

Commentary: The gospel in 50 hugs

March 24, 2020

A couple of weeks ago, after providing pulpit supply for a tiny suburban church, Nancy and I stopped to talk to one of the church leaders as we left. He was one of several immigrants from Tonga who made that church their home. Go figure: An immigrant becoming a church leader!

He told us how in Tonga, though the people dress casually year-round, church attendance requires more formal attire. If you showed up to church casually dressed, the greeters wouldn't simply turn you away; they might even beat you up.

Shaking our heads in disbelief and laughing with him, it occurred to me even here in America many people have experienced a beating when they sought to participate in worship.

They might be turned away or even asked to leave. Their socioeconomic status, their race or their sexual orientation left them ill-clothed. There are far too many victims of church "greeter beatings."

Dealing with terrible news

Hundreds of miles away at that same moment, a friend of mine spotted a small, roadside Baptist church in Mexia (muh-HAY'-uh), Texas. Feeling an urge to do so, he pulled over and went in.

Not long before, he had handed his wife over to her sister, who took her the rest of the way to Houston for an appointment the next day at M.D. Anderson, a world-renowned cancer hospital.

My friend was headed back home where he is a hospital staff doctor. Instead of their intended retirement, his wife had a rare headache one day, leading to the discovery of an inoperable and terminal stage 4 glioblastoma brain cancer.

The doctors told her upfront they could add some time and quality to her life, but the cancer eventually would take her life, and sooner than later.

This doctor and I had been hospice colleagues and became friends. When the bad news came, I committed to stay close and have visited them in their home several times. My heart breaks for them.

Discovering church during crisis

They previously told me they were not people of faith. They'd never attended church. They were straightforward and honest about it, unapologetic. Yet for some reason, they let this hospice chaplain—this “preacher”—into their lives.

I've always had a special place in my heart for people on faith's fringes. Their stories are compelling, as is their honesty.

A couple of weeks ago, her symptoms demanded more tests. That's why she was on the way to Houston. After the tests, the doctors told my friend and his wife she wouldn't live to see the end of this year. They now are trying to cope with that incredibly bad news.

When he'd stopped at the little church and gone inside, it would be the first time he'd been in church in some four decades. He didn't know what to expect. A friendly greeter met him at the door and ushered him to a pew near the back.

There were only about 50 people in attendance. He took note of the fact they were all African American and dressed to the nines. He feared they'd

see him as a threat. He was white and wearing a grungy shirt and jeans.

Digesting a different kind of sermon

The pastor was a large man, he said, with hands the size of basketballs. He was preaching what my friend called a typical Baptist sermon, condemning sin and warning of hell and so on.

Somewhere in the sermon, the preacher noticed my friend. He interrupted his sermon and said to him, "I don't think we've met before."

He asked him to stand and introduce himself, which he did, mentioning he simply was driving by when he spotted the church and decided to stop.

The pastor asked him to come forward and meet him at the altar. He then asked my friend to tell the congregation the whole story about his wife's illness and such, which he did.

When he finished, the pastor laid a big hand on his shoulder and began to pray for him. At the end of the prayer, he said, every single person in the church left their pews, came forward and, to a person, gave him a hug.

The gospel in 50 hugs

My friend's voice quivered as he expressed how moving the experience had been, just as my fingers quiver writing this.

I'm not sure why he and his wife had not been in church all those years. Had they been beaten up? I don't know.

I am certain those 50 hugs were the best sermon preached in any church anywhere that day.

I'm betting the very good news of those 50 hugs will help him and them

take the next steps. They will need hugs again, like we all do.

There is no better news than stumbling deeply wounded into church, fearing how you will be treated, only to get 50 hugs.

That's the gospel if there ever was any.

Glen Schmucker is a writer and blogger in Fort Worth. He served over 40 years in pastoral ministry in Texas and Arkansas—now occasionally providing pulpit supply—and for several years as a hospice and pediatric chaplain. The views expressed are those solely of the author.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This opinion article was written prior to the call for social distancing in response to the coronavirus pandemic. To prevent the spread of coronavirus, physical contact is discouraged. During this time of social distancing and shelter-in-place orders, may this op-ed inspire us to consider the character of a church that cares for people.