

Jesus Gathers Us Together...In His Arms...Now and Forever!

A sermon based on Matthew 11:28-30

This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. Amen.

A hug. Sometimes in life, there's nothing quite as comforting, securing, peaceful as a simple hug, wouldn't you agree? A young child crawls into your arms in the middle of the night, scared of the thunderstorms, nuzzles his head in right here, falls asleep. A rough day at work, and your loved one greets you after and tightly squeezes you and the stress and tension just vanish. You're leaving your friends and some family, moving away, but the warm and loving embraces assures you this isn't a forever goodbye. Hugs are pretty great, aren't they?

One man has taken notice of that, and he's set out to change the world, one hug at a time. I want to introduce you to Juan Mann (it's a pseudonym, of course), and his story. He writes:

I'd been living in London when my world turned upside down and I had to come home. By the time my plane landed back in Sydney, all I had left was a carry-on bag full of clothes and a world of troubles. No one to welcome me back, no place to call home. I was a tourist in my hometown.

Standing there in the arrivals terminal, watching other passengers meeting their waiting friends and family, with open arms and smiling faces, hugging and laughing together, I wanted someone out there to be waiting for me. To be happy to see me. To smile at me. To hug me.

So I got some cardboard and a marker and made a sign. I found the busiest pedestrian intersection in the city and held that sign aloft, with the words "Free Hugs" on both sides.

And for 15 minutes, people just stared right through me. The first person who stopped, tapped me on the shoulder and told me how her dog had just died that morning. How that morning had been the one year anniversary of her only daughter dying in a car accident. How what she needed now, when she felt most alone in the world, was a hug. I got down on one knee, we put our arms around each other and when we parted, she was smiling.

Perhaps you've heard of Juan. Probably, you're more familiar with his campaign, "Free Hugs Campaign," or one of its contemporaries that have popped up in years since.

Even if you haven't, you still know. There's just something about a hug, isn't there. A nice, warm embrace, letting you know you matter, you are loved, you are important. So it's only fitting Jesus is the one offering free hugs today...and really every day. He knows you. He's thinking of you. He sees you wearied. He sees you burdened. And he wants to give you rest. And he does. Jesus gathers you...Jesus gathers me...Jesus gathers us all together...in his arms...now and forever.

Hear Jesus' own words: ***"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."***

It's really the perfect conclusion to a week where the kids, volunteers, some of you parents, we learned how Jesus, our Good Shepherd, gathers us together in so many different ways. Kids, can you help me

review all those ways Jesus gathers us with our take home points? Awesome. Here they are: Jesus cares...Jesus provides...Jesus leads...Jesus forgives...Jesus is our Savior.

You know, for the kids, it's easy to say those things, right? Is it easy for you? I mean, we're adults. We've been around the block a few times. We've been in the world. We've experienced life. We've had the rose-colored glasses removed. We know.

Jesus provides, but then why do bills these days seem so much larger while my funds to pay them are that much smaller? Jesus provides, but then why do all my friends get to go on these lavish vacations, traveling the world with their families, but I'm stuck working extra jobs on the side, and even then, the best we can do are a couple camping trips around the area each summer? Jesus provides, but then why is it all the other kids at school have brand name and brand new clothes and my kids get heckled for wearing hand-me-downs or thrift store specials?

Or, Jesus leads, but a lot of the time, it seems I'm headed the wrong direction. I know the path of righteousness, and I also know how easy it is to veer off in the direction of anger or greed or lust or drunkenness or gossip or any other sin. That seems to be my walk EVERY. SINGLE. DAY. Why doesn't Jesus keep me on the straight path?

Or Jesus cares, but if he really does, he's got a funny way of showing it. I don't think me or someone in my family constantly being sick or in and out of the hospital is necessarily that great of a healthcare plan. Or, our government, do I even need to say any more? They're God's representatives to care for our physical needs. I'm certainly not satisfied. Are you? And let's not even get into the place our society is quickly headed. I literally fear for my future and even more so for that of my children or grandchildren and the immoral issues they're going to have to face.

Or Jesus forgives, but are you sure he could forgive me? The person I've been...the things I've done...the things I keep doing and I just can't help myself...I'm so ashamed. You can't see it, but my guilt is overwhelming, and it eats away at me constantly. I feel unforgiveable.

If any of that is you, welcome to the club. I've been there. I continually go back there. We all do. We all question God. We all doubt him. It's because we're all sinners, which makes it difficult to see or imagine how Jesus would even want to be our Savior. We're that unworthy.

You know, our VBS this year has been focused around a farm theme, so here's some farming imagery (from Scripture) to put our spiritual condition into perspective. We're like sheep, and if you were listening to the children's message, you remember how sheep really aren't that smart. While we know well the straight path God wants us on, walking it is much more difficult. Ask any of the kids who tried to herd their sheep balloons with a fly swatter earlier this week, trying to get them to go in a straight line. They didn't. Neither do real sheep. Neither do we. Despite Jesus' perfect guidance, we stray and sin.

Jesus wants to gather us in. He even used the picture of a hen gathering her chicks under her wing for safety and protection to show how much he wants us. And time and time again, with this sin and that sin, we pull away.

And so what we deserve? Jesus says, ***“[All] will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.”*** At the end, we deserve to be sent away from Jesus, along with the rest of the goats, sent into exile, sent to hell.

And we should despair at that news. Yet we don't. Here's why. I have one more farming picture I want to share with you. ***“Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”*** We've heard, in our service already, and kids, throughout VBS week, how Jesus is our Good Shepherd, who cares for, provides for, forgives, loves us. What better act of love is there than to become one of us sheep and take away every single one of us sins? There isn't!

Yet that's exactly what Jesus did. He became a sheep like us when God became man. The only difference is he was perfect...never sinned. But he took our sins on himself and died for them on the cross...the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, yours and mine included. And he's risen, the only proof we need those sins we struggle with every day are paid for and gone...forever. His grace, our gift!

You see, Jesus wants to gather us into his arms, and into his heavenly family, and so he did exactly what needed to be done in order for that to be possible. He lived, he died, and he rose.

But you notice, Jesus still continues to beckon us into his arms, especially in times of temptation and trouble, doesn't he? Free hugs, right? Hear again his words, ***“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”***

Now, some of you might be tempted to say, “Am I really carrying the light end here, Pastor? When I feel so shattered, so drained, so weighed down by grief and sorrow? This is the light end? How can that be?” If you've had similar thoughts, remember how much Jesus has done for you. He's taken all your sins on Himself. He went willingly through death and came back again, for you. When Jesus spread out His arms on the cross, it was so that God could load all of your pain, your sorrow, your grief, your anger, and your guilt – all of your sin – onto Him.

And all that's left for us, as difficult as it might be to see sometimes, is the light end. Maybe we can picture this idea of a light yoke in a different way. Picture a little boy who wants to help Mom or Dad with moving something – a heavy box, say, or an overstuffed basket of laundry. He's so determined to help, in fact, that he keeps scampering in front of Mom or Dad's feet, and threatening to trip both of them. So Mom or Dad says, “Okay, you can help. Put your hand here.” The little guy lays his hand on the side of the box and walks the last few steps. Mom or Dad sets down the box, then Junior struts away, happy because he got to 'help'. How much weight did he really carry? Very little – none, in fact. Who did all the work? Mom or Dad did. Yet he gets to feel like he helped. Jesus says something similar here. You're greatly mistaken if you think you're shouldering the same load as Jesus. Now, he says, “Let Me carry the heavy end, and I'll give you the light end.” So when Jesus says His yoke is light, he's not kidding. He's taken our mistakes, our failures, our sins, our guilt, our shame, our entire burden.

And that's why Jesus can promise/guarantee us rest. You might feel like you're under intolerable pressure. I won't invalidate that. These days it seems we are dealing with things that even people in our parents' and grandparents' generations, never dreamed of. But no matter what your problem or struggle or temptation is, it's never bigger than Jesus. Never. Jesus is always greater than any problem

you face. He conquered death for you, and His tomb stands empty to this day to prove that nothing will separate you from Him forever. If that's true – if He really did rise, just as He said He would – what will keep you from Him and from his warm embrace and from peace and rest from all this life's trials and tribulations? What is stronger than He is? Nothing, nothing at all.

You have people who love you. Even though they may not say it all the time, or even seem like they want to show it – you are surrounded by people who love you and care about you, a great deal. And even if they were all to go away – even if every last one of them turned their backs on you and refused to speak with you ever again – Jesus is still there. He still loves you. He still walks in when the entire world walks out on you. His love is so great that it conquered sin and death, and now He promises never to leave you nor forsake you. Nobody but Jesus can keep that promise, because nobody but Jesus has risen from the dead.

And he gathers us in now. He gathers us when we're weary, when we're tired of living for him and fighting sin's battle. He gathers us in when we're burdened and loaded with guilt and shame for our failures and wanderings. He gathers us in and gives us rest. He gives us the peace of sins forgiven now and he promise eternal rest and peace with him in heaven forever.

How about that for a hug? Someone (I'm not sure who) once said, "sometimes, a hug is worth more than a thousand words." You know it's true and even more so with Jesus. And he's seeking you. Friends, gather 'round...gather in Jesus' saving arms (opened wide on the cross for you), his forgiving arms (his embrace of reconciliation), his strong arms (shielding us from sin's attacks), his loving arms (where we can climb into his lap and find safety, security, solace), and find peace and rest, now and forever. Amen.