

# All-Age Sermon on Reconciliation

Rev. Anthony Lees-Smith - St Deny's, Evington

## Theme

Understanding reconciliation through the 'drama of embrace', based on Luke 15:11-32

## A Ministry of Hugs

- A [recent study](#) suggested hugging someone you love for 20 seconds a day is the key to alleviating stress and beating burnout. It can lower your blood pressure, slow your heart rate and improve your mood.
- Hugs break down barriers, they make us vulnerable and both enact and symbolise the ministry of reconciliation to which Christians in particular feel called. St Paul writes about how Jesus has given his followers a ministry of reconciliation, or what I like to think of as a ministry of hugs!
- In Luke 15, coming to his senses, the lost son returns to his father in the hope of reconciliation and finding a way to bridge the gap between them. The chapter we find this story in comes right at the heart of Luke's gospel and right at the heart of that chapter comes verse 20: "But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion, he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him."
- One person deeply affected by that story was the Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf, a man who had witnessed so much conflict in his own country but he could see in the story Jesus told what he calls the "drama of embrace" (in 'Exclusion and Embrace' pp.140-147)

Imagine (or even demonstrate!) a hug...

1. Person one opens their arms. This makes them vulnerable, like the father in the story who makes himself look foolish by hitching up his robes and running down the road. By opening our arms we are signalling that we want a hug, that means risking being rejected.
2. That person now has to wait just like the father waiting for his son to return, watching for him even while he was still far off. For it to be genuine, it can't be forced, any more than the father could force his son to come back. You need two pairs of arms to make one hug.
3. Once the other person has also opened their arms and moved in for the hug, then the embrace can be closed, like the father literally falling on his son's neck, wrapping his arms around him. It's the same phrase that was used in the Hebrew Scriptures, in the story of the feuding brothers Esau and Jacob when they were finally reconciled, and in the story of Joseph too, when he was finally reconciled with his youngest brother Benjamin. This is the moment of forgiveness and reconciliation, when endorphins are released, something new is created, a renewed restored relationship.

4. Finally, the hug has to come to an end, the arms are opened again. There is no question in this hug of making two into one. Differences aren't just erased as if they never existed or don't matter. A hug isn't a hug if it squeezes the life out of you, if you're hugged so tightly that you're crushed and can't get away, if either side seize control. The letting go has to be negotiated and although it's the end of this hug, we know it's not the last. The arms are open again, an open invitation to return.

- Act 1: being open and vulnerable; Act 2: waiting; Act 3: the hug itself, a new beginning; Act 4: letting go. Those four acts in the drama of embrace are acted out not just in Jesus' parable, and in our relationships with those with love but also in our relationships with difference which is what particularly fascinated Miroslav Volf who had experienced so much interreligious conflict.

## Embracing those different from us

What could it look like to enact that drama of embrace in our relationships with those who are religiously different?

1. We have to make ourselves vulnerable. Sometimes that might mean going to meet people on their turf, taking off our shoes as we enter the mosque or temple. Being in a place where we don't know the rules makes us vulnerable but it's where reconciliation begins.
2. There's the waiting. Relationships can't be forced. Visiting our neighbours in their place of worship doesn't mean they will automatically want to come and see us in ours. There may be long histories of pain and exclusion that need to be worked through first.
3. Eventually, the response will come and the hug can happen. This is where something new begins to emerge out of that moment of reconciliation. There is a coming together and the potential for new things to happen.
4. There is always the risk with a hug that we don't want it to end and we hold on too tight. We have to let go. We can't own the other person or make them fit into our ideas of how they should behave. We need to respect the fact that our differences may remain.

All of this is true in our relationship with God too. His arms are open wide, he made himself vulnerable by becoming like one of us in Jesus. His invitation is always there and he waits patiently for us to respond. When we come, he will run to us and throw his arms around us and hug us close. Wherever we have been and whatever we have done, we will know ourselves his children, forgiven and set free, restored into relationship with him. And we will be set free, not controlled by some divine dictator but allowed to live freely, to make our own choices. And when we get it wrong, which we will, his arms remain open for us to return and begin the whole cycle again.

Everyone needs a hug at times, even if it's a metaphorical one rather than a physical one. We need to know we are included and welcomed and those four acts of the drama of embrace can help us think about our own response to difference:

- Act 1 – being vulnerable and open;
- Act 2 – being patient not forcing things;
- Act 3 – looking to create something new together when that moment of reconciliation finally comes;
- Act 4 – being ready to let go.

That story of the reconciled son and those four acts in the drama of embrace might inspire us all to work harder in our own lives to seek reconciliation with those who are different.

May God's open arms give us hope, may they encircle and hold us in our struggles, and may they open again to release us into the world ready to embrace others who need to know they too are loved. Amen.

## A Prayer for Reconciliation by Pádraig O Tuama

Where there is separation  
there is pain.

And where there is pain  
there is story.

And where there is story  
there is understanding  
and misunderstanding  
listening  
and not listening.

May we — separated peoples, estranged strangers,  
unfriended families, divided communities —  
turn toward each other,  
and turn toward our stories,  
with understanding  
and listening,  
with argument and acceptance,  
with challenge, change  
and consolation.

Because if God is to be found,  
God will be found  
in the space  
between.

Amen.