

**"NOBODY HUGS ME ANYMORE --  
One Problem With Growing Older . . ."**

**Text: "So faith, hope and love abide, these three,  
but the greatest of these is love." -- I Corinthians 13:13**

I must hasten to tell you at the start, in order to keep my thirty-seven-and-one-half-year-old-marriage intact, that our announced topic is not a Cromie family complaint. I get in enough trouble on my own, without adding to it with sermon topics. No Siree! I will advise, however, that if you are feeling lonely and neglected, I suggest you cut out the words of this sermon and attach them to the refrigerator or wear it on your clothing through the coming week. You will be surprised how kindly and affectionate God's children can be, if you only encourage them. I have been immensely rewarded: all within the proper bounds (of course) of what is permissible for an overgrown, late-middle-aged clergyman, especially one who is so huge that only the longest arms can hug their way all the way around him.

Sometime ago I read a book by Kathleen Keating, called The Hug Therapy Book. Good book! "Hugs are not only nice," she writes, "they are necessary. They make you happier and healthier. . . . They help you overcome fears and tensions. . . . They even give you good, enjoyable exercise, especially," she adds, "if you hug energetically. . . ." (Now watch out!)

"There are several different types of hugs," she continues (Now bear with me, you can't get this sort of thing in most churches!), "There is the A-Frame Hug where you touch at the top . . . good for an old great-aunt, or the boss's wife, or your teacher at the school." Then, "There is the Back-

to-Front Hug, where the hugger wraps his/her arms around the huggie from the back. Good for those who are peeling potatoes, scrubbing pans, picking raspberries, sorting mail, or what-not." Finally, "There is the Heart-to-Heart Hug, firm and gentle -- with heart, as it were, touching heart. That's where real love comes from," she says. "A good bear hug can help you to bear anything."

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You might wonder where I found this topic. Well . . . that's what the lady said to me, and I never shall forget it. She, well beyond three-score and one-half years, sequestered in her little semi-private room over at the nursing home, where she was living out her remaining time, with a deepening impatience in what she called "enjoying the freedom of my little cage." But, as Maya Angelou, she still knew how to sing. From behind those railings which protected her from falling out of bed, and her chrome-plated walker, which itself was "built of bars," she said, to say nothing of the bars on her second-storied window, she taught me a lot of what it means to grow older, long before I began to grow old myself.

"Old age is almost the same as any other age," she said, "only my worries have become narrower. Aches and pains are more commonplace, but they are reminders that I am still here. Not so bad," she chuckled, "when you consider the alternative. I hurt all over, but it sure beats being dead."

Then she gave me this sermon topic as a gift, "The worst thing about it though," she said, "the saddest thing about growing older is . . . that . . . nobody hugs me anymore!" Now, from the twinkle in her eye, I had the feeling that she knew whereof she spoke. At one time, she had surely had as many hugs as anyone around; and enjoyed them . . . but . . . pity . . . that was long ago and far away. The problem with growing older: "Nobody hugs me anymore!" Do you know what I mean?

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The world is full of lonely people. Life in America has exploded, and loneliness is the main ingredient of the fallout. A little child knows it, when his parents are preoccupied. The junior high youth knows it, looking for a friend, to find someone who cares enough to accept them as they are. Teenagers know it: how you have to pretend to be grown up, when you feel like being a child, and you don't know which you really are. Singles who want someone to love know it. Those on the "People Portion" of the Internet know it; that's why they go from cyber room to cyber room trying to locate someone nice to talk to, someone to listen and respond.

And, the 45 million Americans who move each year know it. One reflective friend of mine says, "Life is just a series of hellos and goodbyes." It sneaks in under the fences of our lives. It could be at the root of all the other problems, like drinking and eating and working and talking too much. It could explain the obsessions some people have with strange ideological adventures: why they run from one job to the next, or one love to the next, or even one church to the next. Everybody knows it. Loneliness. . . .

Wives know it. As husbands barter for success and chase among the stars of the mini-galaxies. Husbands know it, too, as wives go off to find their own lives. Everybody knows it, an epidemic of our time: loneliness.

The world is full of lonely people. Loneliness is devastating to the mind and soul and body. Dr. James J. Lynch wrote a magnificent book: The Broken Heart: The Consequences of Loneliness. The point of Lynch's book is that loneliness can kill you. Social isolation and deprivation of meaningful human contacts can lead to organic difficulties and isolation. So, I offer one more reason for staying with the one you love.

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The common problem as we grow older is that so much slips away. We grow careless of the ones we love, thoughtless of the little things that keep a love and life alive. If you fail to remember the ones who love you, you have failed it all. You can succeed anywhere, everywhere else. But if you fail to receive and offer love, you might as well move on.

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Loneliness can not only kill your happy spirit; it can kill you. I first observed it years ago when I was pastor to an eminently successful man who took ill, and for no good reason, he got worse each passing day. He finally died a quiet death. I was puzzled. Then a mutual friend explained it a couple of months later. Earl said quite simply, "Poor Ben, I think he died of a broken heart." Everything else was gone; and he went, too. When the will to live leaves, life shortly follows. Poets know it; you should, too: loneliness can kill you. As W. H. Auden wrote, "We must love another, or die."

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Well, if you know it, or even recognize a glimmer of truth in it, the next question is, what do you do about it? Where do you turn when one day you say: "The problem is that nobody hugs me anymore." An answer in three parts:

I. First, turn inside yourself. If nobody hugs you anymore, it could be that it is your own fault. If you keep closing all the doors, no one can come in. If you're bitter or angry, or overwhelmed by the sense of your own self-

importance; if you spend your life snarling at everybody; if you set out to belittle everyone you meet; if you refuse to change . . . well, then of course you are going to be a lonely old soul and spend your declining years without friends.

You have heard the fairy tale, of course, in which the Princess kisses the frog and he turns immediately into a handsome Prince? . . . Well, years ago, the little wife in my office told me: "They told me that story a thousand times. But, I have been kissing him for thirty-two years, and . . . he is still a frog! Was it worth it?" she asked. I said: "Sure it was. You and I are required to keep on keeping on." And honestly, when we were through with counseling, they lived happily ever after.

Examine your own life: where it begins, and that is where it will end. The examination questions go something like this: "Are you satisfied with what you are and have? Do you have a positive view of life and the future? Are you kind to others who depend on you, and willy nilly, on whom you depend?" If not, watch out.

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That is what Paul meant in the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians. You might have a lot of other things going for you, but if you do not have love, all the rest are not worth a moral tuppence. You can speak with an eloquent tongue; or have brains and money; you can serve the church and community, or have great success, but if you have not love, none of it is worth a tinker's dam. You can be the most generous and charitable one, give all that you have to feed the poor, yet without love, it is not worth a farthing. First you must examine yourself in the gaze of love. The world can be impatient and unkind; be kind and patient with each other.

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II. Second, look at the others in your world. I have never met anyone who was tied up inside himself, who did not want to be free. I never met an old grouch who would not have exchanged unhappiness for love, if he or she only knew how. It takes time and patience to wait while another finds himself or herself. But there is Paul again: "Love suffers long," he says. "It is patient and kind. It is not arrogant, nor rude. It does not insist on its own way." It reaches out, not in. It cares. It leads. It is patient. It waits. It never ends. Love is its own reward. If you have it, you do not need anything else . . . not to make you happy. If you don't, nothing else will do.

Through the years, I have come across an enormous number of angry and selfish people, who ruin homes and families with their vitriolic outbursts, and verbal abuse. "You should hear him when you are not around," she said. I said, "I already have." Inside every tough and troubled man is a frightened little boy waiting, wanting to be loved. He is not mean. He is afraid. The opposite of love is not hate; the opposite of love is fear. He is afraid to let you come too close, afraid of losing control, afraid that you might see his weakness and not like him anymore. Inside each growing woman, too, competent and able, becoming old and independent, is still a little girl waiting, wanting to be loved. She is not tough. She is not mean. She only sounds that way. She is just afraid: afraid it will not work, afraid of growing older, afraid of losing out. Afraid of offering her total self in love, afraid of holding her heart in her hand, lest someone smack it!

"O would some power the giftie gie us;  
To see ourselves as other see us!" . . .

That's Robert Burns.

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Second, look at the others in your world. William Morrison said, "If you cannot live on love, you should die in a ditch!"

III. Third. You must set out to be an instrument of God's love. The Bible knows everything. In Galatians 6 it says, "God is not mocked, whatever a man sows that will he also reap." Any woman, too, any child. Sow sadness, sadness you will get; sow joy and love, joy and love you will receive. Jesus did not tell us to turn the other cheek as a sign of weakness. No. It is a sign of strength: "I love you enough to take the risk again," it says. In Colossians Paul tells us to "Put to death" (Violent words!), "Put to death what is earthly and evil in you": Anger, malice, slander, covetousness. Empty out the vessel so you can then go on to let compassion, kindness and loveliness and meekness come in. You have to fill your life with something. Why not fill it with the right things?

Philippians says: "Whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, think about these things." Think of how magnificent it is that God has put a variety of people around you to stimulate your body, mind, and soul. You don't want everyone to think the same. We would all be bored to death.

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Well, it's near time to close. We were taught in Seminary that every sermon should be reducible to a single sentence. Each sermon should have one briefly stated salient point. One way to know what you are trying to do comes down to the single sharpened "Say it in a sentence," all twenty-two minutes reduced to twenty-two words: what is this sermon about?

Sometimes my sermons are indirect. They are intended to make the hearer think and piece it all together. I try not to make it too easy. That is frustrating to some people. But not this time. Today there is a simple, single, salient message (Are you listening?). You can reduce everything I have said to this sentence. A command. Ready? . . . "Hug an old lady this week, or an old man, or a young one, or anyone else who needs you."

Now, be careful which old lady you hug, or young one either. You could get yourself in trouble. But hug someone to whom your presence can mean the world and all. Not only a physical hug, maybe not even a physical hug . . . but share . . . get beyond yourself -- share the love which others shared with you. We love because God first loved us. Perfect love casts out fear. And while the world might not reverse its downward slide, at least you will have helped to hold it on course within that single moment. Hugs can be in words or letters; in smiles, in a note, or whatever. . . . The fruit of the spirit, Galatians says, is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control . . . practice these things in the way you live your life. We are all in this together.

Loneliness can kill you; and it can kill the others all around you. Eliot said, "We must forgive and love each other, or die." St. Paul said, "The greatest of these is love." It is! When we do . . . love I mean, accept, forgive and love . . . nothing else will matter, at least not quite as much, for now and evermore. Amen.