

Greet One Another with a Holy Kiss

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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2 Corinthians 13:11-14

I went to Cuba back in 2015 with the members of our Cuba committee. It was a wonderful trip. I loved visiting this new country, and I especially enjoyed visiting the Christian Reformed Churches that LaGrave supports and meeting the people. I actually preached in a couple of those churches. It was wonderful to get the sense of the worldwide church of God, and when you see the faith of those people who have so little, it puts our church problems in perspective. I hope some of you get the chance to go sometime. If you do get that chance, I need to warn you about something. The Cuban people are kissers. The Cuban people do not favor the cold ways of Northern Europeans. The curt nod, the subtle wave. When Cubans greet each other, they embrace and they kiss each other. So I would be standing in the narthex of one of the Cuban churches and these older women would come up to me and I could tell they weren't just going to shake my hand. They were going to greet me with a kiss. And I did the best I could to practice the local tradition, but my Dutch-Canadian upbringing hadn't prepared me for this sort of greeting. I didn't know where to put my hands, I didn't know which cheek to start on. I didn't know if I was actually supposed to put my lips on their cheek, or if this was more of an air kiss. It was stressful. So if you ever go to Cuba you might want to study up on proper technique.

The Apostle Paul wouldn't have needed to study proper technique. Read the New Testament and it seems that the practices of the early church were more like the churches of Cuba than LaGrave. It's right there in verse 12: "Greet one another with the holy kiss," he tells the Corinthian church. When you gather for worship, when you come together in fellowship, as part of God's people, "greet one another with the holy kiss." It's not a suggestion. Paul doesn't say, 'consider a holy kiss,' or 'if the holy kiss is your thing do it, but if it makes you a little uncomfortable you can just wave.'" It's an imperative verb. 'Greet one another with the holy kiss. Do it!'

And then there's this. How many times do you think the New Testament tells us to greet one another with a holy kiss? Once. Twice. Three times? Try 5 times! 4 times in the works of Paul and once in Peter. In addition to our passage, Paul gives the same instruction at the end of 1 Corinthians, 1 Thessalonians and Romans. And at the end of his first letter Peter says, "Greet one another with the kiss of love." The wording is a little different, but the intent is the same.

Which begs the obvious question: why don't we do this? This command is in the New Testament 5 times! Why don't we greet each other with the holy kiss? We could, you know. We could do the holy kiss. When Covid ends and we go back to shaking hands at the door after the service, we could skip the handshakes and go straight to the holy kiss. Would you like that? Me neither. But still, why don't we do this? Can you think of anything else in that is commanded 5 times in the New Testament that we essentially ignore?

I'm not starting a campaign to bring back the holy kiss. But we shouldn't ignore it either. When a communal practice is commanded 5 times, it's clear that the Holy Spirit is trying to tell us something. There must be something about the holy

kiss that's important for community formation. Times have changed, and maybe a kiss isn't appropriate anymore, but there is some sort of form this practice should take in our modern church. What form might that be? Well, let's start by asking, what's the kiss of peace about? In its biblical context, what does the holy kiss represent? What exactly did this 'one another' practice form in the first century church? Read through the 5 passages and you see that at its most basic level, it forms community. The holy kiss is a physical sign of the union we have in Christ. Just as in Cuba today, in the ancient world a kiss was a common form of greeting between people, like a handshake in our society. So the church took this common greeting and made it into a ritual for Christian community. '*Greet* one another with the holy kiss'—it's about greeting and connection.

But the holy kiss symbolizes more than just simple greeting, it's a greeting that's meant to overcome differences. When the early Christians greeted each other with the holy kiss, it was a sign of reconciliation. It was a sign that they held no grudges against one another, that they had forgiven whatever grievances they held against one another. That sense of the kiss as a greeting of reconciliation is rooted in Scripture.

Earlier Mike read the parable of the prodigal son. When the younger son returns from the far country, the father runs to him, embraces him, and kisses him. That kiss is not just a hello; it's a sign that all is forgiven. It's a sign that he is welcome back into his father's house. It's not just a hello; it's a kiss of reconciliation. Or do you remember what happened when Jacob returned home years after stealing Esau's birthright? Jacob is really nervous about meeting his brother. He thinks Esau will be furious with him, but instead, Esau embraces his brother and kisses him, and they both weep. That's not just a hello; that's a kiss of forgiveness and reconciliation. One final example. Remember what happens when Joseph finally reveals himself to his brothers in Egypt? The brothers have sold him into slavery. They've done something terrible. When Joseph—who is now a powerful ruler in Egypt—finally reveals himself to his brothers, he embraces them, he weeps and he kisses them. It's not a just a hello; it's a kiss of forgiveness and reconciliation. When you look at the context it's pretty clear that Paul's holy kiss has a reconciling purpose. Right before he calls for the kiss he says: "Strive for full restoration. Encourage one another. Be of one mind. Live in peace." He's not just looking for an ordinary greeting; he's looking for reconciliation.

The early church heard Paul's exhortation and tried to put the holy kiss into practice. It was part of the liturgy. If you went to early Christian worship, you would greet the people around you with the holy kiss. The practice is mentioned in multiple sources. Church father Tertullian mentions it. Augustine refers to it in one of his sermons. The Apostolic Constitutions—a fourth century book of liturgy and church order—includes the holy kiss as part of its liturgical instructions. So for several centuries at least Christian people greeted one another with the holy kiss. Most scholars say that happened right after the sermon and right before the Lord's Supper. The congregation would exchange the kiss as a way of reconciling before they came to the altar.

Unfortunately, the practice was beset with problems. The kiss never quite lived up to its reconciling purpose. After a few centuries, the church stopped practicing the holy kiss. I'll give you one guess why. Yes, that's right, some people were practicing the holy kiss for reasons other than reconciliation. Church father

Clement of Alexandria complained that the holy kiss was being exploited for lascivious purposes-which is no shock. So the church, wanting to honor the scriptural command, tried to find another practice that would physically demonstrate the unity we have in Jesus. Around 1000 AD, a large portion of the church decided they would practice the holy kiss by using something called a *paxbrede*. It was a silver image of the Lamb of God and all the congregation members were invited to come forward and kiss the lamb instead of each other. Kissing the *paxbrede* would be a symbol of the unity they had in Christ. But there were problems here too. Members were invited forward in order of prominence. The bishop went first, then the priest, and then the sub deacons, then the leading members of the community, and so on down the line. People ended up fighting over who should kiss the *paxbrede* first.

Here's an actual incident from 1522. A certain John Brown of a parish in Essex, smashed the *paxbrede* over the head of the deacon who offered it to him, causing "streams of blood to run to the ground." Why this act of violence? The *paxbrede* had first been offered to another member of the parish, and the previous week Brown had warned the deacon, "Clerke, if thou here after givest not me the pax first I shall break it on thy hedde." Christian fellowship at its best. The ritual which is supposed to be about unity and reconciliation has turned into a ritual of violence and status-seeking.

More recently church people have come up with a different ritual as a substitute for the kiss of peace. You can probably guess what that is: the mutual greeting. The passing of the peace descended from the holy kiss. Instead of offering the holy kiss, at some point in the service we turn to our neighbor and greet them. This takes different forms in different churches. In churches with more formal liturgies, including Catholic churches, the passing of the peace is part of the communion service. People turn to each other and are supposed to say, 'The Peace of Christ be with you.' In less formal protestant churches, the mutual greeting takes place at the beginning of the service and its more of a 'Hi how are you' kind of moment. Sometimes those greetings go on for quite a long time with people running up and down the aisles, and hugging each other while the whole sanctuary fills up with a roar of conversation.

But this too has caused division! Some people love the mutual greeting, and some people really hate it. Some people think it's a great builder of community. Other people think it disrupts the reverence proper to worship. We've talked about passing the peace here at LaGrave, as an updated ritual to replace the holy kiss. Having a time when we turn to our neighbor and say, the peace of Christ be with you, or something like that. Let's just say, every time we bring up the idea people express strong opinions. So you have this clear Biblical instruction about some sort of gesture, some sort of physical ritual act where we push past our differences and we acknowledge our deeper unity in Christ. In every case, the act itself becomes a source of division.

What's going on here? I think part of it at least is that because these are all physical practices, they put us in a position where we have to deal with the people in our community, not just in theory, but in reality. The holy kiss, whatever form it takes is a ritual that forces us to actually deal with our neighbor. And that's always messy. We love the idea of small groups in church, but to actually commit to one and to actually show up every other week to meet with these quirky people-that's a different story. We love the idea of being in the prayer and support group, but to

actually have to pray with Mrs. Vandersma, whose prayers are long and uses the word 'just' all the time-that drives me bananas. We like the idea about being one in Christ, but if you ask me not only to sit beside that person who makes those ridiculous social media posts, but also to shake his hand and wish him well-that's a bridge to far.

Please understand: I am not preaching this sermon with an agenda for any particular liturgical change. And besides, during the season of Covid, when we're not even shaking hands at the door, this is hardly the time for instituting some new ritual of physical engagement. But as I look at these 5 Biblical texts that command this physical ritual, and as I consider that Jesus saved us by coming physically close to us, when I see him embrace the lepers and bless little children, it is so clear that the community that Jesus died to create is not just a community of ideas, it's not just a community of a shared beliefs, it's a community of a shared life.

Maybe that's why the holy kiss command is repeated 5 times. Because shared life is *hard*. People in the early church probably didn't want to greet each other with the holy kiss either. Think of the divisions in the early church. Do you think a Samaritan wanted to greet a Jew with a kiss? Do you think slaves were eager to greet masters with a kiss? Do you think it was easy for Simon the zealot, the former Israelite freedom fighter, to exchange the holy kiss with Matthew, the tax collector and former Roman sympathizer? That's why Paul has to say it 5 times. Because community is hard. Because the walls between people are high and reconciliation is hard.

Nevertheless, through the reconciling blood of Jesus, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, these divided groups were brought together into one body. A body that encouraged one another and accepted one another and admonished one another. And when the rest of the world saw these people come together and greet one another with a holy kiss and then sit down at the same table, they knew that this was something more than human friendliness. This was the power of God creating something good and beautiful and real.

Perhaps then, it is no coincidence that Paul finishes his call to deep tangible community by turning our faces towards the source and the power of that community, the root of the community. The foundation of that community. *"May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."* As these people struggle to get over their differences, Paul points them to the Trinitarian love of God. This community of grace and hope and perfect unity at the center of our faith. So that they may know that even though overcoming those divisions might seem impossible to them, through Jesus they participate in the Trinitarian life of God, and nothing is impossible with God.

Come to think of it, that's the same place we ministers point you at the end of every service we have here. Our benediction uses these same words. We point to the same Trinitarian mystery. We do it so that when you leave this place, whether you greet one another with a holy kiss, or a holy handshake or the elbow bump of fellowship, you will know that the power to overcome our divisions lies not in ourselves but in the power of the Holy Spirit. And we are one in him.

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