

**“The Embrace of Christ” based on Luke 22:66 to 23:59 (Palm/Passion Sunday)
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on April 10, 2022, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

As a former newspaper reporter, I find most movies about reporting to be painful. Often, there are unrealistic dilemmas, floating deadlines, and stereotypical caricatures, all of which make it look much more exciting, and much less realistic. However, there is one character that always seems to ring true – the grumpy curmudgeon editor leading a sea of big personalities.

Think of Ben Bradlee in “All the President’s Men” when he said to Woodward and Bernstein, *“You guys are probably pretty tired, right? Well, you should be. Go on home, get a nice hot bath. Rest up...15 minutes. Then get back in gear. We’re under a lot of pressure, you know, and you put us there!”*

I’ve had several editors fit this mold during my reporting career. And some of my favorite moments in the newsroom were when one of them challenged our writing, or questioned our reporting methods, or noticed a mistake after we had gone to print. Every day they were frustrated that never had they seen an errorless edition, yet, that was their goal.

One of those curmudgeons was a man named Bert at the Watertown Daily Times. Bert was a co-editor when I started and was considered by many the “bad cop,” because he was intimidating when compared to the more gregarious Bob. Now, I liked them both a lot, but from almost day one, I gravitated to Bert, and he wanted nothing to do with me.

I think he lived for the role of grumpy editor with his critiques of grammar and AP Style. He was the self-proclaimed Mr. Style and it had nothing to do with how he dressed. He shared corrections with the whole newsroom. He did this not to embarrass us, but to make sure we didn’t repeat others’ mistakes. He was a creature of routine, staring into his computer screen, getting up for coffee and smoking cigarettes on a schedule. He took the same weeks off every year, and what’s more, he ate lunch at the same place every day in a greasy spoon restaurant with his best friend.

Veteran reporters warned me not to mess with him, but I couldn’t help it. I wanted desperately to be friends with Bert – I wanted to crack the curmudgeon. What I found is that the only thing he seemed to like more than complaining about mistakes, was hearing us acknowledge our mistakes and also make fun of our own mistakes. So, I started a routine of every day talking to him, I’d open with: “Well, what did I do wrong today?” And he’d have a list of things to complain about. But after a few disparaging comments, we’d be laughing on our way for coffee.

Then Bert had a health scare – he had to go for “a procedure” dealing with his heart. I remember being legitimately worried as a 24-year-old reporter. I was worried that this person I wanted as my mentor, whose insults were the highlight of my workday, was going in for surgery at hospital more than an hour away. His life was at risk and there was nothing I could do. I was definitely not his emergency contact.

Fortunately, everything went well with the procedure. He returned days later, with orders to stay away, from work, and by extension, me, for weeks. So, of course, this meant I had to rally

up a group of reporters to go visit him at his home. I remember ringing the doorbell and him slowly opening the door, "Oh, it's you." He unlocked the screen door, walked away, and left the door open leading us into his kitchen. We walked in after him and we all sat around his table. For 45 min. we talked about how he was feeling, his surgery, what we were doing at work, and at the end, everyone got up and shook his hand, but I stood there, arms out and said, "Hug?"

For the First time, my curmudgeon let me hug him. For me, that hug was not a goodbye to end a visit, it was a beginning. It was the moment I was sure that Bert and I were actually important to each other. Yes, we had our tense moments over 6 years at that newspaper – I was the union president who had to negotiate our contract with him and we had our fair share of editorial differences and opinions. But with that hug, and many more I forced on him later, I was assured that I belonged, that I was accepted, that I mattered to him, like he mattered to me.

There is a lot that is said in an embrace. As I have said nearly every week since I began in this pulpit at Shelby Presbyterian Church, I believe you are all chosen by God to be here for some purpose today. If nothing else, I believe it is to hear the Good News of God's love for you. The terror and tragedy of the passion narrative which we read today, is all about that love, and the desire of God to embrace you, to hold you and inspire you to do the same for others. This story is about God coming to you, pursuing you, and loving you simply because you are you. No matter what you have done, or where you have come from, you are chosen by God.

The passion narrative offers a gift we did not earn – grace, our unmerited favor before God. The gift here is the gift of our God who not only gave us life, but actually entered into our life. It is the gift of our God, who not only loves us, but empowers us to love others. It is the gift of our God, who not only made us to be free, but used his own freedom to serve, redeem and restore us. By this, we who do not know what we do, as Jesus said, and we whose sins cry out, "Crucify him!" are not only chosen – but we are forgiven too.

Indeed, in the description of Jesus's trial – when a man guilty of insurrection and murder, whose name 'Barabbas' means in Aramaic, "son of a father," (We all are sons of 'a' father, right) is released by Pilate, and instead, the one and only begotten Son of THE Father is killed in his place. This is when we see is the unconditional love of God the Father, sending the Son, thereby putting God's own self, God's own being, on that cross, in the place of Israel, which failed to keep the covenant, and in our place, because we continue to sin each day. The Apostle Paul said that, "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" and that he did this to reconcile us to him so you are not only chosen, but forgiven and also, you are loved unconditionally.

In the house I grew up in, my mother had a small sign hanging from a light in our kitchen. It read: "I asked Jesus, 'How much do you love me?' And he stretched out his arms and died." This is the embrace of Jesus, in whom God, the creator of all things, not only chose to enter into creation and take on human flesh like us, but also chose to be limited like we are, suffering pain and death, not for God's own sake, but for the sake of us as humans, so that we could be made right with God.

Empathy is to put yourself in someone else's position and that is what we see here, when the Creator sets aside power & authority aside to live as we live and die on a cross. God's priorities are a self-giving love based in mercy, not power and authority. God empathizes with humanity despite our sin and embraces us in Jesus. This shows us that God is humble enough to put it all on the line, as we saw in the covenant with Abram a few weeks back. In Jesus we see, we are not required to earn our way, because this God came down to our existence. Jesus is truly Immanuel, "God with us." And so, we are called to love as he loves us.

This image of Christ's embrace is not merely a physical hug, but so much more. God places value on us – that's what it means to be redeemed – not because God needs us, but because we are wanted. There's a difference. It has nothing to do with what you or I do to make ourselves valuable to God. Your redemption value, your worth, is God's desire for you, for all of you. We see this in the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, to die for us. Your value is defined by this, by how much God loves you. Your value is what God has done for you in Jesus Christ.

For me, that first hug I got from Bert was what I needed to know that I'd reached him, that I had secured a spot in his heart. It was like Christ's embrace soothing my anxieties. Yet also, if we look at it from the other perspective, my perpetual pursuit of Bert is also similar to how Christ pursues us even when we are curmudgeons – unrelentingly. We love, because God loves us first and so we are called to embrace.

Now, I realize not everyone is a hugger, and so this is not a call to start hugging everyone, especially after COVID and all we've learned about infectious diseases. But it is a call to embrace others with love. It is a call to do this like Christ, without pre-conditions. I've seen this in our church and I'm grateful, because it is needed. We live in a world where so many are hurting in ways we can readily see, and ways we cannot. They need to know, they have a spot in your heart, and thereby they know they have a spot in the heart of Christ too.

To do this, we ourselves need to be assured that we belong in the arms of Christ. What the passion of Christ shows us, is that we are chosen, forgiven, and loved unconditionally by God. Whether you are in church for the first time, or you joined 50 years ago or more, you have been chosen to be here, to belong, to be accepted and loved. There is a place for you at the table, where you are forgiven and where you are free. Welcome. God's love is pouring out from the Holy Spirit in and among us, so then, we can be temples of the Spirit. Be filled with it, and I pray that it will flow from us to everyone we meet. Amen.