

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on March 11, 2010 (IV Lent, Year C)

I'm not a touchy-feely kind-of-guy. Now I don't mean to shock or disappoint you. But the whole sit-around-a-circle-holding-hands thing isn't really my scene. I don't have a problem with it, of course; some of my best friends are touchy-feely types. But you're not going to find me encouraging everyone to have a group hug during coffee hour. In my defense I love nothing more than hugging my kids, my wife, and my dog – not necessarily in that order. But sitting around a campfire singing Koombayah with a bunch of strangers? Not so much.

Now, I'm *sort of* kidding around. But one thing we learn from the well-known Parable of the Prodigal Son is that God *is* touchy-feely. God wants nothing more than to wrap his arms around us in a big bear hug. To squeeze until we're finally convinced at just how much God loves us. If God was here for The Peace, it would last a *long* time and it might even devolve into a touchy-feely love-fest.

And while that might make a few of us a bit uncomfortable, doesn't that beat worshipping a God who is content with keeping us at arm's length? Isn't that better than worshipping a God who is remote and distant and unfeeling? Our worship can be formal but our relationship with God need not be. At St. John's we take our religious ritual seriously but only as a way to be drawn into deeper relationship with God. We like ceremony but it's important to remember that God doesn't stand on ceremony. Which is why, if God was here for The Peace, I'd envision one of those encounters where – and this has probably happened to everyone at some point – you stick out your arm to shake hands and get a warm hug in return. Always a bit awkward at first but also a nice thing when you just give in and start hugging back.

One of the reasons we're so certain of God's love and affection is precisely through this particular parable. The Parable of the Prodigal Son, or as it's sometimes known the Parable of the Forgiving Father (which is really a better name), gives us great insight into the very heart of God. There is no human being out there God isn't willing to forgive and embrace. We hear that while the prodigal son "was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him." Imagine that! God actively seeks us out. God is out there beating the bush looking for you; seeking to wrap you up in a loving embrace. That's some amazing grace. Which is, of course, a hymn written with this passage in mind. You could argue that it's the ultimate touchy-feely hymn – at least of the hymns in *our* Hymnal: "I once was lost but now am found; was blind yet now I see." It's hard to read these words without hearing the familiar soundtrack in the background.

When hearing and reflecting upon Bible stories it's often helpful to mentally insert yourself into the scene. It's a way of actively engaging Scripture so, if you're reading about Jesus giving the Sermon on the Mount, you might imagine yourself as one of the disciples or as a Pharisee or one

of the crowd. You can do this in a variety of ways and through this exercise you'll often gain new insights into your own life and faith. I've always thought of the Prodigal Son as the perfect story to try this out; there are plenty of characters from which to choose and I'll bet there's one with whom you particularly identify.

As a parent you may well have had moments when you've just had to let go. To recognize that as a parent you are merely a temporary steward of your children, not their owners. To release them, despite all of the love in the world, to make their own mistakes and draw their own conclusions can be a painful process. It's hard to stand by and watch a child make bad decisions when all you want to do is swoop in and fix things. And I can't imagine the pain the father in this story would have felt watching his youngest son head out on his own with his inheritance in hand along with a boatload of immaturity. Not knowing whether he would ever see him again. But he did let him go. Not loving him any less; perhaps loving him even more.

Some of us tend to identify with the older brother in this story. If you're the sibling who has always followed the rules, the one who has continually sought to please your parents, it's hard not to resent the killing of the fatted calf and the party thrown on behalf of your squandering younger brother. It can't help but seem as if the one who screwed up gets rewarded. And that can grate on us. Especially if you're an older brother like I am.

Some of us might best relate to the prodigal son. We probably don't want to admit it; certainly not in good company. But if you've been a prodigal son or daughter, you're well aware of this. The good news is that you're now sitting in church – so *something* must have changed.

But the fact is, we are *all* the prodigal son or daughter. We may not have squandered our inheritance on wine, women, and song; we may not even have much of an inheritance at all. But we have, at times, squandered the greatest inheritance there is – God's love for us. And you can go down the list of the Ten Commandments and start checking them off. Perhaps not the big ticket items like murder. But we've all worshipped idols and run after false gods – be that money or power or sex. We've all failed to honor the Sabbath and keep it holy. We've all lied. We've all coveted. But the moment we repent; the moment we say we're sorry and turn back to God; there is a big fat bear hug waiting for each one of us.

In John's gospel Jesus says, "You didn't choose me, I chose you." Which is important to remember because we are all "Chosen People" in this sense. God doesn't just sit idly by and wait for you to respond; God actively seeks you out. God rushes out to meet you; wherever you are along your journey of faith. Sometimes we're good at hiding and evading; for a variety of reasons we can be spiritually elusive. But God's greatest desire is that we allow ourselves to be embraced. That we turn back toward God. That we don't try to twist or squirm away but rather that we be still and rest in the divine hug; the touchy-feely-ness of God's love for each one of us.