

For the Journey

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The location is Dunedin Airport in Dunedin, New Zealand, southeast of Queenstown. New signage was recently posted imposing a maximum time limit on goodbye hugging - 3 minutes. As a non-hugger that seems like plenty of time to me, too much in fact. Those hugging enthusiasts out there might disagree. At any rate, at Dunedin Airport there have been problems, apparently, with its previous policy of unfettered, unlimited hugging. Hugging-jams had become commonplace, impeding the flow of travellers through the airport terminal. The whole place was often taken over by excessive, lingering goodbye and hello hugs, which is kind of surprising if you've witnessed the Māori Haka cultural dance, often presented at the start of international sports competitions like soccer (football), rugby, and even basketball or volleyball. It's a traditional indigenous act of friendly intimidation toward opponents and is actually quite intimidating. Hard to imagine the same folks having a hard time disengaging from lengthy hugs, or perhaps the Maori aren't naturally huggers to begin with while other New Zealanders are.

Are you a hugger or do you avoid it if at all possible. I'm reminded of three different observations of hugging preferences, traditions and idiosyncrasies. Jerry Seinfeld was once approached by a minor-celebrity fan at some tv show conference/photo shoot/red carpet event. He was being interviewed at the time and the woman, overcome with joy at seeing Jerry, burst into the camera frame, interrupted the interview, praised Jerry, then asked if she could give him a hug. His answer was polite but was a firm no. Her response was to be offended. An awkward moment on a red carpet due to differing hugging preferences.

The Japanese are not into hugging, or handshaking either. After our wedding in 2002 Miho's family of course had to head home to Japan. I'll never forget the airport goodbyes. No hugging or touching of any kind. Lots of tears, lots of emotion, bowing and warm words, but no hugging.

Finally I recall a scene from the movie "Good Will Hunting".

Matt Damon plays a streetwise math genius in Boston, one who carries a permanent chip on his shoulder, is angry at the world, afraid of the world, and carries with him hidden secrets of childhood mistreatment and abuse. One day after an intense counselling session with a university psychology professor played by Robin Williams, he is forced to "let it all out", all the emotion and pain, and it happens through a hug, a bear hug which the psychologist will not relinquish until Damon's character breaks down in tears. Quite a moving scene from a still memorable film.

Hugging isn't mentioned that often in the Bible but embracing is. In reflecting on Jesus' parable of the prodigal son or, as some call it, the parable of the forgiving father (Luke 15:11-32), it seems the key moment of reconciliation occurs without any words but rather with an embrace. Half way through the story the rebellious, wayward son whose blown through his part of the family inheritance decides his only choice is to head home and beg for mercy. The father's (God's?) response is overwhelming. *"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."* (v. 20). Can we imagine this is how our God responds to us as well? That's Jesus' intent in telling the parable, to reveal for us a glimpse of the love God has for us, a taste of the indescribable grace through which God judges us.

The Apostle Paul, in his most important epistle or letter, offered these words in describing for his ancient (and contemporary) audience how God's new revelation in Christ is a kind of fulfilment of all that come before:

“But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed and is attested by the Law and the Prophets, the righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 3:21-24)

We may enjoy a good hug once in a while or we may not. The good news, even if some of us struggle to see it as good news, is that we have no choice - for *“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.”*

Thanks be to God! Amen.