

I will start with a confession (a traditional Reformed practice). I am not a hugger. I don't know why, but I, like many North American men from European stock, just don't hug people very often. All that touching just seems out of place. But, I learned a lesson about hugs that is causing me to re-think my approach to embracing one another.

I was the story teller for Vacation Bible School one day, and the first group I met with were little children, I am guessing kindergarten and first grade aged children. I was assigned the duty of telling a story of Peter's denial of Jesus Christ and then Jesus' subsequent forgiveness of Peter, which leads to one of the most famous reconciliation scenes in literature (John 21). I told the children that this is one of my favorite Bible stories. Being raised near the shores of Lake Michigan and having sat by campfires on the sandy beach, I can visualize the story.

After I was done with the story time and the teacher dismissed the children to their next activity a little girl (we'll call her Emma) came up to me. I was seated on a chair. Emma reached up with her tiny arms and wrapped them around my neck and held on tight. She said, "thank you for the nice story." And then she hugged me for a good 5 seconds. And then she ran off with her friends for snack time. She got me, and how! A child I had never met before, and with whom I had spent all of 15 minutes, taught me more about the love of God than anything else I did that day...or many days. It was, for Emma, an honest, spontaneous, expression of love within God's wide community.

King Solomon, in his reflections on the act of living within time, observed that "there is a time for everything, a season for every activity under heaven,...a time to embrace and a time to turn away." (Ecc. 3:1,5). Our lives would be richer if we took the counsel of this wise man to heart. So, as you rest this Sabbath day, and think about your time for the week ahead, plan to spend some time hugging someone. Engage in some random act of hugging. Someone's day will be enriched by your embrace. And make it a real "Emma hug." Not just a quick embrace and a slap on the back. Hold on tight for awhile. And tell that person "thank you" or whatever else might be meaningful in the context of your meeting. You can say "God loves you", but really, your hug will say that very loudly all by itself.

One last thought. Picture Jesus across the breakfast fire from Peter. After the third time that Peter confessed to Jesus, "Lord, you know I love you", Jesus speaks very personally to Peter about how, in feeding His sheep, Peter will die. And he concludes that remark with the simple command, "follow me." I wonder if, as the two men were reconciled and Peter knew all was forgiven, did Jesus reach for Peter's neck, and wrap his scarred hands and arms around him, and in a strong embrace of God's love tell him, "follow me." Was it perhaps the hug of God, as much as the words, which caused Peter to become the rock upon which the Church is built?

Now, go find someone to give an "Emma hug".

Shalom,

Bill