

Sermon Growth Guide

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THE KISS OF FRIENDSHIP | Romans 16:8-16

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Key Verse: Romans 16:16 – "Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ send greetings.

Big Idea: How we greet and treat one another is a mark of the sweetness of Christian fellowship as we are united in Christ.

Foundations

We all want to be known. We all want to belong. Yet loneliness has reached epidemic levels, and in a transient city like Colorado Springs, both the newcomer and the long-timer quietly do the math: "Why bother? One of us is leaving." This may be one of the hardest places to keep a friend.

Romans 16 answers with good news: if you are in Christ, you have a family. Not a metaphor-family, but a covenant family with a family business: making disciples of all nations together. The list of names at the end of Paul's letter reveals a community that is diverse yet united. We see slave and free, Jew and Greek, men and women, different house churches and social standings, all "in Christ," described as dear friends, co-workers, brothers and sisters.

True Christian community is marked by friendship forged in shared mission and proven faithful over time, and by a warmth and affection the watching world can see. Living this out is impossible in our own strength, but Christ has destroyed the dividing wall of hostility, and by His Spirit He is knitting a ragtag bunch into one body.

Jesus embraces us and calls us friend. Know you belong to Him and to His body and help someone else know that they belong.

Understanding God's Word

Read Romans 16:8-16 together. What do you notice about the people Paul names? (backgrounds, their roles, and the ways he describes them?)

Paul says people are "in Christ" or "in the Lord" nine times in this list. What does it mean that our unity is rooted in Christ rather than in similar backgrounds, life stages, or interests?

Why would Paul end his greatest theological letter by commanding, "Greet one another with a holy kiss?" What is he really asking of the church—and what might that look like in our culture today?

Applying God's Word

Friendship is often forged in shared work and shared mission. Where have you served alongside others at First Pres? What was that like?

Where else have you tasted friendship and community as part of this body?

Apelles' "fidelity to Christ has stood the test" (v. 10), while Demas "loved this world" and deserted Paul. Do you have a "2 a.m. friend" who is reliable, faithful, and present? Are you becoming that kind of friend?

Witnessing God's Word

Who in your life is quietly alone—new to the Springs, new to our church, or walking through a hard season by themselves? What is one step you could take this week to move toward them?

When I moved to Colorado Springs, I noticed that people frequently ask a question that isn't always asked in other places. When you meet someone, the next question people ask after your name is typically not "What do you do?" but "Where are you from?" or "How long have you been in the Springs?" And that makes sense, because this is an assignment city. Fort Carson, Peterson, the Academy. So many Christian nonprofits, ministries and missions organizations are headquartered here, with staff rotating through as frequently as the soldiers do. There is a reason "Colorado Native" bumper stickers and "Pioneer" license plates are such a big deal, right? It feels like so many people rotate in and out of the Springs every few years. And the unintended result is that the whole town is quietly doing the math, wondering, "Is it worth starting a friendship with this person if it's probably going to end in a few years?"

I wonder if Colorado Springs might be one of the friendliest cities in America where it's the hardest to actually make and keep a friend.

We all want to be known. We all want to belong. Yet, we live in a world in which loneliness is an epidemic. The amount of time Americans spend in person with friends has reportedly dropped from roughly 60 minutes a day to 20, and the Surgeon General's 2023 advisory reported that roughly half of American adults experience measurable loneliness, and that a lack of social connection carries a mortality risk comparable to smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day. A lot of us know that feeling. The new job where you're just getting to know people, the empty apartment, the deployed spouse, the table set for one. You are here right now saying, "Yeah, I do feel alone."

Others of us are thinking, "I'm fine! I've got good rapport at the office! I've got friends!" That's fair. But I wonder, how much of your network is built on temporary foundations? When you change jobs or retire, those relationships often don't continue. When the kids grow up, it's harder to connect or stay connected with other parents. Who is there when the diagnosis lands, the job ends, the marriage breaks, or the casket closes?

The loneliness epidemic is one of the great challenges of our time. So, what is the Christian response?

Okay … let me acknowledge that a sermon on a list of names this morning probably ranks right alongside the prospect of a root canal. I get it. But lists of names are significant! Baseball fans obsess over a World Series batting order. Think about a sea of robes and funny square caps. Graduation. That list of names denotes a new season of life! Think back to auditioning for a school play. Going out for a team. You see a list posted and you're asking … "Did I make it!?!?!"

Lists of names are not just lists of names.

We're wrapping up our year in Romans with this series: "In the Company of Friends." Last week, Pastor Tim shared about the first half of the list and highlighted the role that men and women have together in leading the early church. Today, we wrestle with the characteristics of true Christian community. I want us to walk away seeing that how we greet and how we treat one another is a mark of being united in Christ. I want us to see that the gospel has made us a family no person could have built. So, let's look at three implications for Christian community:

1) True Christian Community Is Both Diverse and United.

Diverse AND united … on the heels of an election, that can be hard to imagine, right? But what do we see in Paul's community? Ampliatus, Urbanus, Hermes. These are all common slave names. Perhaps they are actively enslaved, perhaps they have been freed. We don't know. Apelles, Stachys and Olympas are Greek/Roman names. Herodian is a Jew. Those in the household of Narcissus and Aristobulus are likely Jewish slaves who are now employed in Caesar's household. Tryphena and Tryphosa. Their Greek names mean "Dainty" and "Delicate," which is ironic because they are likely sisters working to the point of exhaustion for the Lord. Persis is another hard-working woman of Persian descent. Asyncritus is likely the leader of the house church that Phlegon, Hermas, Patrobas and Hermes are part of. Philologus and Julia appear to be married leaders of another house church with their children Nereus and his sister. Rufus is likely the son of Simon of Cyrene, the man who carried Jesus' cross on the day of his crucifixion, and then Simon's wife, Rufus' mother. We could also add the first part of this roster from last week's text: Phoebe, Priscilla and Aquila, Epaenetus, Mary, Andronicus and Junia … a mix of men and women, Jew, Greek, Latin, all serving the Lord.

And how does Paul describe them? He calls them dear friend, beloved friend, co-worker, fellow Jew, brother, sister, mother. Paul describes them as being in Christ or in the Lord nine times in this section. There is a bondedness. Friendship and family. Warmth and affection. Roll this all together and you get a ragtag bunch on an assignment together. It's aliens, a cyborg raccoon and a tree comprising the Guardians of the Galaxy. It's the Fellowship with hobbits, men, an elf, dwarf and a wizard! It's the A-Team! Mr. T and mercenaries on a mission!
This is a picture of Christian community … of the church. Diverse, yet unified. This roster identifies people of all kinds of backgrounds, economic status, different house churches, men and women, all with different social standing, yet they are of "one body."

British pastor John Stott wrote: "Heterogeneity is of the essence of the church, since it is the one and only community in the world in which Christ has broken down all dividing walls. The vision we have been given of the church triumphant is of a company drawn from 'every nation, tribe, people and language,' who are all singing God's praises in unison." - John Stott

Stott challenges the church to pursue heterogeneity, not to drift into uniformity. This is who we are. A body of different backgrounds, skills, sex, ethnicity, community status, life stage, etc. A diverse body united in Christ. Sometimes we see a lot of that expressed in one local congregation. We have expressions of that here, and we strive to be a place that looks more and more like the vision of "The Church Triumphant" … the church as it will be when Christ returns. We also see glimpses of this in things like City Serve, ECO denomination, World Communion Sunday, Mission Partners, etc. We see this when we reflect on the reality that the center of gravity of the Christian faith is now the Global South. Africa now has more Christians than any other continent. In Christ, we really are a beautiful ragtag bunch on a mission …

So, No. 1, Christian community is both diverse and united. Second, Christian community is marked by friendship. Friendship is often forged in "shared work" or a "shared mission," isn't it? I would bet that most of your friends in adolescence developed and grew through time on a sports field or in music or theater programs. At work, you have teams and networks that form. In military service, you have a bond that is forged through training and battle. In parenting, you often link up with other parents who are in a battle against their toddlers and teenagers!

Common goals, common mission, common work, etc., are breeding grounds for friendship. The same is true in the church. Again, we are a family on a mission. Ask the volunteer teams coming off a long weekend at Winter Camp, a week at Camp Elim or VBS! Ask the Life Group leaders who have been co-leading with someone for years. Ask the Alpha or Grief Workshop team as they come off a ministry season. These are places where friendships are formed, where bonds begin to run deep. And let me just pause and say, you're invited to join in this mission work. We need you in Kids/Youth Ministry, Hospitality, Nursery, Choir and Worship Team. Get over to the Belong Hub. These may be the places where God wants to help you discover new friendships and a refreshed sense of purpose.

We form these friendships around shared work and mission, and we see, then, that true friendship is proven over time. Paul says, "Greet Apelles, whose fidelity to Christ has stood the test" (Romans 16:10a). We're not sure what happened, but we know that Apelles remained faithful to the Lord through trying times. This stands in contrast to Paul's experience with Demas. You may remember that Paul wrote to Timothy saying, "Do your best to come to me quickly, for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me" (2 Timothy 4:9-10a). But not so with Apelles. This is a friend who remained faithful to Christ despite challenge, and his faithfulness to Christ indicates his character as a friend of Paul.

Proverbs warns, "One who has unreliable friends soon comes to ruin" (Proverbs 18:24a). Do you have people in your life who are reliable? Do you have a 2 a.m. friend that you can call when something horrible is going on? Do you have friends who will love you even when you confess your failings to them? Flip that … are you that kind of friend? There's the old saying that "the only way to have a friend is to be one" (Ralph Waldo Emerson). Are you a 2 a.m. friend? Are you regularly moving toward people? Are you reliable?

I have a friend … Charles. One of our mutual friends was going through a really difficult time, so Charles drove 14 hours to have dinner with him and give him some encouragement. After dinner, he turned around and drove 14 hours back so he could make it to work the next day. Who does that!? Who is that kind of friend? Someone who knows he is loved by Christ and who seeks to share that love with others. That's who.

Christian community is both diverse and united. Christian community is marked by friendship.

3) Third, Christian Community Is Affectionate. Warm! Familiar!

I remember rolling up to the Hartnett family Christmas Eve party each year as a kid. My dad is one of seven kids, so family parties were regularly 30-40 people! I remember trying to sneak in the front door and navigate my way to the basement of whatever house we were at. Why would I do that? It's because, like many of you, I had smoochy-smoochy-pinch-your-cheeks great-aunts! And I remember even the adults would kiss each other on the cheek! I thought it was the weirdest thing! I didn't want any part of that! A couple of weeks ago, I flew to Chicago to be with my extended family for a funeral, and I saw it again. There were a lot of hugs and kissing on the cheek between relatives, friends of the family, smoochy-smoochy aunts, the whole lot! This time I wasn't freaked out. This time I knew it to be an expression of warmth, of care, of familiarity, of affection.

Paul, in his magnum opus, in what is arguably the single most important theological document of Christianity, ends by giving a strange directive. In one of the very last commands of the letter, he says, "Greet one another with a holy kiss" (Romans 16:16a). I remember being VERY interested in this directive as a teenager in youth group, noticing some of the girls across the room … but that is NOT really what Paul is referring to.

The JB Phillips paraphrase says, "Give each other a hearty handshake all round for my sake!" Eugene Peterson's Message paraphrase says, "Holy hugs all around!" Listen, the idea here is that Christian community should be affectionate and warm.

Now, many people are uncomfortable with physical touch as a greeting or sign of friendship. Others, like my crazy family, are running around pecking people on the cheek. In our culture, we defer to the comfort level of the more reserved person when it comes to physical touch. I have had to sit down with people in the past to discuss the appropriateness of their preferred greeting. So, let's not get crazy when we line up for coffee in the Commons/Plaza after this service! But Paul challenges us to be a community marked by warmth and affection for one another. When a non-Christian enters these doors, they should be able to look around and say, "Wow … these people really love each other!" This is what I see on Sundays: people connecting, generations embracing, friendships growing and love being shared. But that's not everyone's experience. This is a big church, and it can feel like a difficult place to break into community.

If that's you, there are ways to connect with others and begin to build these friendships. Visit the Belong Hub! Take a step toward A Sunday Community, a Life Group or join a serving team! You can find your people. But for those of us who have found our people here, it's still our responsibility to look for those who are new. To see those on the fringes. Don't assume that everyone here on a Sunday is walking in overflowing with joy and full relationships. Many of us are walking in desperate for a conversation that might spark a new friendship or a new chapter in our lives.

Several years ago, I was tasked with relaunching Young Adult Ministry here at First Pres. At that time, there was a narrative that First Pres didn't have any young people. But I knew that wasn't true. They were just spread out and not finding each other. They weren't connecting, weren't sticking, didn't have a place to belong. So, I started going after every youngish person I saw in the hallways. On several occasions, I actually chased young adults out of the building wearing my Genevan robe, saying, "HEY!!! ARE YOU IN YOUR TWENTIES!?!?! DO YOU HAVE ANY FRIENDS!?!?!"

I'm not saying you need to chase people out of the building (please don't) … but for this to be a place that reflects the type of Christian community, warmth and friendship that Paul describes, we need to invite people into the spaces where spiritual friendships are fostered.

Friends, in the face of a loneliness epidemic, Christian community is a healing balm. The affectionate, friendly, diverse and united body of Christ stands in opposition to an isolated, selfish, individualistic world.

But here's the deal: Attempting to live this out is, like, really, REALLY hard. Look at the state of biological families in America. How many people can't stand their families? (No show of hands, please!) There's a reason the stretch between Election Day and New Year's Day is such a stressful time for so many! For many, the season we're in is something to gear up for! Something to be concerned about! If humans can't live out the type of unity Paul calls us to in our own biological families, how can we even begin to think of knitting together a wildly diverse community like the family of God!?

Honestly, it's impossible … for us.

We all have sin, pride, selfishness … We all walk around with scars from personal experiences of conflict, loneliness, grief and isolation. All of these things overwhelm us and are part of why community is just so hard. But Jesus knows what that feels like. Jesus also knows what it is to be alone. He went alone to face the devil in the wilderness. He stood alone in a crowd receiving the mocking and beating. He went alone into a tomb. But because he was alone, we never will be.

Jesus said, "Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Matthew 12:50). And later he told his disciples, "I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you" (John 15:15b). His final words in Matthew's Gospel are, "I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). Friends, Jesus embraces his followers as friends, and he calls us family … He has destroyed the dividing wall of hostility between his followers.

SO … through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, we are united as one body. And through the Holy Spirit, we receive the love, forgiveness, grace and humility required to live as the church, the Bride of Christ. So, let us live into the sweetness of Christian friendship that is available to us. Let us cling to Jesus, our brother and friend. Let us overflow the love of Christ to the friends, brothers and sisters that God has put in our path. And may we, together, be a community marked by warmth and affection, united in the love of Christ.