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# **A Time to Embrace**

To everything there is a season,

A time for every purpose under heaven:

...A time to embrace,

And a time to refrain from embracing;

Ecclesiastes 3

Ever tried to hug someone and felt their refusal to accept your embrace? Perhaps they stiffened up or went limp or distanced themselves and you knew that for whatever reason, they were not okay with your embrace.

It's not always easy to embrace. Embracing involves risk and implies willing acceptance, whether another person, an idea, a view, yourself, your circumstances, or maybe your history. Usually our refusal to embrace has more to do with our own selves and our own heart than with whatever or whomever we refuse to embrace.

As of late, I've been thinking about how at times it has not been easy for me to embrace myself. I've been finding that my ability to love others and embrace them is dependent upon my ability to embrace myself.

Sometimes when we who are followers of Christ begin to understand that the Word says we must deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Jesus, we forget that Jesus also said we are to love ourselves as we love others. And to be able to accept both of those truths at the same time seems impossible. So we try to choose one or the other of the truths and find ourselves off balance.

One of the beautiful things about Jesus is His ability to be both/and at the same time. For example, He is both mercy and truth. We humans have difficulty being mercy and truth at the same time. Christ both accepts our struggles and challenges them, and yet it is more difficult for us to do the same. As humans, we have difficulty being both/and. We can't figure out how to deny ourselves and love ourselves at the same time. We find it hard to love ourselves for who we are at that moment and yet believe in and hope for who we will become. We are challenged to love others for who they are presently and yet believe and hope in who they will become.

I spent a lot of years denying myself, or so I thought, but what I was really denying was my fears, my struggles, my pain. That is quite different than denying yourself. To deny one's selfish instincts, one's desire to manipulate others, one's lack of compassion, etc., is completely different than denying one's heart.

I've spent a lot of time in the past two years learning to accept my own heart. I've been learning how not to deny reality, whether it be the reality of my own history or the reality of my present circumstances. And in doing so, I have been learning to love myself. I've had moments when I looked at my own childhood and had to say, "That wasn't okay. That wasn't right." So my embracing has been not an embracing of the bad things but of my heart in those moments.

Brian Andreas, who has a line of art called Story People, wrote something I love for a piece of art called Open Heart. He wrote this verse, ***"He told me one time he forgot himself and his heart opened up like a door with a loose latch and he tried for days to put it all back in proper order but finally he gave up and left it all jumbled up there in a pile and loved everything equally."***

I framed that piece of art and hung it on my wall. I must admit that sometimes people read it, scratch their heads, and go, "Huh?" But for me, it is a description of loving my process of learning to love myself.

Well, I realize I am being somewhat philosophical this morning, but I believe that for some of you, today is going to be an "aha" moment for you. You will be challenged to be true to yourself. You will be challenged to love yourself and in doing so, you will find that you can begin to understand, ah, perhaps embrace, what Jesus said.

You can begin to truly love others because you love yourself. As you offer kindness to your own heart, you can truly offer kindness to the hearts of others. As you begin to look back at your own story and have compassion for

yourself in your struggles, learning perhaps that you were wounded or scared or abandoned or unloved, and have compassion for yourself at that past moment, then you can begin to embrace your story. I am finding that it is in my story that I discover the keys to who I am today and who I am destined to be for it is my story that empowers me to touch the lives of others.

So dear believer, your mission, should you choose to accept it, is not impossible at all. Difficult perhaps, but not impossible. Your mission is to embrace. Yourself first. Your flaws, your failures, and your glory. Then others. And in doing so you will fulfill the second commandment of Christ, "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." In fulfilling the second commandment, we can better gauge how well we are fulfilling the first, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, your mind, and your soul," for loving God results in loving others and loving ourselves.

There is a time to embrace and it is today. Fling wide your arms to embrace. Open the latch on your heart, let it all tumble out, and love it all equally, have compassion on your own heart and the heart of others and perhaps you will find God's heart in the process.

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