

“THE BLESSING OF THE TRINITY”

Psalm 8; Matthew 28:16-20; 2 Corinthians 13:11-13

June 11, 2017 ~ Trinity Sunday

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Intro: A long time ago, Jerry and I asked folks in the church we were serving about which parts of the worship service were most meaningful to them. One of our elders, a good friend of ours, said that his favorite part was the benediction. I thought, at first, that he was making a joke, suggesting that what he liked best about church was the part where it was almost over! But no, he was serious. The benediction was meaningful for him because it gave him a sense of being blessed, strengthened, and sent.

These verses from 2 Corinthians include words that are familiar to us because they are commonly used as words of benediction, or blessing, at the conclusion of a Christian worship service. They're important, weighty words. This text, and half a dozen similar ones¹ from other New Testament epistles, are also among the few places in the Bible that make explicit and clear references to the Trinity. So this is appropriate to read for this day when we both think about the meaning of that strange and fascinating doctrine and - more importantly - worship and honor the God who is One, whose nature community, and who is to us, in many ways, unending mystery.

read 2 Corinthians 13:11-13

***Come, Thou incarnate Word,
Gird on Thy mighty sword. Our prayer attend:
Come, and Thy people bless, and give Thy word success;
Spirit of holiness, on us descend.***

Part 1 “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ”

It's all about grace. We do love the illusion that we are independent and that we have somehow earned or been innately worthy of everything good in our lives ... but we know that it really comes down to grace. Grace is sometimes defined as “unmerited favor,” though that hardly covers it. Grace is all the gifts of God we don't deserve, everything that sustains and restores us, the capacity to see goodness and beauty in the everyday, second chances, God's compassion embracing our weaknesses, the good that sometimes comes out of our messes. Above all, it's the *forgiveness* we don't merit. Forgiveness and reconciliation are not easily arrived at. They always involve a cost, and the acceptance of some hurt by one or both parties. The heart of Christian faith is the awareness that God, in Jesus, bears all the cost and of reconciling with us. It's not a transaction (as in we do so many good or generous deeds or a certain amount of

¹ ¹ Philippians 4:23, Philemon 1:25, Romans 16:20; Galatians 6:18; 1 Thessalonians 5:26; 2 Thessalonians 3:18.

penance to qualify). God's grace is simply poured out upon us. It's counter-intuitive, endless, surprising.

But grace is not just God's mercy *toward* us; it's also the power of God *in* us, enabling us to live grace-filled lives. To have the grace of Christ with us is to embody grace and mercy toward others. If our experience of Christ's grace doesn't move us toward mercy in our relationships, we haven't quite grasped it. The grace of Christ gives us not only a new relationship with God but a new way of being in the world. When we are sent out, we are to go not just in the knowledge that we can count on grace for our inevitable sins and failures, but that it's our job to take that grace everywhere we go – into every situation, every interaction, every relationship.

***Come, Thou Almighty King,
Help us Thy name to sing, Help us to praise.
Father, all glorious, o'er all victorious,
Come, and reign over us, Ancient of Days.***

Part 2: "The Love of God"

We use the word a lot, which makes it hard to say anything very meaningful about love. But the love of God is not to be confused with the sentimental or trite versions of love that are everywhere in our culture and sometimes, I'm sorry to say, even in religion. So it's worthwhile to pause and consider what we're saying when we say "the love of God... be with you." There is so much that can be said about God's vast, deep, powerful love – more than we can delve into. So... just three things that might keep us from hearing merely a bland niceness when we hear talk about God's love: God's love is free; it is particular; it is transformative.

God does not love us out of any need of us but out of complete freedom. Preacher Tom Long says "Love flows and splashes from the fountain of God's own life. God's love flows to us, even when it isn't reciprocated. It's a gift, freely given. Nothing we do or fail to do makes any difference. God IS love, the Bible tells us (1 John 4:8, 16) The creation shows perhaps most clearly the freedom of God's love – everything created for no reasons except love, joy, and generosity. That is the love we are blessed with daily.

We say, often, that "God loves everybody" – and that not only makes a good bumper sticker, it's true, and moreover, it's Biblical! But saying that – and only that – does run the danger of making God's love – and God's self – too abstract, too distant, too bland, too nice, too easy ... maybe too easily ignored or dismissed. It's good to remember that God's love is particular, personal, passionate. The Biblical story tells us about how God loved Abraham and Sarah, Hagar, Moses, David who had a heart for God in spite of his many flaws, Mary Magdalene, Saul who became Paul. And so we are reminded that God loves you, and me, and the person sitting next to you, and the loved one you are worried about, the person you are angry with. God sees us, knows us, calls us beloved, seeks us out, brings us home. We are the objects of God's delight.

And such love, unsurprisingly, is transformative. It lays claim to us, and not in an abstract way. (Thus, perhaps, the reason many people prefer a vaguely benevolent and distant deity.) Tom Long says, “To be loved by God is to be drawn toward God. To be drawn toward God is to be transformed into the likeness of God.” The love of God doesn’t just encourage us to be slightly better, kinder people, but is in the process of making us – us! - holy, loving, and lovely in the presence of God.

***Come, holy Comforter,
Thy sacred witness bear. In this glad hour:
Thou who Almighty art, now rule in every heart,
And ne'er from us depart, Spirit of power.***

Part 3: “And the Communion of the Holy Spirit”

In Greek, the word is *koinonia*. The New Revised Standard Version translates it as “communion” (which naturally makes us think of the Lord’s Supper). We often say “fellowship” or “companionship” because those are more generally understood words, but the meaning of the greek word also encompasses “sharing,” “partnership,” and “participation.”

Whichever word we use, this phrase refers to the particular character of the Christian community, in which men and women, Jews and Gentiles, slave and free, rich and poor sat together, ate together, related to one another as equals – very much in contrast to the divisions that were endemic to their larger culture but which don’t define relationships in the church. The sharing they knew in the Spirit was more than what we might call “spiritual” – it was also a practical sharing of resources to make sure that no one went hungry and that everyone’s needs were met.

When we are sent forth from worship blessed by “the communion of the Holy Spirit,” it’s not just a prayer that each of us may experience the presence, guidance, and strength of the spirit in our lives. It also reminds us that wherever we go, we are part of a community of faith, and it is a prayer that we continue, daily, to be in fellowship with one another: praying, encouraging, helping, rejoicing with each other, sharing food, using resources together for good in the world, resisting division, seeking unity, ... being the church.

Sometimes we look at the doctrine of the Trinity as a puzzle to be solved or a theorem that we must explain. Sometimes we forget that it’s really meant as a way of speaking about the ways we are blessed by presence of God – so it is about something mysterious but also about some particular gifts that God’s very nature gives. The blessing of the Trinity is the blessing of welcome and belonging; it is also the blessing of purpose and sending.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit bless us today

***To Thee, great One in Three,
Eternal praises be. Hence evermore
Thy sov'reign majesty may we in glory see,
And to eternity love and adore.***

Resources:

Rush Otey, "The Grace... of our Lord Jesus Christ" in Journal for Preachers, volume XL, number 4, Pentecost 2017.

Thomas G. Long, "The Love of God" in Journal for Preachers, volume XL, number 4, Pentecost 2017.

Catherine Gunsalus Gonzalez, "And the Communion of the Holy Spirit" in Journal for Preachers, volume XL, number 4, Pentecost 2017.