

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 12/8/2023

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

When our first daughter, Talitha, was about three years old, my parents took our family to Disneyland. On Monday afternoons, Talitha and I had been watching an animated show called Disney TaleSpin that featured the character of Baloo, the bear who had mentored Mowgli in The Jungle Book. Talitha loved Baloo, so we noted posters in Disneyland Toon Town that featured images of Baloo. That day at Disneyland, I saw an announcement that Baloo would be appearing “in person” at a particular location and time. I navigated our family to the appointed venue with a few moments before Baloo was to make his appearance. But I didn’t tell anyone why we were going there. We waited in a hallway with Talitha near the front. Then the door opened and out stepped Baloo. Immediately, Talitha yelled out, “Baloo!” and ran and threw her arms around him and hugged him for several seconds. It was the highlight of her day and our, too.

The Disney resorts have a policy regarding children giving characters hugs. This often happens in the various parks when children see what they believe to be an actual person from a show or movie. This policy instructs cast members—the employees who wear the costumes for different characters—to allow a child to hang on to them for as long as the child chooses to do so. They recognize that some children need extra time to hold on to a beloved character and will give them all the time they need.

I like this and I think it is a practice that many of us could and should adopt. Though we aren’t dressed like popular characters and though we may not have someone throwing their arms around us for a hug, from time to time we have the opportunity to grant someone else the attention they may desperately need. Especially since the pandemic, we have been more cautious about coming in contact with others and often maintain distance so as to protect them and us from possible exposure to the coronavirus disease (COVID). A side effect of this protective behavior is that we less often feel the touch of another. And this is having a negative impact on many people.

Among other things, appropriate touch helps to express emotions, lower stress, improve both communication and health, and diminish the effects of anxiety and depression. Seeking to keep ourselves and others healthy in one way has resulted in us decreasing both mental and physical health in other ways. These days, it is important that we are cautious, especially as cases of COVID and the flu are on the rise. But it is also important that we find ways to safely increase our contact with others.

Providing needed contact and care begins with trying to be more sensitive to the situations of others. It may be less safe to touch another, but we can still listen and offer support to any who may need it. As our society has become more isolative and lonelier, reaching out to others in whatever ways we safely can, will make a significant impact on our world today.

In CHRIST'S love,
Pastor Jeffrey