

**"NOBODY HUGS ME ANYMORE:
One Problem With Growing Older . . ."**

Text: "And they all wept and embraced Paul,
and kissed him, sorrowing that they
would see his face no more."
Acts 20:37

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"Nobody hugs me anymore." - I hasten to inform you, mainly to keep my forty nine and seven-eighths years old marriage intact, that our sermon topic this morning was not lifted from the Cromie family file of perennial complaints. No siree! I get in enough trouble on my own, without risking additional scurrilous glances occasioned by misleading sermon subjects. I do think I saw Peggy squirming in the pew a couple of months ago however, when I first plastered this topic on the Bulletin list of up and coming sermons. And, being highly skilled in interpreting what women are thinking from afar, I thought I fathomed her innermost thoughts, and heard her muttering: "Oh dear, he has been complaining for 25 years and now he is going to blab it out loud from the pulpit!" Negative. Not me. Nary a chance.

I do advise you, however, that if you are feeling neglected because your husband, wife or companion is preoccupied with lesser things, I suggest that you cut out the words of this sermon and pin them on your lapel or magnet them to your refrigerator. You will be surprised how kindly and affectionate God's children can be, if you only encourage them. I have been immensely rewarded: all within the proper bounds of what is permissible for a retired, fully grown clergyman, so huge that only the longest arms can hug all the way around.

Sometime ago I read a book by Kathleen Keating, called The Hug Therapy Book, which was a best seller then and is still popular today. It is not much of a literary masterpiece I guess, but it's a good book for fun amongst your family and friends. "Hugs are not only nice," the author writes, "they are necessary. They make you happy and healthy- a real panacea. They will help you to overcome fear and stress and tension. They relax you and give you new life." Darlene Hull adds in her De-Frazzle with Hugs that you need four or five a day to keep your immune system in good order. Dr. Helen Colton adds in her book on Touch Therapy that "If you flinch from personal contact and try to make it on your own, your self esteem will dwindle." Then she raises the tempo a little by saying that "Hugs are as important to you as the medicine you take each day."

"There are several types of hugs," Keating explains, like the A-Frame Hug, where

you touch at the top, leaning in, cheek to cheek perhaps. It might be a good hug for an old auntie, or the boss's wife, or your teacher at your twentieth reunion. It might work at the country club, or the tennis court, or even around at the Fountain Fellowship following Worship, but it does not count as a real-life, bona fide hug. Authorities in the field call it "social hugging" and conclude that it can be superficial. Frankly I call it a "sissy hug," hardly worth mentioning at all.

"There is the Back-to-Front Hug, where the hugger wraps his/her arms around the huggee from the back. Be careful, this one could get you into trouble. If the offended one is really religious you might say that your preacher told you to do it. It is a good kind of playful hug when you find your wife or husband or companion at the sink scrubbing pans, picking raspberries or what-not.

Ideally, Ms. Keating salutes the "Heart-to-Heart Hug," heart touching heart - what some would call a "bear hug." That's where real love is shown and comes from, she says. "A good hug like that can help you bear almost anything." I would add that it must be a hug from the right person, for some people don't like to be touched at all, let alone hugged heart-to-heart. And I remind you that old fashioned jealousy has not departed from the earth.

Oh dear, with that frivolous introduction you might be wondering what on earth led me to preach on this topic when you came to hear the Word of the Lord. Well, let me tell you: That's the way the lady said to me some time ago when I was on my pastoral rounds, calling at an old fashioned nursing home. She was well beyond four-score and one-half years, sequestered in her little semi-private room wondering how she ever got there. It was awful. She had had a good long and lovely life. But her husband died suddenly and her daughter took ill, and her son lost his job out in California, so by the time I met her she was living out her days in what she called "The freedom of my cage, with bars all around me." The railings

were to keep her from falling out of bed; her walker was "built of bars," then there were protective metal ones on her second-story window so she could not jump out. She was caged, but, as Maya Angelou wrote, "She still knew how to sing!"

I asked her what it was like to be there. Now that's a personal question but after all I was her new pastor. "Ah it's not so bad," she said, "once you get used to it. All beginnings are hard but they pass somehow. Old age is the same as any other age. I hurt all over," she chuckled, "but it sure beats being dead. At least I am on the right side of the grass. Then, as she concluded, she gave me this sermon as a gift, "The worst thing about it," she added "is that 'Nobody hugs me anymore!'" Now, from the twinkle in her eye, she knew whereof she spoke. I had the feeling that at one time, she received as many hugs as anyone around; and I would guess that she enjoyed them immensely. But they were memories now, like most everything else. A problem with growing older: "Nobody hugs me anymore!" Do you know what she meant?

The world is full of lonely people. Life in America has exploded in the past decades, and loneliness is the main ingredient of the fallout. A little child knows it when his parents are preoccupied, or worse quarreling. The junior high student knows it, looking for a friend, and hoping to find one. Teenagers know it: how you have to pretend to be grown up, when you feel like being a child, and you don't know which you are supposed to be. Singles looking for someone to love know it. Those who have been led to alternative life styles know it and are bewildered by what other Christian people think and say. Those overly imbedded in Facebook and Twitter and the "People Portion" of the Internet know it; that's why they wander all through cyber space trying to locate someone who will listen and respond. .

And, the 45 million Americans who move each year know it. Having been through it too many time, one friend told me that "Life is just a long series of hellos and goodbyes." They sneak in under the fences as we stroll along. It could be at the root of many of our other problems, like excessive drinking and eating and working

and worrying. It could explain the obsessions some people have with strange new ventures: why they run from one job to the next, or one love to the next, or even one church to the next. Everybody knows it. Loneliness.

Wives know it as husbands barter for success and chase among the stars of their own little galaxies. Husbands know it too, as wives fly off to find their own lives. And those who cross the boundaries and wander off, which we read about with increasing regularity, they know it, indicating that something is missing and they don't know where to find it.

Another common problem as we grow up and older is that so much slips away. The secret is knowing what to hold on to and when to let go. You can't carry the baggage of all your years along: you will stagger under its weight. Ethnologist Konrad Lorenz once said that he gave up a pet idea every morning. Others grow careless of the ones they love, thoughtless of the little things that keep a love and life alive. If you fail to remember the ones who love you, you have failed it all.

Our text is from Acts 20, a touching story where St. Paul was traveling about from city to city collecting funds to deliver to the poor in Jerusalem. Things had grown worse there with widespread unemployment with inflation and poverty on a galloping rise; and it touched his heart. You don't normally think of St. Paul reaching out to the poor; he was so theological and so concerned with the life to come. He had experienced some unbelievable troubles and persecution along the way of his travels. For example, a silversmith named Demetrius in Ephesus who made fine living fashioning silver statues of Aretmis, the Goddess of Fertility, in Ephesus. I wouldn't dare to tell you all the ridiculous things which went on there. When Paul preached about the evils of idols, Demetrius called the Silversmith Union together and warned them that Paul would ruin their business. They incited the crowd who were about to kill Paul when the Town Clerk intervened,

and the apostle was allowed to leave for Macedonia and Greece.

One funny thing happened in transit though. At Troas Paul became so worked up, he preached an all-nighter sermon, i.e., a sermon which lasted all night long. A poor young man named Eutychus had taken a seat by the open window, to find some air I guess. And as they sermon droned on, Eutychus fell sound asleep, no wonder, and he toppled out the window and fell down three stories onto the concrete Courtyard floor. Everybody thought he had killed himself (Admittedly a rather severe punishment for falling asleep in church.) But Paul rushed down the steps, picked the boy up, wrapped his arms around him and Eutychus got up and walked away.

Still heading for Jerusalem, Paul stopped at Miletus, a city of venerable age, even mentioned by Homer. There he summoned the elders from nearby Ephesus to say goodbye. He was going up to Jerusalem but he had bad feelings about it. He felt sure that he would be arrested and put on trial for treason. But he was going nonetheless. He thanked the Elders and told them that he had provided for himself while he was there and asked them to share their money for the poor. "It is more blessed to give than to receive." he said. Then he said goodbye.

They escorted him to the dock and waved goodbye as he sailed off to Jerusalem. You can read what happened next: everything he feared came true. While he was preaching in the Temple, they whisked him right out of the pulpit dragged him through the streets. There he was pummeled with metal chains. It was horrible. Finally he got to tell the arresting officer that he was a Roman citizen and he could not be treated so. They arrested him and when he went to trial before the King he was proven innocent. He would have gone free, if he had already appealed to Caesar to have his hearing in Rome.

And you know the rest of the story. While the ship was crossing the Mediterranean, a "Nor'easter" came up (That's what they called it.) and the ship

was driven aground. He and his fellow prisoners almost lost their lives, but miraculously he finally made it to Jerusalem. There he lived under house arrest, when mysteriously all of a sudden the Book of Acts ends. No one knows what happened to Paul next, or why Acts ended so abruptly. But that is a story for another day.

Drop back with me to the farewell speech in Miletus. I inserted the horrors of what happened next to prepare you for the Text. I have often pondered how much it must have meant to Paul in his last days in Rome when he remembered the warmth of that night. They had embraced and sent him off with tears in their eyes. He had a hard life, and he suffered a horrible death, but the tenderness of their embrace and love, their hugs and farewell greetings must have meant the world and all to him.

For one who was so firm and demanding it was surprisingly warm and cuddly. The words of our text read: "Paul knelt down and prayed with them before he left. And they all wept and fell on his neck and embraced him, sorrowing most of all that they would see him no more." (Acts 20: 36-38) They fell on his neck and embraced him and he never forgot it.

Ecclesiastes tells us that there is a time for everything under the sun: a time to be born and a time to die. But it also says "There is time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing." A time to reach out and touch another person with kindness and love and Christian concern. Nobody hugs me anymore. A problem with those growing older, but a problem with everyone who feels neglected and unwanted. There are myriads of God's children who are perishing for want of love, who have never heard, let alone felt, the warmth of a Christian embrace. Your job and mine is to lavish his love on them while we still can, with an actual hug where that is possible, but with a spiritual and moral hug, even from afar. We were not made to embrace ourselves.

Well, if you know what I mean or even if you just recognize a glimmer of truth, the

next question would be. What should I do about it? How can I give and receive the love of God through his other children? When nobody hugs you anymore, what should I do next?" Let me share a little three-part answer:

I. First, look inside yourself. If nobody hugs you anymore, make sure that it is not your own fault. If you spend a lifetime isolating yourself and withdrawing from those who try to love you, no one will ever get near enough to hug you. If you are bitter and angry, or enamored with your own self-importance; if you spend your life smirking and snarling at everybody; if you refuse to change . . . well, then of course you will become a lonely old soul.

Examine yourself. And the examination questions go something like this: "Are you satisfied with where you are and what you have? Do you have a positive view of life and the future? Are you Happy? Are you kind to others who depend on you, and do you let them be kind to you?" If not, watch out.

That is what Paul meant in the famous thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians. You might have a lot of other things going for you, but if you do not have love, all the rest are not worth a moral tuppence! You can speak with an eloquent tongue, or have brains and money; you can serve the church and community and have great success, but if you have not love, it is not worth a penny. You can be generous and charitable on the surface, yet without love, it will not be worth a farthing. First, examine yourself and where you are.

II. Then second, take a good look at the others in your world. I have never met anyone who was tied up inside who did not want to be set free. I never met an old grouch who would not have exchanged his or her unhappiness for love, if they only knew how. It takes time and patience to wait while another finds himself. But there is Paul again: "Love suffers long," he says. "It is patient and kind. It does not insist on its own way." It reaches out, not in. It cares. It leads. It waits. It never ends. Love is its own reward. If you have it, you do not need anything else

- not to make you happy. If you don't, nothing else will do.

I have known a ton and more of angry, selfish people, who put everyone on edge, who ruin homes and families and churches and communities with their vitriolic outbursts, and verbal abuse. "You should hear him when you are not around," she said to me one day. I said, "I already have."

But, inside every tough and troubled soul is a frightened little boy or girl waiting, wanting to be loved. He is not mean. Neither is she. They are afraid. The opposite of love is not hate; as I mentioned once before, the opposite of love is fear. They are afraid to let you get too close, afraid that you might see something and will not like them anymore. Inside each growing woman, competent and able and seemingly independent, is a little girl waiting, wanting to be loved. She is not tough. He or she is not mean. It only sounds that way. The best defense is still a good offense. She is just afraid: afraid of growing older, afraid of losing out. Afraid of offering the total self in love, afraid of holding their hearts in hand, lest someone smack them to pieces as they have done before. Second, examine the others around you.

III. Then third: once you have looked inward and outward, look upward. Frame your reference in the light and love of Jesus Christ. In Galatians 6 it says, "God is not mocked, whatever you sow that will you also reap." Sow sadness and sadness you will get; sow joy and love, and joy and love you will get back. Jesus did not tell us to turn the other cheek as a sign of weakness. It is a sign of strength: "I love you enough to take the risk again, so there have another go!"

In Colossians Paul tells us to "Put to death" (Violent words!), "Put to death what is earthly and evil in you: anger, malice, slander, covetousness, and the rest." Exterminate them! Empty out your vessel so that you can open it up again and fill it with compassion, kindness, meekness and love. You have to fill your life with something. Why not fill it with the right things? If you don't, it will fill up with

whatever rushes by.

Philippians says: "Whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, whatever is lovely and gracious, think about these things." Think of how magnificent it is that God has put a variety of people around you to touch your body, mind, and soul. Think of how incredible it is that the One who made the starry heavens knows you and me by name, and loves us as his children.

Well, it's near time to close. I was taught that every sermon should be reducible to a single sentence, one briefly stated salient point: all 21 minutes reduced to twenty-one words. Sometimes my sermons are indirect and illusive, I know. They are intended to make the hearer piece it all together on their own. I try not to make it too easy and seldom spell out everything I mean. If you go away from church wondering if you got it right, or feeling that I misstated this or that, you probably did. I was most likely trying to make you think. That is frustrating to some I know, those who like to dot every "I" and cross every "T".

But not here. Today there is a simple message (Are you listening?). Ready? Your duty in the name of Christ is to hug somebody new this week. Reach out and touch some person who will be surprised that you care. Hug your child or your spouse or mother or your neighbor, even your preacher or your choir director. Somerset Maugham once quipped that to make the world a better place, you should wink at some homely girl. But my Dad used to say that would be impossible, "All girls are pretty." he said, "It is just that some are prettier than others. Misterogers used to sing it, "Everybody's fancy, everybody's fine."

Careful that you do not to overdo it or you might get yourself in trouble. But hug someone to whom your presence could mean the world and all. Maybe not even a physical hug, if that won't work. Just step out beyond yourself and share you life with someone who needs you and allow them to share their life with you. We love

because God first loved us. We do not originate the process. Christ does. Perfect love casts out fear. And while the world might not reverse its whole long spiraling zigzagging downward slide, at least you will have helped to hold it on course for that single moment. Hugs can be in words or letters, in smiles, notes, emails, texts or whatever. "The fruit of the spirit," Galatians says, "is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control." Practice these things in the way you live your life, for we are all in this together.

T.S. Eliot wrote, "We must forgive and love each other, or we will die." St. Paul said, "The greatest of these is love." It is! When we do . . . love I mean, reach out, accept, forgive and love, then all the bad things will not matter, at least not quite as much, for now and evermore. Amen.

