

Title: A Holy Kiss
Biblical Text: Romans 16:3-16
Teaching Series: Justified by Love
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Romans 16:3-16

Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, 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. Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaphroditus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia. Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you. Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners. They are well known to the apostles, and they were in Christ before me. Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys. Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. Greet my kinsman Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; also his mother, who has been a mother to me as well. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers who are with them. Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.

When you read this list the brilliance of it may be lost in the formality of it all. It's a list of greetings after all, *right? What could be brilliant about that?* Well, initially we notice that these twenty-five people Paul lists here are all very different from one another.

Some are women, some men.

Some are rich, others poor.

Some have social clout, others don't.

Some are slaves, some are free.

Some are Jewish, others are Gentiles.

But ... they are all Christians. They're all part of the same network of house churches in first-century Rome. And so Paul says to greet them all with "***a holy kiss.***" It's personal. It's beautiful. But it also bears the question, *how? How has this diverse collection of people found themselves in the same spiritual community in the most prominent city of the world?* Well, we might ask ourselves the same question. *How? How do we, as a diverse community in a city like Chicago remain unified, healthy, and joyful?* That's what I want to talk about. I want to talk how we stay together and even flourish in diversity.

I think Paul gives us three, what I'm going to call, *threads* that held this group together in Rome. Each thread helps us see how God intends to make his people powerfully one yet beautifully different. We see these threads in Paul's various

descriptions of those he greets. You see, some of these folks *worked* with Paul ... others *suffered* with Paul ... and they all found *grace* like Paul.

So, that's how we'll organize our time together ...

- The thread of our shared *work*.
- The thread of our shared *suffering*.
- The thread of our shared *grace*.

[Prayer]

Movement 1: The Thread of Shared Work

(vv.3-5a,6,9,12, Acts 18:1-3,26, Colossians 3:23-24)

When you became a Christian you became a new creation. And as a new creation you also got a new job. Did you know that? All of us got new jobs. Paul highlights this in his greetings to Prisca, Aquila. Look at v.3. ***Read Romans 16:3-5a... Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, 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. Greet also the church in their house.*** Notice, Paul calls them "fellow workers." *Did you hear that?* It's similar to what he says about another six people he greets. ***Read Romans 16:6,9,12 ... Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you. ... Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys. ... Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the***

beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. You see, our shared work unifies us. *But what is that work exactly? What is our work? And why does it unify us despite other differences?*

Well, we know the most about Prisca (or Pricilla) and Aquila. Acts helps us to piece together their story and work and connection with Paul's ministry. Meet me in Acts 18. *Read Acts 18:1-3 ... After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. And he went to see them, and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade.* Okay, so this couple lived in Rome but were forced to leave. And as refugees they built a tent-making business with Paul. Soon after they moved to Ephesus (v.18).

This is interesting. When Paul calls them *fellow workers* in Romans 16, we might naturally think that they're ministry leaders or apostles or teachers of the gospel, something like that ... like Paul. But their shared work is actually in their shared small business; a work that enable Paul and others to meet their basic needs, plant churches, and spread the gospel.

That's the work.

Now, while they were in Ephesus a Jewish Christian teacher named Apollos came to town to preach the gospel. Watch as God uses this couple in a powerful yet

unexpected way. *Read Acts 18:26 ... He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately.* Again, Priscilla and Aquila are not the preacher or teacher. They're audience members. They're in the congregation. They're not the ones on stages or up front doing the public works of what we call "word ministry". Rather they're doing the subtle work of correction, accountability, discipleship, and friendship.

That's the work.

Apparently, the shared work that Paul saw woven through the life of the local church was less about the work itself and more about how they saw their work connected to the kingdom or work of God. I think this is instructive for us. No matter what work you do—professionally and in how you serve the local church—our work is connected with one another. And I think there's a few ways we ought to all think about our work as Christians. You see, God gives dignity and gospel purpose to all types of work.

- The work under the work. The first aspect of our work (no matter what our jobs are) is what we'll call "under" the work. Think about relationships; with colleagues, clients, vendors, etc. That's Mary. Notice, Paul says, *Read Romans 16:6 ... Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you.* As followers we're always conscious of the people around us, as infinitely valuable and worthy of love. Therefore the way we treat and interact with the people is

the work of the gospel. Not only so, but invariably we are given opportunities to share the gospel message with those we work with and we should tell them. That's the work under the work.

- The work through the work. The second aspect of our work (again, no matter what work we do) is what we'll call "through" the work. It's about what we produce. That's Prisca and Aquilla. They made tents (v.3). Teachers shape lives and create environments of learning and meaning. Bus drivers bring order and equity to cities that would otherwise have mass transportation chaos. Clothing designers bring beauty. Grocery clerks help feed people. And so on. That's the work through the work.
- The work above the work. The third aspect of our work (no matter what we do for a living) is what we'll call "above" the work. It's about our disposition or attitude or heart posture. That's the rest of this group. Notice has nearly all of them have this qualifying statement ... "in Christ" ... or "in the Lord." The Church in Rome had fully bought into the idea that, *Read Colossians 3:23-24 ... Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.* It was all, therefore, gospel work. No matter what task I'm performing I can do that work with integrity and worship and joy. The way we go about our work brings God glory. That's the work above the work.

The first thread we notice is the thread of our shared *work*. We share the work under the work, through the work, and above the work, no matter what we do. It's a shared calling. Dr. Tim Keller explains that this is what makes a job, a calling.

“Our daily work can be a calling only if it is reconceived as God’s assignment to serve others” (*Every Good Endeavor*). This didn't unify them despite their differences. Rather, it unified them because of their difference. When all our work and all our various gifts and calling are done as for the Lord, and the good of others ... our work brings unity.

So, Paul says greet all those people in Rome whose work is making us one.

Movement 2: The Thread of Shared Suffering (vv.4,7, James 1:2, Proverbs 19:3, Isaiah 53:3)

Work is not all that we share. As we work together, as we live together, as we build life together ... we will inevitably endure hardship together. We'll suffer. And while our work makes us one, it unifies us ... our shared suffering, paradoxically, brings us healing. You see, pain tempts us to seek isolation. But activist and author bell hooks warns us ... *“rarely, if ever, are any of us healed in isolation. Healing is an act of communion”* (*All About Love*). In order to heal and embody wholeness, we need each other. And so along with our shared work, Paul highlights the value and power of our shared suffering. That's the second thread, the thread of shared *suffering*.

Notice, Prisca and Aquila not only were fellow workers but, Paul says they, ***Read Romans 16:4a ... "risked their necks for my life."*** This is likely a reference to a riot that broke out in Ephesus (Acts 18:21-41). Paul preached the gospel, people didn't like it ... and things got violent. But they're not the only ones. Paul also greets a couple named Andronicus and Junia in v.7. ***Read Romans 16:7 ... Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners. They are well known to the apostles, and they were in Christ before me.*** Paul calls them fellow prisoners. You see, like Paul they faced religious persecution at the hands of powerful Jewish authorities.

Now when it comes to considering our shared suffering we must be very careful. What most of us will endure in our lifetime will never be as costly, life-altering, unjust, and prolonged as many of our brothers and sisters throughout the world and throughout history. Yet the Apostle James tells us that we should, ***Read James 1:2 ... Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.*** We should all count suffering (*peirasmos*) as a joy ... even though the suffering we face is different, or "***various kinds***" ... it's not all the same, yet it brings us together in a type of shared familial joy.

With that said, we'd probably do well to consider the various sufferings or trials we face and consider how it all brings us together ... without shame ... competition ... comparison ... or self-centeredness. And I'm considering the idea of suffering most broadly to include all types of pain, discomfort, or any pressure that trains us in righteousness or tempts us to sin (*peirasmos*) ... for all the reasons life is hard.

- Sometimes we suffer simply because the world is broken. The Christian story begins with the Creator creating everything. Then creation rejects the Creator. And this rejection fractured the entirety of creation (see Genesis 3:14–19). As a result, nothing is as it should be and life is made more difficult. We are all to blame for this brokenness because we have all rejected God and his goodness. And yet, a broken world means that we will endure hardship that is not directly related to any one wrong thing we have done. Think about sickness and aging ... think about how our warm drinks get cold and our cold drinks get warm. It's all brokenness.
- Other times we suffer because of sin. That is, we suffer because of you and because of me; because of ourselves. Sometimes our lives are hard because we are sinners (see Romans 3:23). We make bad decisions — accidentally and willfully — and these choices make our lives a lot harder. Often, we suffer because we not only do evil things, but then don't respond well when the consequences come. Proverbs 19:3 exposes us, *Read Proverbs 19:3 ...*
When a man's folly brings his way to ruin, his heart rages against the Lord. Suffering is not always our fault. But far more than we'd like to admit, the challenges we face are a direct result of our fallen nature; our sin.
- Sometimes we suffer because of someone else. Sometimes life is hard — not because the world is broken nor because we personally sinned — but because others sin against us. This is the story of a man named Job (see Job

2:7). This is the story of the man who was left for dead in the parable of the good Samaritan (see Luke 10:25). This is the story of Jesus (see Luke 23:34). Jesus responded to the great need of humanity by allowing himself to take the position of a victim and bearing the sins and folly of the entire human race. *Read Isaiah 53:3 ... "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief."* Therefore, when we are victimized, we can remember that Jesus not only can identify with us in our unjust treatment. But since he put shame to shame on the cross, we also find power and cleansing in him.

- Finally we suffer because God is good. Many of life's difficulties are by design. In his kindness, God has intentionally shaped the world in such a way that effort would be required to accomplish significant change, progress, and reward (see 2 Timothy 2:6). From the beginning, Adam is given a job to work the ground (see Genesis 2:15) and to cultivate and shape creation. In other words, work showed up in the beginning. When embraced as a gift from God, work makes us stronger, more collaborative, smarter, more skilled, and so on. But not just work, growing up is hard but it brings maturity and wisdom ... parenting is by definition hard but it makes us more like our Heavenly Father ... relationships are hard and often lead to a type of suffering but they bring us wholeness, meaning, and healing.

We suffer for all kinds reasons. Yet in all of our suffering, we're drawn together in the Lord. In the brokenness of the world, we're drawn together as we wait for Jesus

to renew all things. In our sin we're drawn together as we are sanctified together by grace. In injustice, when we are sinned against, we are drawn together in our lament and need for healing. In God's goodness we are drawn together as spiritual siblings who find our identity and inheritance in our Heavenly Father. That's what Paul has experienced with those he greets. It's the thread of our shared suffering that binds us together.

Movement 3: The Thread of Shared Grace

(vv.5,7,10,13,15, Romans 3:22-23)

The final thread we see in Paul's greetings is the thread of shared *grace*. Notice, in v.5. *Read Romans 16:5 ... Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia.* Paul shares salvation with Epaenetus. He was the first Christian in Asia, likely modern-day Turkey. Look at v.7. *Read Romans 16:7 ... Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners. They are well known to the apostles, and they were in Christ before me.* Before Paul became a Christians, this couple was following Jesus. Now this shared conversion holds them together. It goes on. Apelles is "*approved*" in Christ (v.10) ... Rufus is "*chosen*" in the Lord (v.13) ... and Paul greets "*all the saints*" who are with Philologus, Julia, Nereus, and Olympass (v.15).

The threads of shared *work* and *suffering* hold this diverse group of people together, but more than anything what holds them together is the thread of shared *grace*.

What exactly is this grace? Well, Paul's of course written extensively about salvation through his letter. It's a primary concern of his that Jews and Gentiles see one another as equal beneficiaries to grace; of the gospel. *Read Romans 3:22-23 ...*
For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. In all our diversity we share a need. The same need. We all need grace, forgiveness, redemption. Paul says, there is no distinction. And therefore, justification or salvation is a grace ... an unmerited gift of divine forgiveness and love.

This grace is directly expressed in our shared work. You see, Jesus enters the work with us. Jesus takes on flesh to engage in the work under the work. To foster intimacy and relationship, to share the truth and beauty of the kingdom. Jesus dies in our place and for our sins, engaging in the work through the work. He brings about the kingdom of God both immediately and progressively making all things new. And through it all Jesus was about the Father's glory. He engaged in the work above the work. Therefore we find hope in our shared work, not simply because it holds us together but rather in Christ's participation, we are held by him. That is our shared *grace*.

This grace is also expressed in our shared suffering. You see, as bell hooks describes, there is a healing that happens in community; especially a community that shares suffering. To know we are not alone, understood, and seen is powerful.

And yet, that's not the fullness of our healing. Seeing someone else with the same wound as you is comforting, but it does not make us well or whole or fully healed.

German theologian Jürgen Moltmann explains that the sufferings of Christ on the cross are not just his sufferings; they are "*the sufferings of the poor and weak, which Jesus shares in his own body and in his own soul, in solidarity with them ... [Christ] identifies God with the victims of violence ... [and identifies] the victims with God, so that they are put under God's protection and with him are given the rights of which they have been deprived*" (quoted in Volf's *Exclusion and Embrace*) In other words, Christ's shared wounds are the only wounds which bring full healing because in his suffering he was putting an end to suffering. That is our shared *grace*.

Paul was writing to a diverse collection of people.

Some are women, some men.

Some are rich, others poor.

Some have social clout, others don't.

Some are slaves, some are free.

Some are Jewish, others are Gentiles.

Yet, they were being held together by three threads: the threads of shared *work*, shared *suffering*, and shared *grace*. Sometimes we think our work is more important than someone else's ... or we think our calling is less significant. We must

recall our shared *work*. Other times we think we are suffering more than others ... or in a way that no one else does. We must remember our shared *suffering*. Other times still we are tempted to think we need grace more (shame) or less (pride) than others. In those moments we must reaffirm our shared *grace*.