

Public Displays of Affection

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



Psalm 85

Last September an incident occurred in the ancient city of Hebron in the West Bank, an area controlled largely by the Palestinian Authority. It involved five American tourists. The five were students and ultra-orthodox Jews and they were on their way to visit the Machpela Cave – believed by many to be the ancient burial site of Israel’s great patriarchs. Jews, Muslims and Christians find this to be one of the great holy sites. The five young Jewish students, however, on their way to the site got lost, took some wrong turns, and ended up in a Palestinian neighborhood. And before they knew it they found themselves under attack by a mob of Palestinians. Rocks were thrown, Molotov cocktails lobbed, the car engulfed with flames and eventually the students pulled from the car in order for the mob to begin beating them. Faiz Abu Hamadiyah, a 51 year old Palestinian Muslim and businessman who lived in the neighbor witnessed what was happening – and without giving himself much time to think about it – ran into the street and interceded for the Jewish students – and along with his family whisked them into his home to give them protection. Israeli security forces were called to rescue the young tourists. “We gave them water to drink,” said Faiz, “and tried to tell them that they were safe though they didn’t speak Arabic.” Had Faiz Abu Hamadiyah given himself much time to think about it he might have considered and weighed too heavily the potential consequences of his rescue attempt – not just in confronting the mob, but in what occurred a few days later. The Palestinian family received death threats from their neighbors and pledges to burn down their house. A reporter when interviewing Mr. Hamadiyah offered that he was a hero, to which the Palestinian replied – “I’m not a hero. I did it because I am a human being.”

There is enough that has happened over these last couple of weeks that has put to the test what it means to be a human being. One dead in Minnesota. 41

dead in Istanbul. One dead in Baton Rouge. 84 dead in Nice. Six dead in Dallas. Three dead in Baton Rouge. 10 dead in Munich. Not to mention 49 dead in Orlando six weeks ago. 32 in Brussels two months before. And those, of course, are only the front page stories. God knows how many that haven’t made the front page. And whether it is color or nationality or uniform that prompts these attacks – what is left to be asked is what does it mean to be a human being?

There was something about being human that possessed the Palestinian Muslim to intercede for those five orthodox Jewish strangers. Something about being human. There was something about being human – when Jesus told his story about the beaten man on the side of the road – there was something about being human that prompted of all people in Jesus’ story the Samaritan to stop and tend to the man and his wounds and to find for him a healing hostel. There was something about being human that prompted young Montrell Jackson, the young African-American police officer gunned down last Sunday, to write just days before in a Facebook post in reaction to the slaying of Alton Sterling, “I’ve experienced so much in my short life and these last 3 days have tested me to the core. When people you know begin to question your integrity you realize they don’t really know you at all. Look at my actions they speak LOUD and CLEAR. Finally I personally want to send prayers out to everyone directly affected by this tragedy. These are trying times. Please don’t let hate infect your heart. This city MUST and WILL get better. I’m working in these streets, so any protesters, officers, friends, family, or whoever, if you see me and need a hug or want to say a prayer. I got you.”

I got you.

I got you. I wonder if that isn’t a big part of what it means to be a human being. That somewhere buried deep into our DNA, deep into this imago dei, this image of god implanted into our souls, I wonder if there isn’t this notion that to be a human being is to have this sense that we got each other. That not only are we a human species ... we are a human race. Not races, but race. We are a human race and we got each other. Palestinian/Jew, Black/white, Samaritan, officer, citizen. We got each other. And I wonder if that isn’t

what the Psalmist receives as an answer to his prayer. The Psalmist in Psalm 85 prays to God and wonders with God what the future of God’s people is to be. What does God most desire for his people? What sign are we to look for if we are too look for your favor, O Lord? And the Psalmist actually places himself in a listening posture and wonders what to expect as an answer from the Lord? How are we to know what you want? What does it really mean, O Lord, to be a human race in relationship with you? How do we most live into our imago dei – into the image of God? “Let me hear,” says the Psalmist, “what God will speak, for he will speak peace to his people.” And boy if there is anything that we might ever want out of our prayers to God it is for God to speak peace to us. In the Hebrew the word is shalom. And if there is anything a person of God might want from the Lord it is God’s shalom. We translate that word peace, but it means a lot more than that. Shalom points us to the state of wholeness and well-being. This sense that I am at peace with myself, with my God and with my world. That somehow the tapestry of being within me and around me has been woven together. Shalom. He will speak shalom to his people. The wellness of soul and the wellness of world.

It’s not unlike the story of the mother who was looking for something with which to occupy her four year old daughter so she found inside a magazine a picture of planet earth. This orb with the outline of the continents. So she tore it out of the magazine and then tore the picture up into little pieces, little puzzle pieces for her daughter to put together. She gave it to her and said, “Put the world together,” thinking that this should keep her occupied for a couple of hours. Fifteen minutes later the little girl came back with the puzzle put together – the world put together. “How

did you do that so fast?” the mother asked. “Oh,” said the little girl, “on the back was the picture of a person’s face. And so I just put the person together and when the person came together so did the world.”

And so the Psalmist waits for God to speak his shalom – and sure enough God speaks his shalom and what we hear are words like steadfast love and faithfulness and righteousness. What we hear is that this big, big world that wants so badly to be torn apart – shalom comes when our righteousness is lived out in our steadfast love and faithfulness to each other. Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet. Righteousness and peace will kiss each other. If there is to be this shalom, God says, it will be in the not letting go. Shalom comes in the holding on. Shalom comes in the “I got you”. Shalom comes not just in my being righteous, not just in my being right – shalom comes when I find my righteousness through my steadfast love, through my faithfulness, through my relationship to God and his people. Because you see what separates me as a human being from all the other species – is that I am not some kind of Darwinian animal set here to illustrate the survival of the fittest, the dog eat dog world --- no I am a human being, a member of the human race whose meaning and purpose is in the I got you. There were a whole lot of I got you’s on this campus yesterday. Human beings helping human beings. Shalom comes in the holding on.

Back in the midst of the great Civil Rights movement in the 1960’s there was a little town in Mississippi that had a boycott of the merchants downtown. The boycott was organized by leaders in the black church. It was a peaceful and constructive demonstration but the police were not on their side and were rough

“... I am a human being, a member of the human race whose meaning and purpose is in the I got you.”

with these black church folk. At the very apex of the struggle the chief of police suffered a heart attack and was in the hospital for several weeks. Even though he was confined to a private room he continued to supervise the police effort calling deputies to his room every day for reports.

One day one of his men said, “Well, they are planning a rally tonight at the AME church. They say it’s going to be a prayer meeting.”

“Prayer meeting,” the chief snorted. “Listen, it’s going to be a warm night so they’ll have the windows open. I want you to go there and stand outside the window and hear what they are planning. Come and tell me tomorrow.”

The next day the deputy returned.

“Did you do as I said?” the chief asked.

“Yes, I did,” the deputy answered.

“What happened?”

“Well, they sang some hymns.”

“I know that. Then what happened.”

“Well, they prayed.”

“What did they pray for?”

“They prayed for you. They prayed for you.”

Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet.
Righteousness and peace will kiss each other.

Have you ever given any thought to kisses in the Bible? I bet you haven’t. I suspect most of us think that there’s no kissing at all in the Bible. No such public displays of affection. And yet some of the greatest stories of the Bible end in a kiss. Remember the story of Jacob and Esau – and poor old Esau getting cheated out of his inheritance by his younger brother and the two boys part as the bitterest of enemies. But that’s not how the story ends. It ends when Jacob and Esau finally having to face each other and Jacob thinks this is the end. He’s finally going to get his just desserts for having cheated his brother. And just when we think Esau is really going to give it to his brother by sword or fist, Esau falls upon him and kisses him. Once kissed Jacob says, “Seeing you is like seeing the face of God.” Or Joseph – beaten out of jealousy by his brothers and sold into slavery – left to live a harrowing life of survival that amazingly ends him up as the savior of Egypt. And his brothers come hat in hand looking for help – and when Joseph sees

these men who tried to ruin his life – what does he do - give them their just desserts - send them home hungry ... he falls upon them and kisses them. And when that father lets his prodigal son go out to the far country – only for him to blow the family inheritance – and the boy comes limping home ashamed – and Jesus says, the father when he saw his boy ran to him and fell upon him and kissed him. It wasn’t about being right, it was about being together. Black, white, Jew, Palestinian, cop, citizen, Samaritan. I got you.

Because you know there is this force in the world – a force as invisible and as powerful as gravity – and it is the force of estrangement. Estrangement. Every day presents us with opportunities to be estranged. To be estranged in our families. In our acquaintances. In our politics. In our community. In our color, our uniform, our nationality. There is this force that wants to pull us apart. There is this force that wants to convince us that we are right they are wrong. It is the natural way of things. It is the way the world is. God forbid a public display of affection. God forbid a Palestinian rescuing a Jew. God forbid one color embracing another. God forbid one enemy kissing another. No signs of love. No watching out for your fellow human being. No human race, but human races. No shalom. No public displays of affection.

And against this force of estrangement we pray that God might speak. That God might speak his word of shalom. And God says steadfast. God says love. God says faithfulness. God says peace. God says meet. God says kiss. And God says it all in the Messiah Jesus. And God says it all in the God-man Jesus, who empties himself first to be born and who empties himself second to die. A rather public display of affection.

Richard Selzer, a plastic surgeon, tells the story of a patient whose surgery under his hand did not go as planned – the result being a nerve in her face mistakenly severed and her mouth unable to straighten. Selzer recounts the moment at her bedside along with her husband when he delivers the bad news.

The young woman speaks. “Will my mouth always be like this?”

“Yes,” he says, “it will. It is because the nerve was

cut.”

She nods and is silent. But then the young man, the husband, smiles.

“I like it,” he says. “It’s kind of cute.”

Dr. Selzer continues: “All at once I know who he is. I understand, and I lower my gaze. One is not bold in an encounter with a god. Unmindful, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth, and I so close I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate to hers, to show her that their kiss still works. I remember that the gods appeared in ancient Greece as mortals, and I hold my breath and let the wonder in.

I got you. I am a human being. I got you. The force is against us. I got you. You may not got me, but I got you. You may even be my enemy. I got you. It sounds like something Jesus might have said from the cross. You know, that time when God reconciled the world to himself. Not just my race. Not just your race. But the human race. You know, that time when that God-man contorted himself just enough to show that our kiss still works.

A rather public display of affection.

We too can bear the image and in bearing the image -- know the shalom.



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Dr. Stephen D. McConnell
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Church of the Palms

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3224 Bee Ridge Rd, Sarasota FL 34239 • (941) 924-1323