

You're Welcome

What is more welcoming than a hug? Of course, not everyone is a hugger, and hugging is actually not in vogue during this pandemic. But when I think about Charlie Murphy, long time head usher at ULC, giving a child or an older widow a hug, I know he was making people of all ages feel welcome, here in this place.

Little Aurora Lee, 8-year-old girl who died just yesterday, she too for the short time we knew her, enjoyed giving and receiving a hug. I think hugs made her feel welcome here. She would come right up to me and hug me, and right up to Charlie Murphy and hug him, and she would feel welcome, and so would we.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus gives value to making people feel welcome. He was so emphatic about this, people making each other feel welcome, he instructed his disciples and us too, that when we welcome each other, when we hug and embrace each other, we are actually welcoming him, Jesus, and God, too.

Yet Jesus did not just talk about making people feel welcome, he lived it. Even his enemies, saw that one of Jesus' attributes was to welcome people. In fact, there was no one Jesus did not welcome. Luke 15:2 says, "The Pharisees and scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'"

So, at the risk of offending the non-huggers, I believe Jesus was a hugger. I picture Jesus picking up children, hugging them and making them feel welcome. I picture him healing a leper, hugging him, and making him feel welcome. I picture him forgiving a woman her sin, hugging her and making her feel welcome.

However, the point here is not actually hugging people. The point is to make people feel welcome. Whether he hugged or not, Jesus valued and was good at welcoming people, making them feel at home in his presence. So, in the Psalm and in the Gospel today, Jesus calls us, huggers and non-huggers, to do the same.

When ULC serves the Love Feast each November, I think we do a great job welcoming people. We aren't even in our own church, we are at Zion United Methodist, yet through a warm and delicious turkey dinner, through friendly smiles, through good conversations, and yes, through a few hugs, people feel at home.

You can tell. People even tell us how welcome they feel. Three years ago, one elderly couple even told me, "We feel so accepted here." Again, the point is, as we feed hungry people, as we spend time with lonely people, and as we talk with people who not many others talk to, we are making them feel welcome.

Psalm 146 calls us to this kind of life. Here the Lord says we are to feed the hungry, uplift the sad and depressed, take care of the strangers, and provide for the widow and the orphan. Why? Well, because as we love and serve such people, we are welcoming them. We are making them feel at home in our presence.

Now, the Gospel makes more sense. As we love and serve such people, Jesus says, we are also loving, serving, and welcoming him, Jesus. As we love and serve such people, we are also loving, serving, and welcoming the one who sent Jesus, which is to say the same thing, as we are welcoming Almighty God.

Then Jesus really makes his point. He says even if we give a cup of water to a thirsty person, we are welcoming and giving a cup of water to Jesus, and he will reward us for this simple gesture of kindness and love. So, every small act of kindness and love matters to Jesus. He sees such acts and they please him.

This makes me think of little Aurora Lee. One Wednesday night a few years ago, she was 5 or 6 years old, she had a couple little pieces of candy with her. I noticed the candy, told her how much I loved candy, teased her how I wished I had some candy too, and she so sweetly gave me one of her two pieces.

Such a sweet act by a sweet child. Right? She didn't change the world, feed the hungry, or make world peace. But, she did brighten the night of a certain pastor. She did make me feel valued, cared for, welcomed, and loved by her. And at the same time, without knowing it, she cared for, welcomed, and loved Jesus.

I dare you, my friends in Christ, people of God, to look at your life this way. I dare you to look at every person you meet as someone Jesus calls you to welcome. I dare you to seek out people you don't know yet, or even people you are not all that comfortable with and make them feel at home in your presence.

Oh, my goodness, how the world would change if even here in Grand Forks, we started giving pieces of candy, cups of cold water, baskets of healthy food, gift cards to Hugo's, Target and Walmart, and just 15 minutes of our time, to people we meet, to people who are hungry, lonely, sad, abused, addicted, or grieving.

Such small acts would tell them how much we care about them. Such small acts would show them how much we love them. Such small acts would make them feel welcome and at home in our presence. And, such small acts would be done not only to them, but according to our Lord Jesus, also to him.

In fact, friends in Christ, people of God, I want to be a person, I want you to be people, I want University Lutheran Church, to be a people and place, to which others look at and say, "Hey, he welcomes all people, even sinners. Hey, she welcomes all people, even sinners. Hey, they welcome all people, even sinners."

I think the birdfeeder in our backyard is a great example of how small acts of kindness and love lead to many creatures feeling welcome. Margo went out and bought a bird feeder, either Margo or I put three different kinds of birdseed in it, and many birds come to eat there, as well as several rabbits and squirrels.

Occasionally, I chase away the dreaded blackbirds because they scare away the cardinals and goldfinches. So, I am no perfect example of welcoming others. But for the most part, our little acts of kindness and love make many kinds of bird and animals feel welcome, even at home, in our backyard.

So, here is the challenge. What small acts of kindness and love can you do this week for people you meet, people you do not know, and even people with whom you are not so comfortable, which will make them feel welcome and at home in our presence. I dare you, I dare me, and the Lord even calls you and me to such a life.

We have such a great example of this life in our Lord Jesus Christ. He welcomed and embraced people from every walk of life. He ate dinner with them, healed their diseases, gave them peace in

their distress, forgave their sins, comforted them when they grieved, and raised them to new life even after they had died.

And now, Jesus who welcomed, embraced, and loved everyone, including his enemies, welcomes us this morning. First, I see him welcome Aurora Lee into his warm embrace in heaven. Second, I see him welcome Henry James Gowan, into his warm embrace as he is baptized into God's family and becomes God's son.

Finally, I see him welcome you, huggers and non-huggers, into his warm embrace, right now and for the rest of your life. In his arms, he will help you, heal you, comfort you, strengthen you, forgive you, love you, and save you. In his arms, you are welcome, all are welcome, and all are at home in his presence forever. Amen.