

## Prodigal Hugs!

Sunday, March 14, 2010

Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior.

Over the years, preachers have tried many ways to unpack and preach this most well-known parable, the parable of The Prodigal Son. This parable is rich in topics-sin and redemption, grace and refusal of grace, and it can be approached from several different perspectives- the prodigal son, the father, the older brother. I read one pastor gave a sixteen week sermon series on the Prodigal Son, and after the sixteenth sermon on it, a woman greeted the pastor at the door of the church and said, "I'm so sorry that poor boy ever ran away from home!"

Well! Only fifteen weeks to go!

Okay, maybe we'll have to turn the page next week but this is a really great story. And the measure of a really great story is its ability to speak to listeners wherever and whoever they are; in first century Palestine, in seventeenth century Holland, or even in the twenty-first century Upper Midwest United States. Some things never change.

It's a story Jesus told about a father and his two sons. Despite tradition having attached the title, "The Prodigal Son", we know there are really three central characters to this story. First, we meet a rebellious, runaway son; and then what seems like a pushover of a father, and third, we meet an older son, so furious and resentful he won't even acknowledge he has a younger brother anymore. From where each one stands, there is powerful preaching.

Keeping all this in mind, and looking for a fresh perspective on such a familiar story, I'd like us to look, not at the characters, but at the one action central to this story, which is, **the hug**. This is a key to the story and what it means.

This seems appropriate on a Sunday when we are highlighting a ministry that gives hugs – our prayer shawl ministry. Prayer shawls are a like a hug, aren't they? A warm shawl wrapped around someone, allows them to actually feel people's prayers for them.

In a collection of stories about prayer shawl ministry, I found this:

A woman was asked to knit a prayer shawl for a seven year old boy who developed a sudden, mysterious illness. She wasn't sure a little boy would wear or appreciate a prayer shawl, so when we gave it to him, she told him it was a wrap; to keep him warm whenever he watched TV or played computer games, and that whenever he wrapped up in it, he would feel the hugs of all the people who love him. Later she learned the boy slept every night with the prayer shawl covering him, and called it his angel hug.

Well, back to the hug that is at the center of this parable? Have you ever seen Rembrandt's painting of The Prodigal Son? He painted in the last year of his life, in 1668. This is a picture that focuses our eyes and our thoughts on the hug. Even though they don't appear together at the same time in the parable, as Jesus tells it, in his painting Rembrandt gathers these three central characters so that it really gets us centered on this one dramatic moment, this turning point: **the hug**.

This isn't just a standard, "yeah, great to see ya!" hug. Many things can be conveyed by a hug: You can receive a shy, tentative hug, a bear hug that squeezes all the air out, hugs for support and comfort, hugs that say, "I wish you weren't going", and hugs that welcome us home.

It's difficult for some people to give hugs. We know cultures and families have their traditional ways of welcoming, of expressing affection. Two weeks ago, Jim and I stood on a street corner outside a restaurant where we'd had brunch with Ben and Emma, and we were going to say goodbye. I glimpsed my husband Jim and our son Ben reach out simultaneously with a handshake; then stop, laugh and hug each other. Hugs can say things words can't.

This hug that this prodigal father gave his prodigal son was like no other. Some of the insights I share come from Henri Nowen's classic reflection on Rembrandt's painting: Return of the Prodigal Son. Nowen was a Dutch born, Catholic Priest, renowned author and respected professor. This Rembrandt painting held such an attraction over him that he actually traveled all the way to the Hermitage, in St. Petersburg Russia, and through friends was granted special permission to view the painting, and he did over several days, each day spending hours taking notes and reflecting on what it said to him.

(Painting projected on multi-media screen.)

Notice the condition of the son, kneeling in a subservience, before his father: his head is shaved, he has bare feet, his clothes tattered and in such contrast to the rich robes worn by both the father and the older brother, who looks on disdainfully. A shaved head, bare feet, that was what a slave looked like in the time of Jesus.

Footwear was for the wealthy. Remember in this parable the young son has rehearsed a speech, and proposes to his father that he be accepted no longer as a son, but as a hired hand.

We don't have a reference a modern day reference for understanding the honor due the patriarch of a Middle Eastern family; and the elaborate codes for living out that honor.

Aristotle once said, "Great men never run in public." The Patriarch of a wealthy and prominent family would never plead with a child, never chase after a child, and never run in public. Think of the father, then, his robes getting caught around his legs, ankles showing as he ran to hug his son. All this costs the father dearly, his status in the community. Remember too he'd already suffered a precipitous drop in status when he permitted his son to sell off part of the family land.

There is no doubt that the father wants a lavish feast, and pull out all the stops to honor and restore his son to his household in the eyes of the whole community. Killing the calf that had been fattened up for a special occasion shows this. The celebration immediately begins, the father is so impatient to celebrate. There is an abundance of food. There is music and dance, and the happy party noises can be heard far beyond the house.

Henri Nowen wrote, "The God who suffers because of his immense love for his children, also is the God who is rich in goodness and mercy and desires to reveal to his children the richness of his glory." And so here we are today, listening to this remarkable story Jesus told. Do we know the goodness and mercy of our Heavenly Father? Do we know how eagerly He desires that we come to His presence, how eagerly He desires to embrace us?

Is there anyone who believes you have failed to live up to our Heavenly Father's expectations, squandered the gift of your life, and broken the trust of those you love? Then the most powerful message of this hug-is to say, don't stay away in shame or sorrow a moment longer. Your Father eagerly awaits you and is planning a welcome to beat all welcomes. The past will be swept away. You will be mystified, and not able to comprehend the depth and breadth of His love for you. And you will be given a new life, and welcomed with joy back into His house.

Sometimes life events and circumstances leave us like the older brother, at a loss to explain the unfairness, confused by what we think is the Father's neglect of us. Being diagnosed with an illness can make us wonder if God is still paying attention.

But in time things become clearer. This father says to the Son – remember, everything, I have is still yours and I will not let anything separate us. It is the same message to both sons. God, who gives us life, does not forget nor leave us.

We take turns in our lives, I think, standing in all these places, prodigal son, prodigal parent, prodigal sibling. Sometimes we are the ones needing a hug; other times we're called to give a hug.

You might try creating your own Acronym from the word "HUGS" to remind you this week of this parable. Here's a few I came up with:

His  
Unconditional  
Grace and  
Salvation

Held  
Unendingly in  
God's  
Safekeeping

Head  
Upon  
God's  
Shoulder

Remember the love of the Father, when you receive them and when you give them. Remember to give God's love like the father does, freely, even foolishly, and in a hurry to come to the aid and welcome of others.

Hugs can remind us of the Father who loves us so much, he is willing to suffer, and give all he has to restore us to wholeness and bring us home.

Closing Prayer: Before your grace, Heavenly Father, we stand amazed and in our astonishment we turn to you, yet again. Thank you for your welcome home. Amen.