

Greet one another with a holy kiss. (2 Corinthians 13: 11-14)

Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church

July 18, 2021

If you're following the teaching given here over these last few weeks, you'll know that we're immersed in a sermon series on the 'one another' passages of the New Testament. There are many of them and we're able to touch on a few.

It's important for us to take on board that these 'one another' passages—do this *to* or *for each other*—are about forming and nourishing health and unity within a community that we as followers of Jesus have committed to. For most of us, that community is Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church.

I've chosen to speak this morning on the instruction we receive from two apostles to 'greet one another with a holy kiss' or in one case 'greet one another with a kiss of love'.

This may be the first sermon about kissing that you've ever heard. I assure you it's the first one I've ever preached.

In fact, if you were to miss today's sermon on kissing, it's likely you'd have a thirty- or forty-year wait until the next one rolls around.

Here's one of our five passages where this kissing instruction comes to us in the letters of the apostles who shaped and instructed the first Christian communities:

2 Corinthians 13:11 Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. ¹² *Greet one another with a holy kiss.*

2 Corinthians 13:13 All the saints greet you.

2 Corinthians 13:14 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Now the fact that you've probably never heard a sermon about kissing and the fact that I've never before preached one doesn't mean that the apostles had little or nothing to say about

kissing. On the contrary, the text I've just read is just one of five that are like it. Nearly word for word like it.

The Apostle Paul writes the same instruction at the end of four different letters, each one identical with the others: *Greet one another with a holy kiss.*

Peter also weighs in on the topic of kissing, although his expression is a little different. He says *Greet one another with a kiss of love.*

Each time, this summons to kissing comes near the end of a letter when the apostle is wrapping things up. Every single one of these Kiss Commands comes in the context of lots of other greetings. For example, have a listen of how absolutely *social* the apostle Paul is sounding as he makes his way to the end of his long letter to the Romans.

Rom. 16:3 Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, ⁴ who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks but all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks as well. ⁵ Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia. ⁶ Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you. ⁷ Greet Andronicus and Junia,³ my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners. They are well known to the apostles, and they were in Christ before me. ⁸ Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. ⁹ Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys. ¹⁰ Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. ¹¹ Greet my kinsman Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. ¹² Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. ¹³ Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; also his mother, who has been a mother to me as well. ¹⁴ Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers⁵ who are with them. ¹⁵ Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. ¹⁶ *Greet one another with a holy kiss.* All the churches of Christ greet you.

You get the picture, right? There is something very important for Paul in each community's web of connections with other communities and other Christians and with Paul himself.

Whatever this Holy Kiss is about, it has something to do with being *consciously connected* with other Christians. This is not just about your spiritual health or mine.

We could put it another way: The order to greet each other with a Holy Kiss only makes sense if we are Jesus-People-in-Community.

So let's start by recognizing that.

In fact, let's stick a pin in that and give it a name. Let's make it a first declaration this morning:

Holy Kissing is for connected people.

Here's a second truth: ***Kissing is intimate.***

I was really hoping I wouldn't have to talk about this in public. It's not a topic that's natural to me. But I think I probably have to say one or two things about it, so here we go...

For starters ... this could get awkward fast ... there are a lot of ways to kiss somebody.

But every one of them is in some way *intimate*.

Just to declare the obvious, you can't really kiss more than one person at a time. Faces aren't big enough for that. So there's already intimacy in the simple fact that kissing is a one-on-one enterprise.

But we can say more about the intimacy that's native to kissing.

You can't kiss from a distance.

You're exposing your moist lips in close contact with another person's similarly moist lips ... or at least their face. Unless you're blowing a kiss ... which is really just a kind of theatrical imitation of a real kiss ... you're getting very close to the person you're kissing. If they have a scent or a smell, it comes into your nose. It's inevitable because you're that close. You're momentarily that intimate. If they're sick, you'll get what they have. If they sneeze at the wrong time, it'll be all over you. Depending on the kind of kiss, you may even taste the other person as well as smell them. If they have hair, it may brush your eyes.

Do you see what I mean? Kissing is inevitably *intimate*, will you grant me that?

So Paul, who is distant from people he cares about, spends a lot of time *sending greetings*, because he's not close enough to kiss them and sometimes he's in prison. But when he turns to the inside of a community—whether at Corinth or Rome or

Thessalonica—he says, ‘Look, you guys *can* get close. I don’t have that privilege. So, you guys, when you gather, *greet each other with a kiss*.

He’s commanding a kind of intimacy within the Christian community that he’s just spent a lot of ink instructing *how to live together* and *how to live on mission*. And he does it over and over again. Something about this practice ... this social ritual ... this discipline ... this kiss ... seems to be really important to Paul.

Holy Kissing is for connected people ...

...and....

Kissing is intimate.

But it would be a terrible thing to stop here.

Think about this with me: all kinds of wild and crazy communities could applaud this instruction if what we’ve looked at so far were all Paul was saying ... and in some cases they’d be very far from being *Christian* communities.

There’s one very *important* ... consistently *recurring* ... feature of Paul’s instruction that we haven’t talked about yet. Can you sense what it is?

Paul says, ‘Greet one another with a *holy* kiss.’

In recent weeks, I’ve worked hard to understand what Paul means by adding the adjective *holy* to the noun *kiss*. He does this in all four of his exhortations to community kissing, so it can’t be a casual or mindless move. He has something very important in mind.

Otherwise, his command would be to *greet each other by kissing* instead of *greet one another with a holy kiss*.

I believe his point in consistently calling for a *holy* kiss is ***community-building restraint***.

I did say, did I not, that this kiss is not about your or my pleasure or spiritual health?

A *holy* kiss is ***intimacy within limits***. There’s a time for kissing without limits, as there is a moment for intimacy without limits. Our own bodies and urges and passions, the way God created us to be, lead us in this direction. And if we need biblical guidance on this,

the very sensual book called *Song of Solomon* makes clear that God values passionate love between a husband and a wife, even urges it, even delights in it. He created the thing, after all. He knows what he's talking about.

But the holy kiss that communicates *greeting ... welcome ...* in a community of Jesus followers enacts *intimacy within limits*.

It *welcomes*. It is a way of 'seeing' the person who arrives at the door of the community or of the community's gathering. It makes eye contact and then it makes lip contact or at least cheek contact (the 'Air Kiss') or at least feigned cheek contact (the 'Air Kiss Plus').

I remember the awkward thrill when I moved to Costa Rica with a young family in 1988 and learned that in that culture a man *always* greets a woman with a kiss. But I was instructed that you don't actually let your lips touch a woman's cheek unless you know her very well or are family with her.

Instead, you touch cheeks and you kiss the air, like this.

Then—a little later I learned the shades and nuances of this kind of kissed greeting. I learned to do what I'm going to demonstrate here. In fact, I became quite an expert at it ... I fancied myself the Rocky Balboa of the Air Kiss Plus.

[Demonstrate the Air Kiss +]

Do you see what I did there? I didn't *actually* touch the woman's cheek, nor did my hand *actually* touch her shoulder. Both of those things *almost* happened, but they didn't *really* happen. It is the Goldilocks Moment in Costa Rican kissed greetings. And, among expats in Costa Rica, I considered myself a bit of a rock star for getting it just right.

I was an absolutely amazing *Almost Kisser*.

The woman felt properly greeted. I felt like the world's best holy kisser. And no boundaries had been crossed.

It was awesome.

This is not too far, I think, from what Paul means when he insists that in the communities that look to him for apostolic leadership, we greet each other with a holy

kiss. I think Peter's community, which is instructed to greet each other with a kiss of love, would have been practicing the same community-building intimacy with restraint.

Can you begin to imagine how this works?

When we come together as God's New Israel, as his little flock, as Jesus' community, we don't just let people find their way in and take a seat, literally or figuratively. We *notice* them. We *see* them. In Paul's and Peter's day, we *kiss* them.

The holy kiss notices ... offers intimacy ... with the kind of restraint that builds community.

The intimacy is important. The restraint is important. And, together, both create and construct a community where Jesus is Lord and people are at home.

Let's work towards some concrete take-aways:

As a dude, I wouldn't welcome a new couple into my Community Group, discover that Mr. Smith works at Pratt and Mrs. Smith is a stay-at-home wife and mother, and then invite Mrs. Smith to go whale watching while Mr. Smith is at work. It wouldn't be appropriate, mainly because it wouldn't build community. It might be intimate. But it would be divisive. It would be weird. It wouldn't be *holy* in the way that a holy kiss is holy. It would be intimacy without the community-nourishing limits.

A *holy* kiss nourishes intimacy and builds community. It is both one-on-one and broadly social. It is both intimate and public (observable).

Let me take a little bit of a detour:

I've noticed over the years that guys, in particular, begin to do two things when they come into Christian faith and Christian community. They begin to *sing*. And they start to *hug*.

Both would have been awkward and alien for most guys before Jesus became their Lord. Both are a little bit out there. A little bit alien. Yet Christian guys begin to do both.

I think this is very close to what Paul is getting at with his instructions about greeting with a holy kiss. We are invited to get out there a little and sing ... and hug. But we do so in ways that are public and restrained because we're building community.

We hardly need to be asked to do this. We just do it. It's natural. It's good. It's holy.

So ... how come we don't kiss each other today?

I don't think it's because we don't *see* each other, although in a Western, individualistic culture, we must always be aware of that tendency. By default, we *do* make all things about my or your individual convenience or pleasure or spiritual health.

So why don't we kiss?

Well, most of us are products of a culture that is not overly tactile ... touch-oriented. We place a very high value on independence ... on personal space.

Somehow, perhaps also in part because we live in an overly sexualized environment, we've decided (without really consciously deciding) that a kiss would not build community. It would be weird.

There's some value in pausing to think about this. Contrary to what some Christians claim, we don't just read our Bibles literally and go do what the Bible says. People who imagine that this kind of literal reading and implementation of what we've read is Christian obedience have not yet thought hard enough. We're far more selective than that. We pass everything we find in the Bible through a couple of prisms before we act. And we should. We must.

One of those prisms is culture. Culture doesn't get the final word, but it gets *a* word. I'm not sure God is concerned that we begin right now to flaunt our cultural norms and begin kissing each other as we gather together.

But if we're not going to start kissing each other as our standard greeting, how *do* we submit obediently to this apostolic instruction?

Here are some practical ways in which I think we practice this odd apostolic instruction.

- We greet intentionally and verbally.
- We touch.
- We make unhurried eye contact.
- We learn each other's names and we use them.
- We shake hands. (There's more than one way to do this. Personally, I love the firm handshake with the forearm twist ... or the shoulder-squeeze twist.)

- We hug.
- We ask questions and listen for the answer.

That is to say, we construct Christian community by practicing both intimacy and restraint.

What we do *not* do ... what we must *stop* doing if it's become our habit ... is to wander in and out with our eyes down, our hands in our pockets, and our hearts playing defense.

We must not do that.

There is room for introverts and extroverts in this practice of Christian greeting. There is space both for the Natural Hugger and the Reserved. But there is no room for untended fear or enmity or distance.

We must open up. We must, figuratively if not literally, learn to kiss one another ... in holiness and with all due restraint but also with an openness to the crazy-good new things that happen when we begin to pay attention ... to make eye contact ... to embrace the other ... to become family ... to get outside ourselves and care more for the interests of the other than for our own.

When we do this, we're not merely *being nice*. We are practicing the same hospitality with which Jesus welcomes us into his company. Into his embrace.

So, if I may: Brothers and sisters ... sons and daughters of the living God ... servants of our Lord Jesus Christ ... spiritual family ... Greet one another. Greet one another with a kiss. Greet one another with a holy kiss.

Thus ends the first sermon on kissing that you have likely ever heard.

May our Lord make us family.

Benediction

2 Corinthians 13:14 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Questions for Community Groups

1. How do you express appropriate intimacy when you greet someone in our Christian community?
2. In the light of the instruction to *greet one another with a holy kiss*, how do we currently err on the side of being too reserved?
3. Are you aware of any practices in our community or in another where we err on the side of *unrestrained* intimacy in greeting or welcoming?
4. What kind of welcome in our cultural context would communicate that 'this is a place where Jesus is Lord and you are at home'?