

Hugs

Revelation 22:17

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When I was in seminary, learning how to be a pastor, I had to take classes in all different kinds of subjects, all designed to teach me to do this pastor stuff well.

I had to take a preaching class, which was intimidating as heck, because you had to preach to twenty other students who were taking copious notes on everything that you did wrong, so that they could critique you in the feedback session that followed. I had to take classes in Greek and Hebrew, so that I could impress future members of my church by saying things like "fascinatingly, the word the Apostle Paul uses in this particular verse can also be translated as *pomegranate*."

(I learned early on that this was not at all fascinating to people.)

And of course I also took classes in church history, and counseling, and a bunch of other stuff.

But there was one thing that I did not get trained in, that no class prepared me for, and it was something that, as it turned out, people really expected ministers to be good at.

And that is HUGS.

Yes, hugs, hugging people, hugs.

Not only was that class not offered, but it's one that I really could have used, because I'm actually really bad at hugs.

And let's face it -- in church life, where we call each other family, where we are with each other in good times and bad, hugs are something that should happen a lot.

And your church leader, your pastor, oughta be good at them.

Me -- not so much.

Len Morgan, the great Len Morgan, after whom our Youth building is named,

took it as his personal challenge to try to teach me good hugging.
Len was the most wonderful hugger,
and he made, I think, real progress with me,
but I'm still not great.

There is in fact a picture on my office wall taken just last summer,
a picture of Cindi Bigelow hugging me, on the ASP trip last year.
and I keep it there as a reminder that I have a long ways to go still.
'Cause there's CIndi, arms wrapped around me in an exuberant embrace,
and there's me sort of like *this* [ducking].

Cindi was doing the hug right --
she had thrown her arms open wide and pulled me in,
with joyful, exuberant welcome.
That's a hug done right.
Arms open wide, and the huggee pulled in close.
That's a hug.
Me -- I'm still a hug disaster.

So here's why I'm talking about this.
It all has to do with the wedding that David and I just did this weekend.
We returned late last night from Block Island,
where it was our joy, our privilege to perform the wedding of Devin Rafsky and Mike
Dwyer.
Devin and her family have been members of this church since before I came here;
I have known Devin since she was seven.
She grew up in our Church School,
fixed homes in Appalachia,
led worship up here as a Junior Deacon.
She and I even led a bible study for teenagers together, entirely her idea.
She's pretty special,
and we've been waiting and watching for someone special enough to marry our
Devin.

And finally, along came Mike.
If you were here in church two weeks ago, you met Mike, Mike Dwyer.

He was the tall redheaded guy who joined the church on July 20. Usually, we welcome new members of the church on first Sundays, but Mike wasn't going to be able to be here today, cause, well, obviously, it's his wedding weekend.

And he didn't want to wait until September, because he loves Devin and he loves Devin's church, and he really really wanted to be a member of this church family *before* we married him.

Mike's sweet like that, faithful like that, which is why we all decided that he was good enough for our Devin.

So on Friday afternoon, David and I took the ferry out to Block Island, where Devin and Mike had decided to be married. And on Friday night, after we'd run through a wedding rehearsal, we gathered for the dinner afterwards, and Mike's dad got up to say a few words.

He wanted to offer a blessing for the couple, he said, a wish for them.

And this is what he said.

He said "Mike and Devin, I want your life together to be like a hug."

Well, we all thought that sounded sweet, but we weren't sure exactly what he meant.

And he explained.

"Everyone knows what a good hug is," he said.

"Just think about it. A good hug, a real hug, is when you fling your arms open wide and then you pull people close into your love.

"I want you to be like that," he said.

"I want your arms to be open wide to the whole world.

I want you to welcome others into your hearts, your lives, your homes.

I want you to fill your table with people, fill your home with people.

I want you to open up your arms, and pull people in,

just like a good hug does. Just like a good hug."

I liked that. I liked that a lot. So did David.

We looked at each other, and we said,
that's Greenfield Hill.

That's Greenfield Hill, that's what we want always to be.

A place where arms are opened wide in welcome,
a people of faith who embrace the whole world in love,
and draw close, in tight embrace, each person around us
and each person who needs our love.

A hugging church.

A hugging church.

I'm not actually saying that we need to tackle people in a bear hug each time they walk into church; I'm going to guess we'd terrify new visitors.

And I'm not saying that if you aren't a good hugger you don't belong here, because I've already admitted that I am still lacking in hug technique.

But to be an embracing church, to be a church that flings wide its arms in love, that IS what we're meant to be,
that IS what we are called by God to be.

Our denomination, the United Church of Christ,
coined a phrase a few years back for what we're supposed to be about.

We are, they said, called to be churches of extravagant welcome.

Extravagant welcome.

Arms open wide in an inclusive embrace,
drawing people in, drawing all people in.

Extravagant welcome ... a hugging church.

Of course, we're not the ones who came up with this.

Like everything we do, we do it because Jesus thought it up first.

I'm going to guess Jesus was a good hugger.

Because his life was one of full-on embracing,
full-on extravagant welcome,
arms wide open to all.

I don't just mean the people who came to learn from him, although he always made them feel at home.

I don't just mean cute kids and babies, although he welcomed plenty of them.
And I don't just mean folks who were down and out, although he embraced them with profound kindness.

I mean that Jesus embraced *everyone* into his welcome, even the ones whom others thought he shouldn't come near – tax collectors and lepers and Roman soldiers.
I mean that Jesus embraced even the ones who were dead set on hurting him, even the ones that the rest of us would call enemies.

The best example of that is what happened at the Supper we're about to remember, the dinner we're about to commemorate.

On the last night of this life on this earth,
Jesus gathered up everyone he knew, into one long final embrace.
He invited them all to dinner,
with good food and good wine.
He made them all welcome.

But here's the thing -- he knew full well that one of them was going to end up betraying him. He knew Judas' heart was no longer with him.

And he still made him welcome.

And he knew that most of them weren't going to be able to hack it when the going got tough.

He knew that his best friend Peter was going to disappear on him as soon as he needed him.

He knew all that because he knew they were human,
and not perfect,
and he loved them anyway and he embraced them anyway. He hugged them anyway.

Just like he does for us, each one of us --
loves and embraces us anyway, in all our imperfections and failings,
pulls us in and holds us tonight anyway.

And because that's who he was,
then that's who his **church** is called to be:
an embracing church of extravagant welcome,
a hugging church.

I want to close with a story about hugs,
really the best story I've ever encountered about hugs.
In Albuquerque, New Mexico,
there is a restaurant called "Tim's Place."
The owner of this restaurant, Tim Harris,
is a young man with a particular vision of how a restaurant should be.
The vision is summed up by the slogan on the sign outside:
breakfast, lunch and hugs.
Tim has Down syndrome,
and from childhood has always loved hugs.
And at his restaurant, the restaurant his family came together to help him start,
Tim greets every customer with a welcoming hug.
Every customer.
And people come because they know that when they walk through that door,
no matter who they are,
they will receive a warm embrace.
His brothers had said this about him:
"Tim has really influenced how a lot of us live now.
His spirit rubs off on you.
You start to have a more open attitude to people, to all people.
Because Tim has no internal or external judgments on anyone.
He loves, every day."

And so the people keep coming,
to that place of welcoming hugs.
They come from all over
To Tim's place.

Jesus' place is a lot like Tim's place.
No judgment, only embrace.
NO barriers, only extravagant welcome.
And a place at the table set just for you.
Amen.