

## **a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing**

*For Everything There is a Season 3*

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Faith Presbyterian Church, Sierra Vista, AZ

Sunday, August 16, 2020

Ecclesiastes 3: 1, 5-6

### **Introduction**

A couple of weeks ago I saw a meme on Facebook that I decided to share in our church's Facebook group. It said this "Have you kept physically distant from a Presbyterian today?" which is a take-off on a group called, "Have you hugged a Presbyterian today?" The response was immediate! One person said, "I sleep with one." Another said, "This warms my heart....oh wait...." while still others noted:

" well - maybe the deeper question is whether you have kept emotionally distant from a Presbyterian"

and plenty of comments from our happily married members talking about their distinct lack of social distancing from their partners.

Finally, John Stevenson, Faith's founding pastor commented, "Renee, my dad always used to say, "You ask a dumb question, you get a dumb answer." Yes, John, you are so right!

When I saw the line in our Ecclesiastes passage for today about embracing and not embracing, I immediately thought to myself – gosh, this line has never resonated like it does here in 2020. As one of the pairs in this passage, my eye usually glided over it, because I thought to myself, what does that really mean? When do we have to "refrain from embracing"? 2020 is teaching us a lot, right?

For how many of us are longing for touch with our loved ones these days? Those of us who are living alone may not have had a hug since March, and our children are confused by adults telling them not to get close to grandparents and the like because of the risk of passing along the corona-virus.

### **Physical Embracing in Ancient Times**

In the Bible, many of the healing stories involve touch to some degree. Elijah brings back to life the son of the widow of Zarephath after he dies by laying on top of him. Elishah tells Naaman the commander of the Aram army to go wash in the river to heal his leprosy.

In the new Testament, sometimes Jesus heals by his touch, other times he simply tells the person that the healing has been accomplished by asking them to rise up. Jesus takes the hand of the mother of Simon to heal her. The man borne by four friends through the roof of the house where Jesus stayed rose at his command, while Jesus stretches out to intentionally touch the man with leprosy to heal him and restore him to society. Jesus feels the woman with the issue of blood touch his garments and feels his healing energy leave his body.

Physical intimacy comes in a variety of ways in the Bible – to show romantic and erotic and filial love, to demonstrate kinship, and loyalty, as well as healing, just as it does today. The Jews believed that our bodies are good, and meant to be used.

### **Refraining From Embracing**

The Bible is also full of people who are excluded entirely from their communities because of physical factors. I noted that Jesus healed a man with leprosy – leprosy (or a skin disease that was considered “unclean”) was not only a physical condition, it was an illness that required separation from the rest of society. Women who were menstruating were separated from the rest of society, as were gentiles and tax collectors and sinners.

Only by a restoration to physical and ritual cleanliness could people be restored to society, and embraced by their communities. The story of the ten lepers healed by Jesus in Luke’s gospel points out the need not only to return to their homes, but also to give thanks to God.

Jesus crossed these boundaries of ritual cleanliness because he saw how they demeaned and excluded those whom God loved. Sometimes physical separation is a power move, and not about health, as we saw in the earlier days of the AIDS epidemic, when patients with the disease were excluded from schools and communities despite easy safety measures, largely because it was initially connected to the LGBTQ community.

### **Strange Times**

Today, with our knowledge of infectious disease, our measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 lead us to a different kind of refrainment, one that is new to most of us. We find ourselves reversing our emotional engineering to think that refraining from embracing physically is our way of showing care and concern for one another. All of a sudden, masks are signs that we care about our neighbors, and staying home to stop the spread of the virus can help our children return to learning in their schools more quickly. I guess our author of Ecclesiastes knew something after all!

Here at the church, as we move along in our process for considered when and how to regather, we continue to learn about what are the safer ways that we can remain connected. The elders and I on Session, as well as our Reopening Task Force, are looking how to re-connect in our spaces while still making sure that all our members are included in our worship and other activities.

Our parking lot service was one way to reconnect with each other – even seeing each other in our cars was a lift to those who chose to come. We had a good time doing it too! We want to schedule another one very soon, and we ask your patience as we work through some staffing transitions this month.

Today we test out a new way to connect – Zoom coffee hour. It will occur on Sunday morning after our Facebook watch party of the Sunday service, about 11:15 a.m. If you have a computer-like device with a microphone and speaker, or even just a phone line, you can join a call and get connected with a small group of Faith folks to catch up on life now. We're going to make this first one connecting folks randomly in small groups, since most of us haven't caught up with each other – and we'll see how it goes. Go to the bulletin for the service, or the newsletter to get the information on how to participate.

*A Stranger in a Strange Land Psalm* by Edward Hays

Oh my God, help me,  
     for I feel lost in this strange place  
     and yearn to feel at home again.  
 Help me, O you who are truly at home in every place,  
     to be at home in this unfamiliar space.

Stolen is my compass of comfort,  
     my confident ground of the familiar and known.  
 Without that compass, my heart fills with fear,  
     jettisoning my peace of mind and heart  
 and casting me adrift in a sea of strangeness.

O God whose home is here and everywhere,  
     help this new place to be as comfortable  
     as an old shoe.  
 May my awareness of your ever-present love  
     make a homeland  
     of what now for me is a strange land.