“Learning to give it all”

Doug Howell

I confess there are some days I don’t feel very contemporary. But I am an epistle—and so are you, whether you realize it or not. Did you ever wonder what your epistle is saying to the world?

My epistle, as Groucho Marx said, “was born at a very early age.” I remember as a 7-year-old riding next to my Grandma Regis in the back seat on the way home from church, looking at a little Sunday School book together. There was a picture of two hearts: a white one and a black one. I told Grandma I wanted a white one. Grandma prayed with me right then and there and we asked Jesus to come into my life and give me a white heart.

From then on, there was no question who my life belonged to. No, I never took ordination vows, but I did take a vow, to give the Lord first place in my life, no matter what. Unfortunately, I was a sinner, too, as all the pastors and teachers seemed to never tire of pointing out. But if there was anything I didn’t need them to point out, it was that. As far back as I can remember, I was all too aware that if I were ever to have a white heart, it would be God’s doing, not mine.

Luckily, there was a fact that was pounded home even more strongly than my sinfulness: God loved me. My mother, my grandparents, my friends, my pastors and teachers—all reminded me of that by word and example on a daily basis. God loved ME. As I was. No matter what. This became the bedrock belief of my life.

As a massive introvert, I had a lot going on inside even as a kid, so I’m thankful that my Dad—though he’d said he “really didn’t like music”—still wanted me to learn to play the piano like his sister, so I started lessons at age six. Thanks to my Aunt Leota, I learned to “chord” the hymns, and was never content to play hymns exactly as written after that. We played organ and piano on opposite sides of the church, and she’d lean out and hold up fingers to tell me how many sharps or flats we’d play them in. By the time I was in high school, I was writing down my own songs.

I’m not sure what I would have done without music in my life. To me, music has always been a way of tuning in to what God was trying to tell me, like tuning in to a radio station. When I tuned to the right frequency, the music started flowing—and I wrote some of it down. Each song was a precious gift, one that I could turn around and sing back to God, and others, too. Each one was like a little epiphany, a moment when God’s light broke through to me. God could—and still does—use just about anything to jolt me out of my self-absorption and tune me in to His frequency: a falling leaf, a bluebird, a misunderstanding, an excruciating hurt.

When the songs started coming, so did the realization that I was a little different in other ways, too. I used to climb the willow tree by our old farmhouse and dream of a world where I could love my best friend forever, deeply, like Jonathan and David did, and it would be just fine. In fact, I thought God put that story in the Bible just for me. But somehow it wasn’t fine, and eventually I came face to face with the biggest challenge of my life in Christ. I was into my 20s by the time it dawned on me that I was being tempted to do things so bad people couldn’t even talk about them.

By this time, I’d already begun to travel the country singing to people about God’s love and recording the songs God had given me. I wrote love songs, too, but always kept to the second person so there would be no questions about the gender of the beloved. And for me, it all revolved around the Lord anyway. As the struggle deepened, the one thing I knew beyond any doubt was that I couldn’t live without God. Turning my back on Him was not an option. So instead, I asked Him to help me figure all this out.

There followed six years of pschotherapy from a “change” therapist, and three years of Homosexuals Anonymous meetings. (And No, I’m not kidding!) I can remember a couple times I even went into a gay bar and asked a few guys whether they were Christians, and if they were, how they dealt with the conflict between their sexuality and their faith. I know, not exactly what you thought people talked about in gay bars, but it’s what I did. If I was going in there, God was going with me. I wasn’t about to check Him at the door. If He was really God, then He was God of this, too.

I thought about ending it all a couple of times—one time I came pretty close—and there were many times I thought the only way I could live my life was to put all my emotions on pause. But thank God, He broke through somehow. He broke through many times—again and again, patiently—and there are many songs to illustrate that trail of tears…

After hearing an amazing number of sermons in my life, I found that the parts of each worship service that spoke to me the loudest were the ancient, liturgical ones, and so I found myself drawn down “the Canterbury Road” to the Episcopal Church. There I read a pamphlet that talked about the Episcopal viewpoint on scripture. As Episcopalians, we “stand in Christ and read the Word,” it said. We don’t “stand in the Word, and read Christ.” To me, that said it all. The scriptures I’d “heard and read and marked and learned and inwardly digested” all my life were all still true, but their meaning had many more dimensions than I’d ever realized. They weren’t just two-dimensional, black-and-white rules. They were a living extension of the Living Word.

God was leading a man named David Glaser to the Episcopal Church around that same time, and as all of you know, we began a little experiment together, which has now lasted nearly 30 years. But that’s another story… As we begin the 30th year of that experiment here in a whole new place, among a new ohana, I find myself learning new seasons, and tuning in to God’s frequency from the middle of the Pacific.

When I was 7, I gave my life to the Lord. But as I grew up, my life changed, and I had to give it all over again. With each new challenge won or lost, every dream dashed or fulfilled, every lesson learned, I had to give it again. God, it seems, is not satisfied with a 7-year-old. He wants the 8-year-old and the 20-year-old, too. He even wants the 66-year-old, if you can believe it. He wants the scared, sad little kid, the confident performer, the man with cancer, and the perfectionist who can’t sleep at night.

After all the joys and sorrows of my life, I stand each morning at the threshold of a new day, looking out on a new landscape, realizing that I must give myself yet again. I must tune to that frequency again—and listen. Have you given your life to God? How many times? Don’t stop. Do it again. Learn to give it all.