

Sunday 16 August 2020
Glynde Lutheran Church
Sermon on Romans 5:8-21 (cf. 2 Cor. 5:18,19)
Theme: “Hugged by God!”
“Isn’t it great to be hugged!?”

Introduction:

I loved being hugged and kissed by my wife. Can I say that!? Or isn't it a very masculine thing to say!? You see, as I've discussed with some of you, I was brought up in a family that didn't use hugs and kisses to show love and acceptance and forgiveness. It was great to meet Jenine, my wife, and become part of a family where this was the accepted norm.... So, you see, I really appreciated being hugged and kissed, *particularly by my wife....*

This morning, I want to use the picture of a hug to speak about God's love for us and His forgiveness of us. It's a great picture to use.

The picture is suggested by Paul's use of the word "reconciliation" in our Bible reading which has at its heart the picture of two people hugging, they having been reconciled to one another (*Romans 5:10-11; cf. 5:1,8-9*).

Where should we start, as we begin using this picture of God hugging us in order to talk about God love of us, and His forgiveness and His acceptance of us. Perhaps the best place to start is with Jesus' story of the Prodigal Son (*or The Lost Son, as I prefer to call it*).

Remember the story!? I guess that most of you know it well. But let me remind you of what happened. The younger of two sons takes his share of his inheritance and leaves his father's house to eat, drink, and be merry, so to speak, in a far land. He eventually spends all his money, and sinks to the depths of having to feed pigs and eat the pigs' slops....

It's the father in this story, though, that I want us to focus on. For the father in this story is a pointer to God. Behind the father in this story, Jesus wants us to see God. And what does the father do!? Does he say, "Good riddance" to the son!? No way! He waits on the veranda of the house for the son to return home. And when the son finally does,

in the hope that his father will receive him back as a servant in the household, the father rushes out to him and greets him. Let me read to you what Jesus said happened:

The son was still a long way from home when the father saw him; his heart was filled with compassion, and he ran, threw his arms around his son, and kissed him (Luke 15:20).

The son comes home expecting to earn his way into his father's house as a servant, *as a hired worker*, and what happens!? Out of compassion for the son, the father runs to him, *hugs him*, and gives him a kiss on the cheek. By doing this, he shows the watching villagers that he forgives the son. And then the father goes on to show everyone that he is receiving the boy home, *not as a hired worker*, but as a son: he puts the best robe on him, a ring on his finger, shoes on his feet, and throws a party for him....

By the way, I'm with Kenneth Bailey, the great New Testament scholar, who says that it is only when the son sees the father's display of love and acceptance of him that he *really* repents. Prior to that, he is seeking "to save himself. He wants no grace". It is only when the father runs to him and hugs and kisses him that he *truly* repents... (K. Bailey, *Poet*, p.177-190).

You know, when you hug someone, be it your wife or your husband, your girlfriend or your boyfriend, a family member or a friend or whoever, *someone has to take the initiative*....

And in the case of us and God, that someone is God. He has sent His Son to this earth to tell us about Himself, and then to suffer and to die for us in order to reconcile us to Him. Jesus, God's Son, has taken on himself *on the cross* the judgement and the punishment that we deserve from God... (Rom. 5:6-11).

Do you hear what has happened *in terms of our picture of a hug*.... God has taken the initiative!! He has reached out to us, and has put His arms around us in love and forgiveness. All that we can do is to respond or not to respond: to receive God's hug, or to push Him away and to turn away from Him.

Every so often, I get invited to go to a lecture or a seminar given by a

Christian leader, visiting from another country. When I was in Geelong, one such visiting lecturer was a man by the name of James Torrance, *or to give him his full title, Professor James B. Torrance*. Professor Torrance was a Christian pastor and scholar from Scotland, and he gave us a lecture on “Prayer and the Trinity”. Now, it a bit of a gamble to go to these things.... Sometimes it’s a waste of a couple of hours.... Sometimes you receive treasure upon treasure.... It was very much the latter case, when I went to see Professor Torrance.

One thing he shared, which will go down into my treasury box so *to speak*, was the distinction between legal repentance and evangelical repentance, a distinction which goes back to John Calvin, the sixteenth century Reformer.

Let me explain the distinction as he did, using the account of Jesus’ meeting with Zacchaeus, the tax-collector, someone who was a social outcast in the society of that time, because he worked for the hated Romans, and because he ripped money off people (*Luke 19:1-10*).

I think that you’ll understand its connection to what I’ve been saying about the hug of God:

In his encounter with Zacchaeus, Jesus could have said, “You’re a sinner! Repent, or you’ll burn in the fires of hell”. How the crowd would have loved it, if Jesus had said that to Zacchaeus. But no! Jesus offered to eat with Zacchaeus, an offer of acceptance and forgiveness, and at Zacchaeus’ home Jesus presumably spoke about God’s love and forgiveness, as he had been doing elsewhere.

In response to Jesus’ actions and his message, Luke tells us: Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Listen, sir! I will give half my belongings to the poor, and if I have cheated anyone, I will pay him back four times as much”. Jesus said to him, *presumably with a laugh and a smile as in the film Jesus*, “Salvation has come to this house today...”.

That’s the difference between legal and evangelical repentance. The first says, “Look you *must* repent, before God will love you and forgive you”. *Or in terms of our picture today, “You must turn to God before He will hug you”.*

The second says, “God loves you, and forgives you for Jesus’ sake. Repent and turn away from living your life *for yourself*, and turn to God and receive His love and His forgiveness. *Or in terms of our picture of a hug*, God is reaching out to you in love and forgiveness to hug you. All we need do is to respond, to receive God’s hug.

Can I tell you another story which James Torrance shared with us.... It’s a story which I think relates in very well to what I’ve been talking about this morning. Professor Torrance shared with us about a friend of his who lives in a Roman Catholic monastery in Scotland. This friend went to the chapel to pray, and there he met a man, a sculptor, who was beset by homosexual thoughts and feelings and who had been thrown out of his church, his Christian community. Professor Torrance’s friend, a friendly, kindly Christian man, talked with this man and emphasised to him that God is a God who is full of love and mercy towards us, *and then he hugged this man!*

The man was so overcome by Roland Walls’ act of hugging him that he stayed on in the monastery to sculpture a statue in the garden of the monastery. He sculpted a statue of the old Adam being hugged by the new Adam. It just looks like two men hugging one another: each is laying his head on the right shoulder of the other.... If you look closely, though, you can see that one of the men has nail holes through his hands. The statue is this man’s representation of Jesus’ love for him, and everyone.... And the statue is a pointer to God’s love for us, and His forgiveness of us for Jesus’ sake.

One more story to help us think of God’s love for us, and the picture of “reconciliation” that we are focussing on. This one comes from Brennan Manning in his book *The furious longing of God*. Brennan Manning tells the story of a man named Larry Malaney:

Back in the late 1960’s, I was teaching at a university in Ohio and there was a student on campus who by society’s standards would’ve been called ugly. He was short, extremely obese, he had a terrible case of acne, a bad lisp, and his hair was growing like Lancelot’s horse in four directions at one time. He wore the uniform of the day: a T-shirt that hadn’t been washed since the Spanish American War, jeans with a butterfly on the back, and of course, no shoes.

In all my days, I have never met anybody with such low self-esteem. He told me that when he looked in the mirror each morning, he'd spit at it. Of course, no campus girl would date him. No fraternity wanted him as a pledge.

He walked into my office once day and said, his lisp evident, "Ah, you're a new face on campus. Well, my name is Larry Malaney, and I'm an athgnostic"....

The story *that* I'm about to tell you is *about* what Larry got for Christmas one year.

Christmas came along for Larry Malaney and he found himself back with his parents in Providence, Rhode Island. Larry's father is a typical lace-curtain Irishman. Now there are lace-curtain Irish and shanty Irish. A lace-curtain Irishman, even on the hottest day in summer, will not come to the dining room table without wearing a suit....

Well, Larry comes to the dinner table that first night home, smelling like a Billy goat. He and his father have the usual number of quarrels and reconciliations. And thus begins a typical vacation in the Malaney household. Several nights later, Larry tells his father that he's got to get back to school the next day.

"What time, son?"

"Six o'clock".

"Well, I'll ride the bus with you".

The next morning, the father and son ride the bus in silence. They get off the bus, as Larry has to catch a second one to the airport. Directly across the street are six men standing under an awning, all men who work in the same textile factory as Larry's father. They begin making loud and degrading remarks like "Oink, oink, look at that fat pig. I tell you, if that pig was my kid, I'd hide him in the basement, I'd be so embarrassed."

Another said, "I wouldn't. If that slob was my kid, he'd be out the door so fast, he wouldn't know if he's on foot or horseback. Hey, pig! Give us your best oink!"

The brutal salvos continued.

Larry Malaney told me that in that moment, for the first time in his life, his father reached out and embraced him, kissed him on the lips, and said, “Larry, if your mother and I live to be two hundred years old, that wouldn’t be long enough to thank God for the gift He gave to us in you. I am so proud that you’re my son!”

It would be hard to describe in words the transformation that took place in Larry Malaney, but I’ll try. He came back to school and remained a hippie, but he cleaned up the best he could. Miracle of miracles, Larry began dating a girl. And to top it off, *would you believe*, he *eventually* became president of one of the fraternities. By the way, he was the first student in the history of our university to graduate with a 4.2 average. Larry Malaney had a brilliant mind.

Larry came to my office one day and said, “Tell me about this man Jesus”. And for the next six weeks, in half-hour increments, I shared with Larry what the Holy Spirit had revealed to me about Jesus. At the end of those six weeks, Larry said, “Okay”

Larry Malaney was *later* ordained a priest in the diocese of Providence, Rhode Island. And for the past twenty years, he’s been a missionary in South America, a man totally sold out to Jesus.... (p. 90-93).

Now, what made the difference in that young man’s life? A hug from his father healed him. Sure, this isn’t a story about a hug bringing reconciliation, but it is a story about how a hug changed a young man’s life. And as such it is a story that reminds us of God’s life-changing hug of us. In Jesus, God has reached out to us and hugs us with a life-giving hug, and as we respond to that hug, our life is changed....

Well, being hugged by God is a great picture of our relationship with God, and us being reconciled to God....

I want to leave us pondering on three points:

1. Firstly, where does all this leave you and me? It leaves me with an overwhelming feeling of gratitude to God for reaching out to

me in the person of His Son and rescuing me.... God hasn't left me and you to 'stew in our own juices', so to speak, but He's reached out to us human beings in the person of His Son, and through Jesus' suffering and death on the cross, He has rescued us.... *Or to use the picture of reconciliation that we've been focussing on this morning, He has reached out to us with His forgiving arms to hug us.*

Is that how you feel towards God? Do you feel like me an overwhelming gratitude to God for Him acting to reconcile us to Him? And does that gratitude move you to live your life in service to Him, *in any way that you can?*

2. Secondly, does this picture of God reaching out to hug *you* make you think of all those who don't know the wonderful life-transforming news of God's love and forgiveness?

Listen to what Paul writes elsewhere:

When anyone is joined to Christ, he is a new being: the old has gone, the new has come. All this is done by God who changed us from enemies into his friends and has given to us the task of making others his friends also, *Lit. "All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation"* (2 Cor. 5:17-18).

Paul writes that God has given us "the ministry of reconciliation", that is, the task of enabling others to be reconciled to God by trusting in Jesus as their Saviour, or in terms of our picture of being hugged by God, *enabling others to see God's loving, forgiving arms reaching out to hug them.*

How are you going in that area of your life?

Are you focussing on "the ministry of reconciliation" that God has given you?

In this Corona Virus time, *and at any time*, the people around us need to hear the wonderful news of God's love, and His forgiveness through Jesus!!

3. And thirdly, our focus on God reaching out to hug us reminds us, I think, of our call *as God's forgiven children* to do likewise: to reach out in love to the people around us, *particularly those who have hurt us in some way*. Remember what Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount:

**Blessed are the peacemakers,
For they will be called children of God (Matt. 5:9)**

Conclusion:

Well, we wandered a fair way today.... Or, I should say, I've wandered a fair way today, and I've taken you with me.... But I hope that the picture of God reaching out to hug you is one that you will take away from worship this morning, and which you will never forget.

It's a picture that sort of sums up the good news of Jesus, and of the Bible, to us: that God has acted, out of love for us, to make it possible for us to be accepted and forgiven by Him. He did this when he sent His Son to suffer and to die for us on the cross.... (*Rom. 5:10; 2 Cor. 5:18,19*)

Now God reaches out to each of us to hug us, and have us live with Him as friends, no more than friends, as sons and daughters. He wants us to respond to His hug, and to receive His love, His forgiveness, His acceptance, and all that He wants to give us.

And in turn, He wants us to love Him and to go out and share this good news with those around us, and to hug others, *so to speak*: to show love and forgiveness and acceptance to others....