

The Hug
Genesis 33:1-10
October 13 2019
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Long years ago, when I was in seminary studying up on how to be a pastor, I had to take classes in all different kinds of subjects, all designed to teach me, of course, how to do pastoring well.

I had to take a preaching class, which was incredibly nerve-wracking, because you had to preach to twenty other students whose assignment was to take copious notes on everything that you did wrong.

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 that the Apostle Paul uses in this particular verse can also be translated as *pomegranate*."

And of course I also took classes in church history, and how to do counseling. But there was one skill that I did not get trained in, which actually was the pastoral skill I most needed training in.

And that was how to hug.

Yes, hug. Embrace your fellow human being.

That class was not offered,

but it's one that I really could have used,

because in fact it was a point of amusement among my friends that I was a terrible hugger.

Someone would open their arms wide to me, and I would do this kind of awkward lurch forward,

and usually elbow the person in the sternum somehow.

And this was a problem – because, 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.
And your pastor oughta be good at them.

When I came here it was immediately apparent to all that they had hired a pastor with this significant deficiency – they had hired a substandard hugger. So it was that Len Morgan, the late and dearly loved Len Morgan after whom our Youth building is named, Len took it as his personal challenge to try to teach me good hugging. Len was a Southern gentleman who exuded love for everyone, whose hugs were something of a force of nature – they drew you in, they comforted you, they made you feel like everything was going to be okay. He made, I think, real progress with me, but I'm still working on it. I've got a picture on my office wall of Len and me just to remind me of what a real hug is meant to be – a hug that says “it's okay,” “you're loved,” “I'm here.”

Today's sermon is about a couple hugs that said “it's okay” and “you're loved.” One from the Bible, the book of Genesis, and one from 10 days ago. Two hugs, from a few thousand years ago and just a little bit ago, that both serve to remind us what it means to embrace another, truly embrace. To let someone know “it's okay.”

The hug from the Bible, well, it's pretty unusual. There aren't a lot of hugs *in* the Bible -- people back then either weren't much given to hugging, or weren't much given to writing about it.

So the hug that Jen just told you about in her scripture reading is close to unique in scripture, and when a biblical moment is that rare, and that dramatic, it's worth paying attention to.

It's the hug that Esau gives to Jacob.
They're brothers, these two.
And they haven't seen each other for ages, for a couple decades.
And when they meet up,
Esau throws his arms around Jacob,
and it's a beautiful thing.
Jacob says, "oh, Esau, to see you is like seeing the face of God."

You know those Folger's coffee commercials that are going to start popping up on TV any day now? –
those Christmas commercials they do every year?
Where, like, the dad opens the front door and his soldier son has made it home, and they hug, and you can't help yourself, you cry like a baby.
That's what the Jacob and Esau hug seems like when you hear about it: the Bible's ultimate warm and fuzzy moment.
You can practically smell the coffee.

But, oh this hug is so much more than a warm and fuzzy moment.
This isn't just two brothers who haven't seen each other for a while.
There's a back story to this hug,
a back story which makes you realize how absolutely extraordinary this embrace really is.

Because the Jacob and Esau back story is a story of profoundest hurt and deepest betrayal.
For these two to end up a hug is against all odds,
against all common sense, really.
This hug is a hard-won embrace,

the embrace of two men who were as close to killing each other as ever looking at each other again.

There's a reason, you see, why they haven't seen each other for decades,
And that's because all those years earlier,
Jacob, Esau's twin, had tricked their father into giving him Esau's rightful inheritance

and all the blessings of the ancestors.

And when Esau found out that his birthright was stolen,
there was no end to his righteous rage.

Jacob had had to flee for his life,
with Esau breathing threats against him.

That's why they hadn't seen each other for all these years.

And during those years, far from home,
Jacob had managed to build a life for himself.

But now he was aging, and lonely,
longing to see his family again,
longing for somehow everything to be made right,
longing to go home.

But how do you go home again
after leaving such a wake of devastation and anger?

Well you go home in fear. **And** in hope.

That's how Jacob makes his way home again.

In fear and in hope.

And in the passage that Jen read to you,
Jacob has just learned that Esau is coming to meet him,
with an army of four hundred men.

There goes all hope.

So Jacob does the only thing he knows to do:
he tries to reverse the curse he has brought upon his brother
by approaching Esau in absolute humility,
bowing down to the ground seven times, the story says.

And Esau, whose entire life has been altered by his brother's betrayal,
in an extraordinary act of forgiveness,
runs to Jacob,
and throws his arms around him.
Hugs him.

And this is no Folger's coffee commercial hug,
this is no mere Hallmark card of a hug.
This hug is a hard-won victory for forgiveness,
for humility, for faith and love.
This hug represents two men's determination
not to allow cruelty and devastation to continue in their families,
not to allow division and rage to flourish,
but instead to embrace, literally embrace, a different way.
To embrace a different future,
to embrace God's own best hopes for them.

Small wonder then that what Jacob says in that moment is
"Ah, Esau, in your face I see the face of God."

I see the face of God.

Because what had happened in that moment was something holy,
something sacred.

And both men knew it.

Ten days ago our whole nation saw an embrace
that was also something holy, something sacred.
In a courtroom in Dallas, a police officer convicted of murder sat waiting for her
sentence to be determined.
And as is customary in the sentencing phase of a murder trial,
family members of the one murdered were given the chance to present their
'victim impact statements' –
to let the jury – and the murderer - know the depth of their loss,
and to ask that the judgment be just.

It was a young man, Botham Jean, who had been murdered by Amber Guyger.
And it was Botham's brother, Brandt,
who sat down in the witness stand to make his impact statement.

And he said this:

I forgive you. And I know if you go to God and ask him, he will forgive you.

And he said this:

I love you just like anyone else.

And I'm not going to say I hope you rot and die ... I personally want the best for you.

*And I wasn't going to ever say this in front of my family or anyone,
but -- I don't even want you to go to jail.*

I want the best for you, because I know that's exactly what Botham would want you to do.

And the best would be: give your life to Christ.

Again, I love you as a person. And I don't wish anything bad on you.

And then there was the moment that took our breath away,
and certainly took the judge's breath away:

Brandt Jean swallowed hard, tugged at his collar nervously,
and then turned to the judge and asked

I don't know if this is possible, but can I give her a hug, please?

And when his request was met by stunned silence from the judge, he said, again,
with near-desperation in his voice,

Please?

You know, I think, what happened next.

The judge said yes.

And Brandt Jean came up out of his seat, and Amber Guyger was led from her seat,

and they hugged,

and embrace that went on and on, while she sobbed,

and he whispered words in her ear that we couldn't hear

but can imagine –

words of forgiveness, words of hope.
And I imagine that for Amber Guyger,
as it was for Jacob,
it was like seeing the face of God.

I've watched that video again and again.
I showed it to our middle school youth group, and our high schoolers.
I said "this is what forgiveness looks like.
This is what a Christ-follower looks like."

There were those who decried Brandt's decision to embrace his brother's killer –
there were many who urged that we not let sentiment cloud our vision
of how much yet needs to be changed:
to remember the real, racial inequities of our justice system,
the real racism that is, as David preached earlier this year, our original sin.
And all of that is true.
And we must never stop working toward that day when all shall be judged
by the content of their character and not the color of their skin.

But it would be wrong not to recognize Brandt Jean's embrace of Amber Guyger
for what it was:
an act of mercy,
a conscious decision to choose forgiveness over justified anger.

My guess is that when Esau threw his arms open to Jacob,
there were those among Esau's 400-man army
who also thought it was a mistake,
who looked on not in admiration but in horror at what Esau was doing.
But what Esau was doing was making the choice for hope over despair,
choosing to embody goodness rather than to breathe rage.
As did Brandt Jean. As did Brandt Jean.

The world needs such embraces.

The world needs hugs – needs our hugs.
I don't literally mean more hugs like the hugs Len Morgan taught me,
though we could use plenty more of those, too.

I mean finding every available moment to choose
hope over despair,
to embrace forgiveness over fury, to embody goodness.
I mean finding any possible way to be a witness to mercy
even when it flies in the face of what is reasonable.

And I get, I totally get,
that choosing reconciliation over justified anger
is not the easiest sell in today's world.
But it's what we're called to as Christ-followers,
as people of God.

Because the embrace that the world needs, then and now,
is the embrace of Jacob and Esau.
A hug that was not just some sweet and sappy reunion,
but a hard-won embrace,
a conscious choice for love and goodness in the midst of anger.
And a choice that, had it not been made,
would have ended the story of Abraham's descendants,
God's people, right there.

The challenge for us is to be the ones to choose to keep embracing:
to never let what is evil keep us from holding on to goodness and speaking out
for love.

The challenge for us is to be Esau,
to be Brandt Jean:
to grab hold of idealistic hope,
to embody mercy,
to choose the way of kindness,

to be God's own arms of love in a world whose need for love grows daily.

Because in the end, the essence of our faith **is** this daring willingness to love against reason,

In the end, the essence of our faith is to embrace hope over despair.

This isn't just warm and fuzzy.

Nothing about this is not the easier choice.

But it is the choice of Christ himself;

it is the way that Jesus chose, always. Always.

And this, *this*, is the faith he himself calls us to embrace.

Amen.