

RELATE OR REJECT

My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. (James 2:1)

The experience sticks in my mind like white glue on construction paper. It was one of those memories which still produces embarrassment, even though it happened thirty-two years ago. The incident transpired in a musty church basement which was the home of our youth Sunday School class.

My friend Steve Simmons had arrived early and we were discussing the activities from the previous week. Steve was a good friend, mainly because he and I were always at every church event. Steve and I had very little in common. We attended different schools and lived several miles apart. His father was a leader in the church, and as I remember, he was not above causing trouble and creating a stir.

Steve and I did share our music - we both loved to sing. We were allowed to join the adult choir, probably because they were in need of tenors. When we got warmed up, Steve and I could drown out the entire choir with our high-pitched resonant tones.

During the height of our singing career, Billy Graham brought his crusade to Denver. Steve and I went every night and sang in the massive revival choir. We stood on the front row of the stadium bleachers and sang as loud as our vocal chords would allow. They made one of those Billy Graham movies, using the Denver crusade as the background. If you look real close during one of the scenes of the movie, you can spot Steve and I in the choir. We were celebrities in our church when that film was released.

Outside of the choir, Steve and I did not share many common interests, but we were still friends at church. Perhaps it was a shared tragedy which had united us. Steve was not much bigger than I, but one Sunday night he was carrying me down the stairs at church. Three steps from the bottom, he tripped and we both tumbled. The wall at the foot of the steps broke our fall and my collar bone. The broken bone was painful but Steve suffered even more.

My bone mended and his spirits lifted and we became closer friends. We both had the ability to overlook our differences and concentrate on our similarities. I did not condemn him for his lack of interest in baseball. I enjoyed visiting his house, even though he often ended up in a fist fight with one of his three brothers. We shared many good times, but few of them remain in my memory today.

The Sunday morning that sticks so firmly in my recollection involved Steve and a girl named Sandy. I do not really recall much about Sandy other than what occurred on this fateful Sunday. She was one of those kids who just appeared at church, without any family or friends. Looking back from my adult perspective I realize that she was probably looking for someone to care for her.

Sandy walked into the classroom before the majority of kids arrived. Steve and I were minding our own business, probably laughing about something mundane. Sandy walked over to us and spoke, but her attention seemed especially focused on me. I am not normally self-conscious but for some reason she made me uncomfortable.

After exchanging our meaningless greetings, she stretched out her arm which had been tucked behind her back. In her grasp was a brightly wrapped gift which she stuck in my face. It was one of the few times in my life when I was nearly speechless, but I did manage to mumble something unrecognizable.

Sandy responded, "This is for you."

It was summertime, therefore, I knew immediately it was not my birthday so I stammered, "What for?"

Her words almost knocked me unconscious. "Just because I like you," she said.

As she was speaking these words it seemed as if the entire church youth group walked through the door. Making quick decisions during a crisis has always been one of my strengths and this was no exception. I immediately discerned that no one except my friend Steve had witnessed this transaction. Without even examining the present, I quickly handed it to Steve and said, "Here, you can have this!"

Being unaware of my discomfort, Steve was just glad to get a present. He immediately tore away the wrapping paper and uncovered a bottle of cheap after shave lotion. Neither one of us was old enough to shave but he splashed some on his face like an experienced barber.

My initial reaction was to breath a sigh of relief because it seemed that no one noticed my embarrassment. However, I then began to think about Sandy. By the time I looked up she had walked away and taken a seat in the back of the room.

I do not remember ever feeling so disgracefully. For some reason Sandy had come to believe that I was someone who might care about her. Almost in desperation she had reached out for my friendship only to be rejected once again. Within a few weeks Sandy quit coming to church and I have never seen her again.

Sandy was not especially repulsive in appearance. Neither did she have an overbearing personality nor any disgusting traits. The only thing unacceptable about Sandy was her dissimilarity. For some reason she did not fit in with us normal kids. For a fifteen year-old boy this is an obstacle the size of Mt. Everest.

She did not have what we considered a normal family life with a father and mother who participated in her life. Sandy was obviously from a lower social class than most of us and she just did not meet our expectations. She was different.

If Sherry Clark or some other girl in the youth group had given me a gift, I would have carried it with pride. Most of the time Sherry Clark would not give me the time of day. However, she and the other kids in our church were able to meet the group expectations. I treated Sandy differently because she was different.

What really makes me uncomfortable is that I realize that my friend Steve was also different. He was not very well liked by the other kids but I accepted him. What makes it possible to accept one person but reject another? How come we tolerate differences in some but not in others? The frightening reality is that, in most people's opinion, I am the one who is very different.