

“Embrace, Don’t Touch”

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Delivered Sunday, May 15, 2022

Reading

An excerpt of a poem called “Wash your hands” by Dori Midnight

We are humans relearning to wash our hands.
Washing our hands is an act of love
Washing our hands is an act of care
Washing our hands is an act that puts the hypervigilant body at ease
Washing our hands helps us return to ourselves by washing away what does not serve.

....

My friends, it is always true, these things.
It has already been time.
It is always true that we should move with care and intention, asking
Do you want to bump elbows instead? with everyone we meet.
It is always true that people are living with one lung, with immune systems that don’t work so well, or perhaps work too hard, fighting against themselves. It is already true that people are hoarding the things that the most vulnerable need. It is already time that we might want to fly on airplanes less and not go to work when we are sick.
It is already time that we might want to know who in our neighborhood has cancer, who has a new baby, who is old, with children in another state, who has extra water, who has a root cellar, who is a nurse, who has a garden full of elecampane and nettles.
It is already time that temporarily non-disabled people think about people living with chronic illness and disabled folks, that young people think about old people.
It is already time to stop using synthetic fragrances to not smell like bodies, to pretend like we’re all not dying. It is already time to remember that those scents make so many of us sick.
It is already time to not take it personally when someone doesn’t want to hug you.
It is already time to slow down and feel how scared we are.

We are already afraid, we are already living in the time of fires.

Sermon/Homily: “Embrace, Don’t Touch”

When we are afraid, for whatever reason, human touch can be one of our resources for soothing or dissipating that fear. Science has now demonstrated what humans viscerally have known since our species’ inception: infants literally cannot survive without human touch; children deprived of touch have strikingly lower cortisol and growth development levels; a stressed person’s brain quiets in response to a hand being held; and as my friend Joy often reminds me, “twenty-second hugs release oxytocin in our brains.”

When we think of embrace, we often think about hugs, touch, or affection. The word itself comes from Latin words that translate as “in the arms.”

Yet as we are all very well aware, Covid-19 drastically affected our relationship to physical touch and proximity, even with loved ones. By 2021 studies showed that people who experienced touch deprivation during lockdowns suffered from greater feelings of anxiety and loneliness, and we have weighed and continue to weigh these cost benefits of mental and physical health risks as individuals, communities, and a society. As vaccinations rolled out in 2021, and public health restrictions lifted, many of us have enjoyed hugging more friends and maybe even strangers again. We’ve savored gathering indoors with loved ones, perhaps cozied up around a kitchen table or cuddled on a couch again. We’ve gone back out to eating inside restaurants and enjoying live performances.

And this is all very human and very good. We need human touch and we need proximity to other human beings.

And yet, I worry that we have forgotten that, as Dori Midnight puts it, there are always, “people living with one lung, with immune systems that don’t work so well, or perhaps work too hard, fighting against themselves.” Or at least some of us have.

I know this is true because I myself forgot such critical awareness a few weeks ago. I was talking on the phone with my best friend—we’ll call her Bee for the sake of her privacy—and we were discussing our plans for our reunion in Minneapolis this June, when one of our other best friends from college will be getting married. Minneapolis is the beloved city in which we all became young adults, and I’ve been really excited about this wedding because I plan to take a full week off work in order to go and reconnect with my community there. During our phone call, Bee tentatively asked: “So, I’ve been wondering...would you be willing to structure your visit in a way that allows us to spend the whole time together?”

Now, what you need to know about Bee is that we share a lot of the same identity markers, except that Bee is immunocompromised and already lives with several chronic health conditions. While she was able to choose to get vaccinated and boosted, she is not able to risk getting Covid-19 because she cannot willfully risk adding long-Covid to her list of chronic conditions. She doesn't fear the virus's symptoms or that she would need hospitalization; she simply knows her body and her medical history and is afraid that she would be one of the few percent who incurs long-term health issues.

So during our phone call, she was effectively asking me, "Hey, best friend! Would you be willing to meet me where my risk levels are—essentially, to masks indoors and be mindful of touch and proximity—so that we can maximize our time together in Minneapolis?"

And what was my reaction? Resistance, woo-wheee! In the moment I said something like, "Maaaaybe, BUT there's this thing for me to consider, and BUT, I'm not sure about that."

Now to very quickly clear: I don't think there was a right answer and I gave a wrong answer. There is nothing black and white about navigating a pandemic that has become an endemic. We are living in a gray world right now. AND, as I processed my reaction in light of this theme of embrace with a few friends, I came to recognize that my resistance was about the fact that I had grown quite comfortable over the previous months with my not-so-restricted lifestyle. I was having fun going to an occasional show! unmasked! indoors! And I had long been doing small indoor gatherings with friends unmasked.

So here I was, immediately resistant to embracing the risk level of my best friend, who is one of the people I love most in the entire world.

What struck me most as I held this truth about my reaction was how it stood in stark contrast to the time during the pandemic, when so many of us felt risk collectively and were collectively afraid and anxious and unsure. When we did cease from travel and we learned to wash our hands and wear masks and/or stay home and/or stay six feet apart as acts of love and care. = And that's when I knew: I had already forgotten the most valuable lesson the pandemic had taught me: how to embrace the most vulnerable in my everyday actions.

As I lamented that I, too, had become somewhat apathetic in this exhausting and confusing time in which we find ourselves, I was reminded in my work as a chaplain that the word apathy comes from the Greek "a" + "pathos," meaning "without suffering." This etymological insight helped me understand how it was I had forgotten my most valuable pandemic lesson so quickly: I had already forgotten how it felt to be at risk when the virus was new and highly contagious and unknown. And I had already forgotten the

ways in which I had experienced suffering: when all my grad school classes moved online and I could not hug or touch any of my friends; when I watched as the number of cases and deaths rose exponentially every day; when I was afraid I would get sick; and far more, that someone I loved who was more vulnerable or older than me would get sick.

Perhaps I forgot so quickly because I am one of the privileged few in the U.S. who has not had anyone I'm close to die of Covid, so that is a suffering I do not know.

Yet, I am inclined to believe I am not alone in my forgetfulness, that, in fact, it is part of the collective amnesia to which we Americans, especially European-Americans, are predisposed. This is by design and it is a topic that my former Dean at Vanderbilt Divinity School, emilie m. townes, explores at length in her book entitled Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil. She terms this "forgottenness" (added quotes) and discusses how it is a strategy of those in power to create and retain that power. As she writes: "to forget, (which is another way of saying to deny as well) is to be able to feign ignorance and a lack of agency."

In other words, if we apply this to Dori Midnight's poem: "Forgottenness" is to pretend or forget or deny that we don't always have neighbors living with one lung, with cancer, who are old, who are immunocompromised, or who have new babies, or who need healthy food.

Naturally, the antidote to forgottenness is to remember. Dean Townes calls this a strategy of "countermemory," describing it as an act of looking at the past for microhistories to force a reconsideration of flawed (a.k.a. incomplete or vastly circumscribed) histories.

An example of a microhistory, in this case, would be for me to remember the small ways in which I, too, experienced suffering during the Covid-19 pandemic that I just described. And perhaps most importantly to just remember how it felt to be at risk, to be vulnerable, and to be afraid.

How have you suffered? When we can sit with, and tenderly hold, our own suffering, we find a portal, which some call Spirit or God or the Universe, and that portal moves us from apathy, where we were once resisting suffering to compassion, where we can be with other people in their suffering. Compassion, after all, literally means "to suffer with."

So now, when I contemplate Bee and our Minneapolis visit, my best hope is that I can make decisions from a place of compassion, being mindful that for her, and plenty of people, the suffering caused by this virus has not ended and does not yet have an end date. And even more importantly, as Dori Midnight reminds us, it is always already true

that people were living with immune compromised systems and disabilities and chronic pain and chronic illnesses before the pandemic, and it will always already be true that those same folks will be living (there will be such folks) long after the pandemic.

So how do we embrace one another in love and care and with compassion in this ever-changing and complex world in which we find ourselves?

I have discussed how remembering, or “countermemory,” can be a powerful antidote to forgottenness and apathy. This is one tool in our toolkit.

Another tool in our toolkits is to remember, in a deep and bodily way, that our friends, family, neighbors and fellow OUUC community members have different levels of risk and needs. Some may need to be embraced without touch. Others may need and want a hug.

UU congregations are using a very handy tool to help facilitate this process: stickers to express what an individual’s boundaries are for the day

Explain dots/stickers:

Red = “No contact – please respect social distancing”

Green = “Contact welcome – please continue practicing consent”

Yellow = “Cautious – please ask me what’s comfortable”

During our reflection time after the service, you will have an opportunity to engage questions of embrace, and if you’re in-person, to practice with these stoplight stickers.

May we always already embrace one another with care and intention with, or without, touch.