

September 12, 2008

Dear Friends of Cornerstone,

In the last couple of months we have discovered much about the nature of our community from one of our residents. It all began when he (I will call him Rick) noticed some money missing from a prepaid credit card he had purchased on line. He had only given one person his PIN number – another resident (whom I will call Caleb). It was only natural for Rick to suspect Caleb for the missing funds. Since I was out of town when all of this happened, our two wonderful community builders had a meeting with both residents on our porch. Rick calmly confronted Caleb: “I don’t feel that I can trust you and that you may have taken the money off my card.” Then he shared some other instances when he felt that Caleb proved to be deceitful – many that I had noticed as well.

At this point Caleb became quite angry and loud as he vehemently denied the theft. Then he did what I have observed many times in working with people with addictions, he “flipped the script” on Rick. He stated that he now would have to “watch his back” in the house. Rick responded, “You will get no violence from me; I just don’t trust you.”

One week later, I am back in town and we are sitting in our weekly community meeting. Everyone except Rick has shared with no mention of last week’s incident. Rick begins his sharing this way: “This morning I read in the Bible to ‘judge not lest you be judged.’” He paused, looked up and then continued, “I am learning at Cornerstone that love is the most important thing in life. I want to love everyone. So I want to ask your forgiveness for judging you. I am still struggling to trust you, but I want you to know that I love you and want to relate to you.” Then he got up, walked over to Caleb and gave him a big bear hug.

I must say I was profoundly touched by this beautiful picture of grace. Here was a man who had experienced so much pain in his life – chronic, life threatening disease, the grip of addiction, homelessness, incarceration, mental illness and the negative, me only, violent mindset from all of these things – here is this man choosing to release the other from his judgment and to pursue relationship, yet with the realization that lost trust takes time and mutual effort to rebuild. We were being schooled in the art of forgiveness and community. And Rick, our instructor, was discovering the pain and yet personal freedom of forgiving.

**“To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover the prisoner was YOU.”** (Author unknown)

This was a beautiful and enlightening experience but not the end of the story. As Paul Harvey used to say, “And now the rest of the story” ...

A couple of months later, Rick was struggling with some circumstances in his life that began to overwhelm him. He was skimping on his medications for mental health and not sleeping. One evening, when everyone happened to be out of the house, Rick decided to go up to a nearby liquor store to play a lottery ticket. They were giving away free samples of wine cooler. In his struggling state, he decided to try just one. By the time he got back to the house, he was feeling so depressed and hopeless that he decided he wanted to end his life. So in a fog of desperation he went up to the rooms of the community builders and grabbed their computers and other items he could sell on the street – all of it worth a substantial amount of money. His plan was to sell them to buy enough alcohol to kill himself. He tried just that – selling the items for a pittance, buying a lot of alcohol going to a park nearby to drink himself to death. He drank all the alcohol and just laid down on a bench hoping to go to sleep and never wake up. It did not work. A couple of days later he awoke and ended up in the hospital and then at a shelter.

In the meantime, we had no idea where he was. We were worried and hurt – feeling violated by someone we had taken into our trust. Mostly we just wanted to find out if he was okay. After a couple of weeks word came back that he was still alive and wanting to come to meet with us to “make things right.” We set up a time for that. Now it was our turn to extend grace. When Rick entered all of us approached him and hugged him. In the beginning the meeting was a bit awkward, but after a time, Rick began to pour out the story with many tears and some regret. After a while all he could say over and over was that he was tired and he still did not want to live anymore. He said he felt hopeless – that we could not understand how he bad he felt. After much loving listening, I asked Rick if he would go somewhere to stabilize his mental health if I could find a place. He agreed. I left the meeting and after some calls and conversations, I drove Rick to the shelter to pick up his belongings and then to a hospital.

A few days later, we welcomed Rick back to Cornerstone after the hospital released him. He was feeling much better, but was racked with guilt. He told us that it was very difficult to live each day with those from whom he had stolen. He could not sleep at night. He was struggling to receive the grace we offered. We arranged for Rick to go to drug treatment, but it would take 3-6 weeks before he was to go. He did not think he could make it that long staying at Cornerstone dealing with all the guilt. I arranged for him to move into a safe house before treatment. But each day of his time back with us, he became more and more comfortable. We still must process our pain and hurt with him when he is ready, but we are trying to be sensitive not to “break the bruised reed or quench the smoldering wick.” On his own initiative, Rick has spoken with the community builders about restitution. He is still with us preparing for residential treatment. We are so pleased to have him back.

During this saga, I told our staff that this was the kind of community I imagined when we started Cornerstone – a place where grace flows and people can come back – like a healthy family. I am grateful to Rick and our staff for making our mission vivid to me again. In our core beliefs we state that “love and forgiveness are the most powerful agents for positive personal change” and that “community operates best without judgment, punishment and violence. There is structure to facilitate the life, health and safety of the community and each of its members, but always within the context of love, acceptance and forgiveness.”

What happened in the past few weeks will not show up on an Excel sheet showing “outcomes” for a grant report, but it feels right and exactly what Cornerstone was meant to be. I feel like we have heeded the advice of Dietrich Bonhoeffer as he wrote from a Nazi prison where he would later be executed just days before the prison was liberated ...

**“We must learn to regard people less in the light of what they do or omit to do and more in the light of what they suffer.”**

Your love, prayers and gifts make it possible for us to continue this great mission of love and grace. Thank you for any assistance you can give us at this time.

Peace and love,

Tom Copps  
Community Leader