

Wesley United Methodist Church

September 7, 2014

"How to Hug."

Matthew 18:15-20, Romans 13:8-14

The world has changed so much that even certain jokes don't work anymore. For example, there is a story of a man who was in love with love that is, romantic love. He bought every book he could find on the subject. One day he was at a bookstore when he saw a book titled How to Hug. He didn't have time to thumb through it and find out what it was about, but from its title, he knew he had to have it. He paid for it quickly and took it proudly out of the store. It wasn't until he got home that he realized he had bought the seventh volume of the Encyclopedia Britannica, "How to Hug."

Now let me explain to everyone under 30 what an encyclopedia is... Imagine Wikipedia or Google in hard copy.

Preacher and storyteller Tony Campolo tells of walking down a street in Philadelphia one day when a homeless person came toward him. He describes this man as a dirty, filthy bum who was covered with soot from head to toe. You couldn't believe how messed up he was, says Campolo. He had a huge beard and there was rotted food stuck in the beard. As he approached Tony, the man held out a cup of McDonald's coffee and said, "Hey mister, want some of my coffee?"

Campolo said he looked at this dirty, filthy personhood and said, "Thanks, but that's ok," and walked on by him.

Now you must understand, Tony Campolo seeks to live like Jesus. The minute he passed this down-trodden man, he knew he was doing the wrong thing. So he turned around and said, "Excuse me, I would like some of your coffee." He took some of the coffee and sipped it and gave it back to the homeless man. (Some of you are already getting squeamish.) Then Campolo said to the man, "You're being generous. How come you're being so generous today?" The homeless man looked at him and said, "Because the coffee was especially delicious today and I think that when God gives you something good, you ought to share it with people."

Tony Campolo says he didn't know how to handle that, so he said, "Can I give you anything?" He thought that perhaps the man would hit him up for five dollars. But the soot-covered man said, "No." Then he said, "Yeah, yeah, I've changed my mind, there is something you can give me. You can give me a hug."

As he looked at this filthy man, Campolo was secretly hoping the man would settle for five dollars! But the man put his arms around Campolo and Tony put his arms around the homeless man. As Tony Campolo in his suit and tie and this homeless man in his filthy garb hugged each other on the street, Tony says he had the strange awareness that he wasn't hugging a bum, he was hugging Jesus.

Some of you are aware of a worldwide YouTube phenomenon of a few years ago. On December 1, 2004 a man in Sydney, Australia started handing out free hugs in the Pitt Street Mall of that city. The man's name was Juan Mann, which I think is quite an interesting name. Juan Mann. Can "one man" or one woman make a difference in the world? Well, Juan Mann did. That's his real name. A worldwide movement began when a friend of Mann's posted a video online of Mann standing in the mall holding up a sign with "free hugs" printed on it and giving hugs to any passerby who expressed interest. More than 94 million people all over the world have since viewed that video and imitators all over the world have taken up Mann's cause.

What inspired Juan Mann to begin his free hugs? In the months prior, Mann had been feeling depressed and lonely. However, he was invited to a party at one night and a complete stranger came up to him and gave him a hug. He said he felt like a king! "It was the greatest thing that ever happened," is how he describes it. And so he began inviting other people to receive free hugs.

Tony Campolo hugging a soot-covered homeless man. A man in Australia handing out free hugs in a shopping mall. This is starting out as a very "touchy-feely" sermon, isn't it? The world seems to be divided between two kind of people, huggers and non-huggers. Have you noticed that?

Some people are huggers and some are not. My guess is that many non-huggers would like to change sides, but they are simply too reserved, too timid. Anyone who wants a free hug, please see me after the service. Now loving and hugging are not necessarily the same thing, but as we know, a hug can be an expression of love. And love is the heart of the Gospel.

In fact, love, says the apostle Paul, is the fulfillment of the law. The commandments, "Do not Commit Adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandments there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to its neighbor, he concludes. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

Paul is just echoing the words of Jesus: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart with all your soul and with all your mind. this is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matt. 22:37-40).

What is Paul trying to say to us? First of all, it is important to note that the command to love does not abolish the law, but rather fulfills it. Jesus made it clear that he did not come to do away with the Law. "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matt. 5:17). Jesus didn't come to do away with the commandments that Moses gave us, but to set them in the context of God's love. Christ didn't keep the rules just for the sake of keeping them. In fact, he did away with petty rules, like an obsession with Sabbath-keeping that was hurting people more than helping them. That did not mean that every part of the law was obsolete, however. Laws like "Do not commit adultery...Do not murder...Do not steal...Do not covet" will never be obsolete.

God gave us certain rules for living our lives. He gave those rules out of love just as a loving parent makes rules for his or her family. Rules given in love help us live life to the fullest. When God gave the children of Israel the commandments, he had their best interest at heart.

In one of his sermons, Pastor John Ortberg told about an 8-year-old boy who was kind of a nerdy, clumsy, chubby kid. One time a group of bullies were chasing him calling him, "Fat Freddy." He ran toward the home of an elderly widow in the neighborhood. He prayed she would be home to let him in, and she was. He said that greatly increased his faith in God.

Freddy's full name was Fred Rogers. Remember him? Fred Rogers, as in Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood. The fact that this elderly widow took him in and kept him safe from the bullies was one reason the idea of being part of a neighborhood was so important to Fred Rogers.

Fred Rogers really led an amazing life. He would wake up every day about 5:30 a.m., pray, read the Bible, sing some hymns, then go swimming to exercise. He would do this every day, then weigh himself on a scale. He weighed 143 pounds his whole life. That was his favorite number 143. Do you know why? Because it takes one letter to say "I," four letters to say, "Love," and three letters to say, "You." 143 I love you. Love is everything.

Paul believed that too. Love is everything. When the value of our lives is summed up, we won't be judged on how well we kept the commandments, though that is important. We will be judged on how well we loved.