



One Day at the Museum

Exodus 17:1-7 & Romans 5:1-11

Lent 3 - March 12, 2023

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Some thirty some years ago, I spent a Sunday afternoon touring the Detroit Institute of Art with the young singles group from my church. I remember the feeling I'm about to describe from that afternoon like it was yesterday ... it is still fresh in my mind even despite the distances of time and geography.

I had broken away a bit from our group and was lingering in a room that contained a Van Gogh. I wanted to ponder it a bit more than the rest of the group and sat on a bench in the middle of the room to contemplate it a bit more.

I thought I was alone in that little room when all of a sudden, in the midst of my solitary thoughts and quiet observation of Van Gogh, I felt two arms coming over my back, wrapping themselves around each other on my chest and hugging me tightly.

For a moment, for a brief moment, I tensed. I didn't know or comprehend exactly what was happening. In a matter of less than a second, my isolation and supposed solitary contemplation was invaded and interrupted by these arms that were roped around my neck.

Just as I was considering what I would do, a voice behind my left ear said quietly, in a whispered tone: 'There you are Martin. We've all moved on and we miss you.'

It was one of the young ladies from the group ... an insurance agent or automobile engineer, I have forgotten which, who must have been sent to find the lingering leader of the group and return him to the rest of the group. I don't think it was that they missed me too much ... more like some of the guys in our little group wanted to get to the pub and couldn't if they left me behind; I had the keys to the van.

Anyway, in that split second of being hugged by an unknown, but somewhat familiar presence, I learned something about the love of God ... I learned something about relaxing and learning to trust the One who has me in his grip.

As I was being restrained briefly by those arms, I had a quick decision to make: to fight off in some way and struggle to be free this alien encounter or to relax and trust that the person who had me wrapped in her arms intended good for me. (By the way, I want to emphasize that this was not a romantic gesture by the young lady; she was just one of those effusive types that hugged anybody and everybody ... I think she hugged the security guard as well before we left the room.)

In that split second, I had to decide to struggle against this embrace and stay with my isolation and solitary contemplation, or just relax and trust that the one who was hugging me meant only good for me. There wasn't much else I could do.

The apostle Paul writes to the Romans and assures them that God has reached out to them in an embrace of forgiveness, mercy, and pardon in the person of Jesus Christ. They did not ask for it; they did not do anything to merit this grace; it just came to them not because of who they were, but rather because of who God was and is in Jesus Christ. This was more about God than about them, but it eventually included them.

The only thing that Paul says they can do about such a revelation of God's love in their life is to respond with faith ... with trust that God's work in Jesus Christ is enough to bridge the gulf, to complete the work, to finish the awesome task of reconciliation and restoration.

Just as I had wandered off into that little anteroom of the museum, forgetting about others and becoming isolated and estranged in my own little world, so too has the human race become estranged from God. In fact, this is one thing that we share with all the human race -- we are estranged from God and need to be reconciled and brought home.

When Paul asks the Romans to have faith in God's work in Jesus Christ, he is not making their faith a requirement for God's grace. If we come to believe somehow that it is our faith or belief that saves us, we have missed the point. If we come to understand that it is the faith of Jesus Christ which God has placed in us that responds to God's grace, then we are on firmer ground -- God's ground. It is not our faith that saves us, it is rather the trust that we have been given by God that grants us peace ... it is learning to trust that what God has begun in us in Christ, he will complete.

I think one of the difficulties for the Christian is this dogged belief that we have done something to deserve this great grace; we have been better than our neighbors or have answered correctly when asked about our faith. Nothing could be further from the truth ... what we do by faith is only a response to the grace that has already altered our lives and brought about our salvation. The faith that we have is a derivative, responsive faith, not an initial or creative faith ... we are bid to respond to God's grace with faith. In fact, we are called to accept it as acceptable.

Paul Tillich, a great theologian of the last century, understood sin as separation from God, as estrangement from the holiness and goodness of God. This is what he wrote about God's saving act in Jesus Christ that Paul seeks to describe in our passage for the day:

It is an act of God which is in no way dependent on man, an act in which [God] accepts [the one] who is unacceptable. ... Indeed, there is nothing in man which enables God to accept him. *But man must accept just this. He must accept that he is accepted; he must accept acceptance.*

What Paul Tillich describes here sounds so inviting, so comforting, so confirming that it is hard to grasp. We just don't think this way. We think, on the other hand, that we must do something to deserve God's grace and acceptance. We think that we must make ourselves acceptable to God in order for God to really love us and seek our salvation in Jesus Christ.

Hear again, the wisdom of Dr. Tillich:

He who looks at himself and tries to measure his relation to God by his achievements increases his estrangement and the anxiety of guilt and despair.

When we do that, when we attempt to live up to the acceptance of God, we only increase our sense of estrangement and our anxiety of guilt. We see that we can never make ourselves acceptable to God and so we begin to despair.

However, when we live in thanksgiving for what God has done for us in Christ, we get our eyes off ourselves and our attempts to earn God's love. We get our eyes more focused upon the purposes of God for our lives and begin to live with a confidence that we could call hope or faith or trust, that what God has done for us can never be paid back, but is certainly deserving of our thanks and praise and our faithful response. When we consider the truth that it is only in Christ that we are made acceptable to God, we can finally accept that and live.

Back at that museum in Detroit, enveloped in a caring embrace over which I had no control, I was given a choice as to how I would respond: struggle against this alien intrusion into my isolation or just relax and trust that this one who held me meant me no harm.

In Jesus Christ, we have been embraced and brought home. Our faithful response must be to trust God that such action on his part is enough ... to trust in God and then to live out that faith that such love inspires in us all. That is what we are called to do.