



North Shore  
**Congregational  
Church**  
FOX POINT, WI

*From the Pulpit...*

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## ***“A Holy Kiss”***

**Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching**

*I Thessalonians 5: 12-28; Ecclesiastes 4: 9-16*

*June 7, 2020*

It was two months ago, on Maundy Thursday, that I stood in front of this communion table for the first of our experiences of ‘gathering’ at the table through a camera and a screen. I talked, that night, about the ‘oddity’ of coming to the table without coming to the table, and we made our way into this experience of sharing the cup and the bread in profoundly unusual ways. Today, now for the third time, we will do the same again. What has been standing out to me as we do so, however, is that one thing that is notably different, at least in me, is the clarity of just how long things will continue to remain on this remarkably unsettling path of naming the abnormal as the ‘new normal’ of our existence.

You see, when I stood up here at the beginning of April, it was still a potentially isolated experience we might be having. The understanding of the duration of this whole journey was still far from clear – the wisdom and input from various authorities and scientists murky at best – and we (or at least I) still had no real clarity on what was in store. Today, three months in with many more to go, there’s still a lot we don’t know, but we do know we’re far from through it and that this whole Covid-19 thing is going to continue to impact every corner of our life experience for quite some time to come. And that awareness, in many ways, is why, early this week, a simple phrase jumped out of the Bible like fireworks bursting in the sky.

I was reading that final exhortation and blessing from Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians when I read that 26<sup>th</sup> verse in which it compels them to, “Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss.” That image leapt from the page the moment I read it! The Holy Kiss, sometimes called the Kiss of Peace, was a commonly used greeting in the Judean culture that was not altogether different than the kissing of each cheek that remains common in many European cultures today. That, of course, is not something that is part of our cultural identity – nor that of the practices of our church. But, we do have our ways of our holy kiss. The shaking of hands with the guest in the next pew, the hugs among friends, the arm around the shoulder in compassion...we have our myriad of ways in which we show our love for one another – our own holy kiss if you will. And, what jumped out to me was that those things that are such a part of our communal identity are simply not an option right now. My mind started spinning with the countless ways in which we will continue to be unable to express our care and compassion in the manner to which we are accustomed.

As many of you know, we've had a team of church leaders working, for a month and a half now, on plans and details for the phased reopening of in-person worship and programs here at the church building. Already, this past week, that endeavor has begun. The task that has been faced by that team, however, has been monumental. Everything we do will be different. How we gather...how we enter...how we leave...how we sit...how we worship...how we share communion... There are pages of FAQs about how we are structuring the safe reopening of the church building that most of you will see in a newsletter in the next couple of days. What is striking, however, is that even as we finally get to come back together again, the nature of our connection and fellowship with one another will still be far from any semblance of the manner in which we are accustomed to gathering. Spaced seating...limited numbers...no hugs...no handshakes...no coffee hour... I could go on... But, you see, what I found myself struggling with, this week, is that even as we begin to gather as a body, physically present with one another once again, we won't be able to share our holy kiss. And the problem amidst that reality, is that we need it.

Over the course of the isolation that has been inherent in the past few months, some have struggled with the separation more than others. The extroverts among us quivered with angst, longing to engage with their social circles, and the introverts among us settled in for a bit of a hiatus of personal time. Beyond our individual proclivities in regard to socialization, however, there is a fundamental element of our human construct that calls out for relationship – and that need has grown day after day for months now. We are built for community. From the creation story of Genesis that notes the partner that was needed for Adam, to the communal journey of the Israelites, to the core friends and confidants who ministered with Jesus, we are recurrently reminded that we are relational beings. We thrive in connection with one another and we feed off the support and strength that we receive from the relationships we share.

That's what is so abundantly clear in that passage from Ecclesiastes.

*Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. 10 For if they fall, one will lift up the other...if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? 12 And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.*  
-Ecclesiastes 4: 9-12

One of the things I find fascinating about Ecclesiastes is that, although Biblical, it is not an inherently theological text. The 'Qoheleth,' or 'teacher,' that authors Ecclesiastes is not making a faith argument. It isn't a text that is intended to help one understand God, one's relationship with God, or one's life in God. It's not a theological text – it's a manual that is intended to express the manner in which we can best and most meaningfully thrive in the realities of the creation in which we live. It's not a text about God – it's a text about how we make the most of our life in the midst of God's creation.

So, when the teacher says that two are better than one – that a threefold cord is not quickly broken – the argument is not trying to drive home some theological discourse on the importance of relationship and community in the pursuit of faithfulness. The argument is a statement of fact regarding this creation in which we live...we do better together! We are stronger together! We thrive together! We are built for community and do better when we have the strength of others

when we are weak, the compassion of others when we are sorrowed, the wisdom of others when we are lost, and the love of others when we feel alone. We do better together! We are built for relationship! We are built for community! We thrive when we are together.

One of my deepest concerns, as I look at the ongoing nature of our current circumstances – as well as that which will come after – is the looming isolation of it all.

- In businesses we are increasingly discussing the possibility of more and more of the workforce working from home.
- In commerce we are moving evermore towards digital retail.
- In food service we are loving the convenience of having someone else drop our dinner at our front door.
- And, in the church, we've lost our holy kiss.

Now, yes, there are some families that have been brought closer together in the midst of all of this, friends that have reconnected over newfound technologies, and people sitting in our digital pews this morning who would never be able to be here in person. That's all well and good. Over the last 30 years, however, in the flourishing of the internet and wired living, we have inched, year after year, further from that human relationship and community in which we thrive, this covid-19 existence threatens to exacerbate that reality both now and in the years to come, and we do better together!

So, I implore you – find your community. It will look different for a while. It will take on new forms and new structures for more than just a few more weeks to come – I'm not in any way suggesting that we ought to discount or in any way disregard the calls for distancing and safety in the face of the Pandemic – but, we do better together. So, I implore you – find your holy kiss. Whether it is the smile on a face on another screen, the wave from another across the pews here in worship as we reopen, the conversation with someone seated at the other end of our your patio table outside – it's going to look different for a while, but we have to remember that we do better together. So, no matter how it may look for you, I implore you to push against the creeping isolation of it all and find your community. Find your holy kiss. Resist the seclusion into which this circumstance increasingly directs us and remember we do better together!