



# Sermon Growth Guide

**October 17, 2021**

**Belong – Authentic Love**

**Romans 12:9-13**

**Key Verse:** Romans 12:10 “Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.”

**Big Idea:** Belonging requires authentic love.

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## Foundations

Pastor Greg brings the word this week and offers these words from Mother Theresa to steer a part of our conversation: “The greatest disease in the West today is not TB or leprosy; it is being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for. We can cure physical diseases with medicine, but the only cure for loneliness, despair, and hopelessness is love. There are many in the world who are dying for a piece of bread but there are many more dying for a little love. The poverty in the West is a different kind of poverty—it is not only a poverty of loneliness but also of spirituality. There’s a hunger for love, as there is a hunger for God.”

Did you catch the middle line of this quote, “the only cure for loneliness ... is love”? Our Scripture passage calls us to “be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves,” (Romans 12:10).

But how do we love sincerely? First and foremost, in the strength of the Lord. Only a life abiding in the love of God and rising in the strength of the Lord will be able to pour forth the kind of love that builds real belonging. To this end, pray earnestly for one another and for your time together this week.

## Understanding God’s Word

What is the believer called to “hate” in verse nine? Why is it OK to hate in this regard?

In your circle, what does it look like to “be devoted to one another” as instructed in verse 10?

Throughout the string of imperatives in this week’s Scripture, what comes most natural for you, what is most difficult?

## Applying God’s Word

Belonging requires authentic love. Authentic love requires God’s love to be at work in your heart. How can you even more join the Holy Spirit in welcoming His love into and through your heart, that it might be poured out to those around you? What’s your next step in being devoted to your community, your circle?

## Witnessing God’s Word

Jesus demonstrated what it means and what it looks like to be devoted. How might you allow the devotion-love of Heaven to move through you to be poured out on those who suffer from what Mother Theresa calls a “poverty of spirituality”?

**ALONE IS NO GOOD. JESUS INVITES YOU TO BELONG.**

In the last two months, we've been talking about belonging and loneliness. We've discussed how, in our world, we're dealing with a "loneliness epidemic." Here's the challenge: "The greatest disease in the West today is not TB or leprosy; it is being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for. We can cure physical diseases with medicine, but the only cure for loneliness, despair, and hopelessness is love. There are many in the world who are dying for a piece of bread but there are many more dying for a little love. The poverty in the West is a different kind of poverty—it is not only a poverty of loneliness but also of spirituality. There's a hunger for love, as there is a hunger for God." – Mother Teresa

A poverty of loneliness ... a hunger for love ... a hunger for God. Mother Teresa wrote this in the 1990s! Over 25 years ago! But I think this is still an eerily accurate description of our society today.

In our **Belong** series, we've dug deep into John chapter 4 and

the woman at the well, and we examined an interaction between Peter and Jesus. Along the way we discovered a pattern in Scripture of people moving from being **Lonely**, to **Risk being Known**, becoming **Open to God**, and then being **Open to Others** with a new footing, a new confidence, a new basis for relationship. In our quest for understanding "belonging," we're now looking to Romans 12 for an explanation for how we're to live as a community of faith. We're trying to understand, "What is OUR response to the loneliness epidemic?"

Again, Mother Teresa says there's one cure for loneliness, despair, and hopelessness ... Love.

When I was in 7th/8th grade, our school would host monthly dances, and I wasn't really allowed to be "dating" someone, or to ask a girl to go with me. But, you know, my friends were much more mature and much cooler than me, so they all met up at the dances with the girls they'd asked

ahead of time. So inevitably, at some point in the evening at any of these dances, you could find me, standing alone on the dance floor heartbroken, watching while everyone else slow danced with their "date," awkwardly humming along to "I could be your hero baby! I could kiss away the pain!" Talk about being lonely in a crowded room! I didn't need Mother Teresa to tell me love was the answer. I mean, at that time, love seemed like the answer to everything in my world!

Now, it's not the middle-school dance brand of love we're talking about today. There's something a bit deeper to dig into here. And, fortunately, St. Paul's letter to the church in Rome gives us a picture of what this kind of love looks like. I want to give you fair warning: this kind of love is not easy to pull off. I mean, I know myself. I know that I can try and try, but I'm really not all that good at loving people. To be honest, I'm actually pretty selfish. You can ask my wife! I do my best, but let's be honest ... it's not GREAT.





And I know a lot of you, and I feel that I can say, from the bottom of my heart, that y'all are pretty selfish too! Here's what it comes down to: We are sinful beings. So, our best efforts at this, our best plans, are always getting derailed! We do our best, but within the church there's often frustration, anger, entitlement, consumerism, pride, selfishness. And then, externally, people criticize us (often rightly) and see Christians as hypocrites who cause problems for society. So, if that's our situation, how do we get to **Authentic Love**? How do we become a community that fosters true belonging?

Marcos Henry joined our staff this year as the Director of Student Ministries. And he's awesome! Often, in staff meetings, if a question is posed and there's a moment of silence as people consider a response, Marcos will chime in with "Jesus ..." because, you know, in church, Jesus is always the answer. Now, sometimes it's a bit hard to see how Jesus is the right reply when you're talking

about what account budget for an upcoming event is being drawn from. But that's the right response for us today! It's all going to come back to Jesus.

For now, let's turn back to Romans 12 (you'll want to have it open on your lap because I'm going to be chopping it up and using a slightly different translation). At first glance, this passage reads like a laundry list, right? Like a bunch of random thoughts and spiritualisms that Paul strings together. But this is Paul unpacking a theme. Paul knows that sincere/genuine/authentic Love is the most central feature of Christian community. So, in the Greek, the passage simply starts with, "The Genuine Love." and then continues. It's almost as though genuine love / Authentic Love functions like a header for this passage, and that's how we're going to approach it today.

Verse 9 – Authentic Love: Hates what is evil, clings to what is good. How can we tell good from evil? How do we know what we should avoid or cling to? Well, first and foremost,

it's the Holy Spirit. It's the job of the Holy Spirit (John 16) to guide us to truth and convict us of sin. See, WE are blind in our sins. We demonstrate again and again and again that we cannot tell the difference between good and evil! But with sincere love, we learn. With authentic love, God starts to train us. It is the Holy Spirit in us that opens our eyes.

So then, a question: Are you inviting God to move in your life in this way each day? Are you waking up every morning asking the Spirit to lead you to truth?

One way the Spirit works is through Scripture. The Bible is filled with wisdom about what is in-line with God's desires for us, and what is antithetical to His purposes. God's Word is a lamp for our feet, a light on our path (Psalm 119). As we are rooted in and shaped by Scripture, we are shaped to God's mold. Another way the Spirit moves is through community. In community we are enriched by the wisdom of others and engage in mutual



discernment. I think about the prophet Nathan with King David. God uses Nathan to confront David with the truth of his adultery and murder. Only when Nathan approaches him, in love, does David realize what he's done. Do you have people walking alongside you in this way? Friends, authentic love pulls us out of evil and toward good. How do we get there? We open ourselves to the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives and we join with the Psalmist every day praying, "Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days" (Psalm 90:14).

Okay, look to verse 10... Authentic Love is: Devoted to one another in brotherly love. Outdoing one another in honor. There are several different words for "love" in Greek, and each have nuanced meanings. This is "philia." It's literally the word (philadelphia). It's a "brotherly love," the ideal love between family members. My brother is doing travel nursing right now. He and his wife take contracts for a few

months at a time and then move on. Sometimes it can seem hard to keep up with where they're at, what they're doing. We can go a while without talking because of busy schedules ... but, you know, if they needed something. If they called and said, "We really need help..." you better believe that I'd snap to attention and roll up my sleeves. Because that's my brother! He's family!

Paul says that this is what the church is like. Christians across the globe are an extended family, and because we're family, bound together in Christ, we love one another. Some of you have been part of First Pres for a long time. Some of you have raised children here. So, this might not sound totally crazy to you, but many of us are still meeting new people in this church! It's amazing to think that the Holy Spirit binds us together as a family, regardless of how long we've been in one another's lives. In Christ, we have a foundational layer of relationship that cannot be removed.

Verse 10 goes on to say, "Honor one another above yourselves." Or "Outdo one another in showing honor." In Christian community, we're called, not just to have affection for one another, but to honor others above ourselves. This requires humility. The classic definition of humility is, "not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less." And this is surely what Paul has in mind when he encourages "out-honoring" one another.

How do we do this? Well, we simply start. We start practicing loving like Jesus loved. Honoring others like Jesus. Start viewing others through "Jesus glasses," trying to see people as Jesus sees them, and we look for opportunities to honor, celebrate, or invest in others.

So then, verse 11. Authentic Love is: not lacking in eagerness, willingness, or zeal, but is ablaze in the Spirit, serving the Lord, Think about this: If you've got a fire going with red-hot coals in it ... What happens when you take a hot





coal out? Goes dim. Fades.  
But then, what happens if you  
put the coal back in the fire?  
Turns red within the warmth of  
the fire.

The image in this verse is, “be  
set on fire with the Spirit!”  
How? Well, like the coal, we  
must remain close to the  
source, must draw life from the  
source.

Friends, this is a call to worship.  
It’s natural to for us to lose  
steam throughout the course of  
a lifetime; it’s easy to become  
complacent, but we’re called to  
be renewed in our zeal. To that  
end, we gather together week  
after week. We draw close  
to the source of life, we give  
praise to the king of creation,  
we unite as the body of Christ.  
And through worship and the  
sacraments, we are consistently  
renewed and nourished.

Pastor Tim has often talked  
about worship using the image  
of blood going in and out of  
the heart. We come in, are  
refreshed and reminded of  
God’s love for us, and then are  
sent out after having been in  
the presence of the Lord. Here  
at First Pres, we know that

worship trains our hearts to  
beat for God. So the question  
is, ‘Are you present?’ Are you  
showing up to training? Are  
you gathering together with  
the Body each week to be  
encouraged, challenged, and  
formed?

Paul also calls the church in  
Rome to serve the Lord. We  
heard in the sermon a few  
weeks ago that one of the  
best ways to navigate out of  
loneliness is to serve others.  
Listen, there are so many  
ways for you to activate into  
the service of the Lord here  
through First Pres, so if you  
haven’t found your place  
to serve, please reach out!  
Seriously, we need more people  
on the Welcome Team helping  
host worship! We can put you  
to work next week!

So, we’re called to worship  
and serve. And then verse  
12: Authentic Love is: joyful  
in hope, patient in affliction,  
faithful in prayer.

In the first few centuries, the  
church in Rome experienced  
real persecution for its  
faith. People were attacked,  
imprisoned and murdered.

And Paul’s charge to them is  
to be patient, prayerful, joyful.  
I don’t know about you, but  
that doesn’t seem like a super  
practical response to me. It’s  
not, “Hey you’re the victims  
of hate crimes and public  
executions. Maybe you should  
go into hiding or learn karate.”  
This seems strange at first,  
but then we remember that  
Christian joy comes not from  
our circumstances but from the  
knowledge of who we are in  
Christ.

Remember the Heidelberg  
Catechism: Q. What is your only  
comfort in life and in death?  
A. That I am not my own, but  
belong—body and soul, in life  
and in death—to my faithful  
Savior, Jesus Christ.

Each of us must consistently  
draw close to Christ. Scripture is  
filled with the truths of who we  
are in Christ, and the promise  
of God’s love for his people. We  
must dwell on these, internalize  
these truths.

And then collectively, we,  
the church, are able to stand  
together in the confidence  
and hope that comes from  
belonging to the Lord. It’s just



like the redness of the coal from the fire, as the church we remind each other of the hope that we have in Christ. And then, this hope and our ongoing faithfulness in prayer inspires joy and fuels patient endurance in suffering.

Finally, verse 13: Authentic Love: contributes to the needs of the saints, practices hospitality. Hospitality is more than having the right forks and spoons available at a dinner party. It's more than making sure your guest's glass is never empty. It's more than cleaning your bathroom before guests come to your house. Though all of those things are important, especially the last one! Hospitality is actually listed as a spiritual gift in the New Testament.

I get to work with a program called Alpha here at First Pres. Alpha offers a place for people who wouldn't describe themselves as Christians to explore the Christian faith. In Alpha team trainings, we've often talked about which spiritual gifts are most helpful in those serving with Alpha. Initially, I thought, "Surely it's

evangelism!" But as we've been running Alpha over the last few years, we've come to discover that actually "hospitality" might be the most critical.

Here's what I mean: Hospitality, in addition to creating a welcoming environment, can be expressed in the way you "make room" for people in your life and in your conversations. When you allow people to be themselves, to feel safe/welcomed/warm in your presence, when you are a safe space for people, when you make people comfortable, that's hospitality. You know those people in your life! In our culture, today, the first threshold that a person typically crosses on their journey toward faith in Christ is "trusting a Christian." Our world has a bad taste of Christianity in their mouth. Typically, in the news or other media, Christians are associated with scandals, embezzlement, belligerence, abuse. What would it look like for you, for us to be a people who are so authentically loving and hospitable that our neighbors couldn't help but become curious about the faith we possess?

Jesus told His followers, "As I have loved you, so you must love one another.... This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34-45). So, we're called then, by Jesus, to love like no one else, for the sake of the Kingdom! When we do, we become an incredible place where belonging is the norm. We become a solution to loneliness.

How are we supposed to do this? How are we supposed to love in the manner that Jesus and this passage calls us to? How can we, the church, be a stronghold/bastion of belonging for others? Well, remember, this is church, so the answer is, "Jesus."

Look at this passage again; doesn't this just sound like Jesus? "Hate what is evil / Cling to what is good." Jesus faces evil in the wilderness. He faces the tempter and comes out the other side having clung to the Lord. He flips over tables in the temple courts because merchants were exploiting the poor who were coming to worship the Lord.





“Be devoted to one another / honor each other.” Jesus loves His disciples and is devoted to the point of dying on a cross. After being resurrected, He says, “Surely, I am with you always.”

Joyful, patient, prayerful, serving—Jesus was constantly renewing His zeal in prayer and solitude, even as He is preparing to be led to His death! And then, in His death, He demonstrated the ultimate act of self-sacrifice/service. Share with the people, practice hospitality. You want to talk about sharing? Jesus looked at a crowd of 5000 and said, “No problem!” He got gold in the sharing Olympics! And hospitality? Jesus is the one who says, “Come to me all you who are weary and heavy burdened, and I’ll give you rest!” (Mt 11:28). Jesus makes room for people.

You want to know what **Authentic Love** is?

This is how we know what authentic love is: Jesus. Jesus modeled this kind of love throughout His life and expressed authentic love as He laid down His life for us. And because of that, we lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters (1 John 3:16).

If you’ve been around First Pres for 10 minutes, you’ve heard us talk about being Light and Life for the City. The Light and Life that we’re talking about are not generated from within us. It’s an overflow, a reflection of the Light and Life that comes from Jesus Christ.

When I try to envision this, the image that comes to mind for me is a champagne glass tower. Have you ever seen that? They stack row after row on top of one another, making a big pyramid, and they pour into the glass at the very top. The champagne just keeps overflowing each glass and pouring into the next row!

Listen, the God of light, the God of life, the God of love, has loved the world so much that He gave His son Jesus, and Jesus has loved us to the point of sacrificing His life. God’s love then is poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit to the point that it spills over into our relationships with one another, and then to the rest of the world.

Friends, we can do this thing together, we can practice authentic love in community ... because of Jesus. We can love one another because he first loved us (1 John 4:19).

