

## “A Billion Friends and Counting”

Romans 12:9-18

Series: BELIEVE Week 16 Biblical Community

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A dad from Texas worried his family was trying to get rid of him. After driving all night on a family vacation, they stopped to eat and fill up the tank in Tennessee. After dad paid for the gas, he came out to find his van was gone. Before the stop another family member offered to drive so dad could sleep in the back. Thinking he was already sleeping in the van, they closed the doors and took off.

Now here’s where it gets interesting. The dad calls his own cell phone, which is still in the van, but nobody answers it. He calls the phone of each family member. "Six different cell phones and nobody answers and my phone is in there because it's on the charger and it goes straight to voicemail."

How did this frantic father finally reach them? He borrowed a computer at a local motel and got in touch with his family through Facebook. Can you imagine scrolling through your newsfeed and discovering an SOS from your dad? How far away was the family when they learned their mistake? 100 miles. So the family turned around, picked up dad, and continued their vacation. Now the question is: when the kids saw their dad stranded on Facebook, did they “like” it? <sup>1</sup>

Facebook continues to grow exponentially. It’s beyond a billion friends and counting. In 2016, founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg reported “net income nearly tripled to \$1.5 billion, and monthly active users hit a record 1.65 billion.” Even more amazing, their stats reveal users spend an average of 50 minutes a day on their products: Facebook, Instagram, and Messenger. The New York Times commented,

The average time that users spend on Facebook is nearing an hour. That’s more than any other leisure activity surveyed by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, with the exception of watching television programs and movies (an average per day of 2.8 hours). It’s more time than people spend reading (19 minutes); participating in sports or exercise (17 minutes); or social events (four minutes). It’s almost as much time as people spend eating and drinking (1.07 hours).<sup>2</sup>

In one respect, this is the most interactive, interconnected generation in all of history. We are free to reach out and touch people anywhere on the globe, to cross nearly every culture, boundary and barrier and say whatever is on our minds. We can be in constant communication day and night, 24/7/365. We can build an endless list of friends.

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<sup>1</sup> WMC-TV, "Kids leave dad at gas station, realize mistake 100 miles away," (6-25-13).

<sup>2</sup> James B Stewart, *Facebook Has 50 Minutes of Your Time Each Day. It Wants More.* New York Times, May 5, 2016. [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/06/business/facebook-bends-the-rules-of-audience-engagement-to-its-advantage.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/06/business/facebook-bends-the-rules-of-audience-engagement-to-its-advantage.html?_r=0)

There's no doubt about it: Facebook can be a tool to spark revolutions, expose corruption, form support groups, and reconnect long separated family and friends. Yet Facebook, like the internet, is a mirror of us – the good, the bad and the ugly. It can also be a place where we post political rants, cyberbully, and commit crimes. Sure I can send messages to hundreds, even thousands of people around the planet but to do so I wind up staring at a screen by myself. Facebook is not a substitute for face-to-face relationships. Each of us needs at least five to seven people in our lives – real faces that will laugh with us and cry with us, real arms and hands that will hold us, hug us and help us, real minds and hearts and eyes, ears and voices that will comfort us and correct us, hear us and hold us accountable. Friendships fall flat on a flat screen.

Like Facebook there is another network that has a billion friends and counting. It's called the Church. This week in BELIEVE our theme is Biblical Community. The key idea is "I fellowship with Christians to accomplish God's purposes in my life, in the lives of others and in the world." The key question is: "How do I develop healthy relationships with others?" You have heard me say repeatedly the Church is not a building, a day of the week, a pastor or an institution. Like Facebook, the Church is a network of people – people who are followers of Jesus. Like Facebook this network is worldwide and growing. Like Facebook, the Church is a movement and a revolution. Like Facebook, the Church is composed of countless connections and groups who speak every language on earth. Like Facebook the Church has been used by its members to accomplish great good and, sadly, great evil. Unlike Facebook, though, this network is united not by the power of the internet but by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Today, I hear people say, "I don't need organized religion. I don't need to go to a building and worship God. I don't need the institutional church." And they are right. Nobody needs that. But all of us need someone who will love us, laugh with us, cry with us, help us, hold us, hug us, suffer with us and even lay down their lives for us. And we all need a God who will do the same. When Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome they didn't have a building, an institution and nobody could accuse them of being organized.

So what did they have? Jesus and one another. In those days, the church did not have small groups. The church *was* small groups. The church in Rome met in Priscilla and Aquila's house, in Aristobulus' house, in Narcissus' house and in a few other houses. That's all they had. That's all they needed. They didn't have Facebook. It was just face-to-face raw real relationships. They had to love each other faults and all. And when they gathered together, Jesus was with them. His love and their love sustained them through poverty, persecution and prison. How can we be that type of Biblical community?

In Romans 12, Paul gives a list of rapid fire practical suggestions for how to practice Biblical community. The first is **Love Honestly**. Paul writes in Romans 12:9, "Love must be genuine." He literally means: Love is not hypocritical. *Hypocrite* is a Greek word which describes an actor who is pretending to be someone else. That's fine in a play. It's wrong in relationships.

The profile we post on Facebook is a carefully crafted image of what we want the world to see. I can pretend to be someone I'm not. So long as there is a computer between me and you, you'll never know the real me with all my faults and failings. I can send you sweet pictures with hearts and flowers on Facebook but I don't have to really love.

The Greek word for love in this passage is agape. It is a unique word that appears only in the Bible. Christian love is not primarily a feeling or emotion. It is not romantic or sentimental. Love is a verb, an action. It is giving yourself to others, even to your enemies. It is not superficial, it is not phony, it is not counterfeit. This is tough love, the toughest love of all. And it is only possible if God pours this agape love into you through the Holy Spirit. In order to love honestly, ask yourself these questions:

- Do I keep secrets or hide something from someone?
- Do I need to seek forgiveness from someone?
- Do I need to confront someone who is harming themselves or others?
- Do I love someone to their face but talk about them behind their back?
- Do I hold judgments or prejudices against a person or group of persons?
- Do I love someone enough to stop enabling them?
- Do I love and serve someone even if they don't thank me or love me back?

In another letter Paul writes,

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ (Ephesians 4:15)

The best way to grow up to be like Jesus is to speak the truth with love. That's what it means to love honestly.

Next, **Love Reciprocally**. That simply means love must flow in both directions. Do you know there are 59 "one another" passages in the New Testament. There are three here in Romans 12: "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Live in harmony with one another" (vv. 10, 16). These "one another" verses remind us love is always a two way street. Christianity is not a religion. It is a relationship – with God and with God's people.

It's hard to have a close relationship with everyone in the church. Newcomers to a church need to form at least seven relationships within the first six months to feel they belong. If they don't bond with at least seven people, they will wander away.

While wallpapering a bathroom, I discovered this wonderful substance called sizing. If you paint in on the walls, the paper is easier to hang. Best of all, when it's time to strip the wallpaper, it peels right off with no mess and no paper left behind. Sizing closes all the pores and seals shut the wallboard. Sizing is great for wallpaper. But the bond between Christians must be stronger and closer. So close, in fact, that Paul tells us to "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn." Your joy and pain become mine and mine yours. You can't tear us apart without damaging both of us.

The absolute best way I know to receive Christ's love and to grow closer to fellow Christians is through a Growth Group. We have over 60 Growth Groups and more than 500 people in them. There are women's groups, teen groups, men's groups, mixed groups and senior groups. There are morning, afternoon and evening groups. There is a group for everyone's schedule. Nobody can use the excuse there is not a group for you. The only reason to avoid a group is you're afraid to be in a group. You may be thinking, "Those people are weird, they'll ask me questions I don't know, waste my time, invade my privacy, and start singing "Kum By Yah." None of those things are true. You will find friends who will laugh with you, encourage you, fight for you, cry with you and stand by you no matter what. This is the place you get to practice the "one another" passages. When you rejoice, there will be family members to celebrate with you. And when you grieve and mourn, you will be surrounded and supported by God's family. Sign up for a Growth Group today on the insert in your bulletin.

Let me take this opportunity to thank you, my Woodside family. You have always rejoiced with my family at our graduations, weddings and births. And in this last month since my Dad passed away you certainly mourned with us. You overwhelmed us with your cards, words, hugs, prayers, memorial gifts and even comments on Facebook. Many times, during a funeral, a family will say to me, "I don't know how people get through this without faith and the church." I now can say the same from the depths of my heart.

Finally, Paul tells us to **Love Boundlessly**. Up until now, Paul focuses on relationships inside the church, between Christian brothers and sisters. Now he turns to relationships with those outside the church.

Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. (Romans 12:13-14; 16-18)

The word "hospitality" does not mean serving tea and cakes. In Greek it literally means "loving strangers, outsiders, foreigners." I don't know what the government should do about undocumented aliens and immigrants but I do know how Jesus feels about foreigners, immigrants and outsiders: He loves them. How do I know? Because I am a foreigner, an immigrant and an outsider to the Kingdom of God. He loves me even though I don't deserve it and He wants me to love them as He does. He does not want me to be proud or conceited around them, to look down on them, to avoid them, or even to repay them with evil when they do evil to me. What he asks me to do is bless the stranger, the outsider, the foreigner, the other. He tells me to try my best to live at peace with all people. There are no boundaries in the Kingdom of God.

Now people can get on Facebook and argue this back and forth. That's a waste of time. Why not do something instead. Start small. Join the Welcome Team. You can welcome guests by directing them to a parking space, by opening the door, by smiling, handing them a bulletin, finding them a seat, giving them your seat. This is extremely

easy and hugely important. First time guests make up their mind whether they are coming back to a church in the first few minutes – long before they hear the sermon.

Don't stop there. Practice hospitality by serving on the dinner ministry, taking a turn with Code Blue and Family Promise, visiting with the Prison Ministry, helping with a Recovery Service, attending Ash Wednesday to hear about Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission. And if you are in a Growth Group ask yourself two questions:

1. How long has it been since a new person joined our group?
2. What can we do to give birth to another group?

Why? Living things grow, scatter seeds, give birth. Living groups welcome new people and start new groups. Living churches welcome new people and start new churches. We started new groups, we started a new campus at Parkland. We believe God is calling us to go to the next level, to be a church that starts churches that start churches. God is calling us to be a sending church. And it all begins with love – loving honestly, loving reciprocally, loving boundlessly.

Thirteen years ago Woodside went through 40 Days of Purpose. Lisa and I led a Growth Group that met in our house every Thursday night. At the beginning, many of us were strangers to one another. Over those six weeks, the Spirit forged us into a band of sisters and brothers. We took on the ministry of planting flowers out by the church sign. One of our members, Doris Mary Smith had come back to church after years away. She didn't like digging in the dirt because the worms made her squeamish. But she still came for moral support. At the end of the six weeks, we decided to have a potluck celebration dinner on April 29<sup>th</sup>.

In the weeks between Easter and our scheduled dinner, Doris Mary went into the hospital. Though she looked good, the prognosis was serious. We still hoped and prayed she would be out in time for our dinner. Then the tests came back – her condition was terminal. Her dearest friend, Lyn Lerie, was by her side every day after work along with Doris Mary's family. Through it all, she kept a smile on her face. She was completely certain that, no matter what happened, her Lord was waiting for her in heaven.

The end came swiftly. I prayed over her in ICU. Then her son Bob and daughter-in-law Lisa told Doris Mary it was all right, she didn't have to struggle. She could go to be with the Lord. And she did. I had to break the news to Lyn and her friend Ellen Williamson. Doris Mary Smith died at 4:21 p.m. on April 29<sup>th</sup> just hours before the potluck dinner we planned to celebrate our 40 Days Growth Group. As I walked into Pam Herlong and Eric Christiansen's house, I had the sad duty of telling them our dear sister was gone. In her honor, we broke bread and gave thanks to God for the lady who couldn't stand worms, who loved to laugh and who loved the Lord above all. Lyn said, "I feel her presence here with us." Jennifer Cole said, "Do you know what? Doris Mary is seeing Jesus right now! She's having dinner with Him!" And we knew that Jesus was also with us, right there, right then. Do you want to meet Jesus?

Turn off Facebook and get your face in His Book among His friends.