

After the Hugs and Kisses

An All Saints Sunday Sermon on 1st John 3:1-3—Rev. Adam E. Eckhart
November 5, 2017—The First United Church of Christ (Cong.) Milford, CT

1.

A parent and child who are constantly angry with each other go to family counseling. There it becomes clear that each is unsure if the other really loves them. The counselor has them practice daily expressions of love and appreciation, which quickly makes them live more peacefully together. Still, the parent realizes, after the hugs and kisses, we still have work to do, being parent and child.

Two young adults go out on some dates and sort out for themselves whether the other is “the one.” Eventually, after fits and starts, misunderstandings and reconciliations, ups and downs, they profess their love for one another and decide to commit themselves to each other. But this is where the story ends in the movies! After the hugs and kisses, the vows and reception, the unknown rest of the relationship begins.

A grown child walks down the hospital corridor where a beloved parent is in ICU, barely holding on to life. It’s not clear if the parent will live to see another day, so the grown child says their good-byes and then sits quietly. After the hugs and kisses, they wait and grapple with what is to come.

2.

Last week I described God’s unconditional love for us, God’s grace, as being like the prodigal son’s father waiting with open arms to receive us in loving embrace as soon as we are willing to open our arms in faithful love. This thread is picked up in first John, where the author more or less writes, ‘God [the Father] has given us so much love that it’s like we are God’s children.

God dotes on us, God is all hugs and kisses in the good parental sense. We’re God’s beloved, that is what we are. That’s settled.’

But what isn’t exactly clear is what exactly happens next. Or as it is translated: ‘What we will be has not yet been revealed.’ God loves us completely and claims us as God’s own children through Christ. God and God’s people are all x’s and o’s...but now that we’ve got our love established, now what happens? What comes next?

This is a significant question for us in church in general, especially after the anniversary of the Reformation when Martin Luther challenged the penitential system. Luther said, ‘Look here in Paul’s letter to the Romans! We are justified, we are made right with God, by faith, not works or confessing our sins every day! God loves us and offers us the gift of forgiveness! By God’s grace, God’s love is accessible to us!’ Hugs and kisses all around!

Okay, but now that we can access God’s love, now what do we do? Twiddle our thumbs until the second coming? That might have made more sense when early followers thought Jesus was coming back any minute now, but when Jesus didn’t come back in that first generation, people had to look longer-term.

One group that evolved out of the Reformation, the Calvinists—ancestors of the Presbyterians, the Reformed Church, and our forbears, the Congregationalists—answered the question of what to do in light of God’s grace with the Protestant work ethic. They speculated that only some people are headed to heaven, pre-determined by God, outside our

control. Predestination it's called. They threw their hands up: "We can't change what God has decided." But, assuming that we're in like Flynn, we can do our best to make it clear to God that our salvation was a wise decision. Work, work, work, until Sabbath at least.

Now we may disagree that God would choose a select few to be saved. But whether we think we need to work hard to make salvation seem fair or not, there's something else that goes on after the hugs and kisses of God's grace and salvation.

It's called sanctification—a fancy word for basically being formed by God's grace into saints.

It's like couples who are partners for decades or children who are formed by being raised by parents. The more time we spend together, the more we are open to another, the more we are formed in their image. In the recent insurance commercial, grown children fight against the reality that they are becoming their dads, while also admitting that they text in full sentences, refer to all children as chief, and will argue that it's defense that REALLY wins championships.

Or every week here at church I see children in the church use mannerisms and body language like their parents or see couples who have established a pattern of interactivity, of similar habits or complementary habits, where one person finishes the other's sentences, just knows what they're thinking. We are formed by and in the image of those people and things we're close to.

This is why parents get worried when their children spend time with friends who they think are a "bad influence" on them, right? Or urge their kids to be a part of our youth

ministry, where kind kids and advisors over the years like Tina and Wendy, James and Lorrie and Kelsey, or Jay and Craig, April and Rev. Ashley have been hopefully positive influences. Our spiritual environment rubs off on us a little or a lot.

So sanctification is the process of being formed more closely to God because we spend quality time with God and with others who spend time with God. Karl Barth refers to this sanctification as the interaction where God makes people ready and willing for God's purpose¹. After the hugs and kisses, we who accept our place in God's family are molded into God's loving and merciful image; God starts to rub off a little.

I've seen how this has worked around Milford. Don Civitello was a faithful man who because of his walk with God saw the divine spark in all people, and especially in young people who were disabled and had little to do over the summer. He also saw the divine spark in the young people's parents who were trying to work and care for their kids. So 50 years ago he started Camp Happiness. And wouldn't you know it, being around the Camp Happiness kids and Don has formed countless kids and counselors and folks like current Camp Happiness director and church member Marlene Sanchez. Don seemed to me like a saint whose saintliness rubbed off on others.

Or there's Lorraine Trueman, whose faith journey made her a persistent presence and loving woman, even with her biting sense of humor. She volunteered at the Red Cross and Milford Hospital for years. She helped form this congregation in faith for many years and of course formed her daughters Pam and Debbie in faith, paying forward the sanctification to the next generations.

Or there's Ruth Songhurst, who not only was raised in this church but worked as our secretary for 26 years: that alone qualified Ruth as a saint! She was formed by having a brother with hydrocephalus, by her relationship with God, by her love of community and of music. Even when Ruth's husband Bob declined and she was sick with cancer, she continued to play keyboards at nursing homes as long as she could. God's dedication and unconditional love rubbed off on her.

And our stories could go on and on with other beloved family and friends, saints of our age who were formed by their relationship with God and through Jesus Christ, people who internalized Christ's call to nonviolence, to peace and joy, to love God and neighbor, and whose divine spark was enlarged by their faith practices. The saints we remember today and

those of yesteryear have made impacts on us that last long after the hugs and kisses are over on this earth. They still touch us, because their love and grace reflect God's love and grace toward all of us.

"See what love [God] has given us. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure."

When we spend time with our loved ones and with God, we end up more like them, we are slowly transformed and sanctified.

Thanks be to God and to the saints who have joined God and to those who are being formed in God's loving image. Amen.

ⁱ Colin Gunton, "Salvation," from *Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*. Ed. John Webster. Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2000. Page 150.