

Trinitarian Blessing

II Corinthians 13: 5-14; Matthew 28: 16-20

First Sunday after Pentecost, (June 12) 2022

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What we would not do for the ones we love. Especially if that person is on the verge of destroying himself, or herself. Most of us would go to any lengths, make any sacrifice, to try to help the person we love.

That is the position in which the Apostle Paul finds himself in his second letter to the Christians in Corinth. The Corinthian church is in a major mess and Paul is doing all he can to try to turn them around. He is planning a trip so he can be with them in person but trips in those days took months and he knows that by the time he gets there it might be too late. Paul is desperate. He tries everything he knows in this letter. He pleads, he begs, he berates, he teaches, he loves, he is tender, he vents, he is brusque. He tries one approach and then another in an effort to get their attention.

One commentator says that it is almost too painful to read. If I had written a letter to someone like this, and thought someone else might see it, I would delete parts of it. Indeed, it is rather surprising that the church saved this letter because it is such an honest, heart-wrenching letter from the Apostle Paul to a congregation he loves deeply but a congregation in a big mess.

What is at stake is the very truth of the gospel, and the nature of the church and her ministry. Super-apostles have come to Corinth and convinced them that the

Christian way is the way of success, wealth, health, domination, and power. Paul calls them super-apostles or hyper-apostles in chapter 11 (v.5) and then a few verses later he calls them false apostles (11:13). These super-apostles are slick public speakers, smart manipulators who boast of their success, and who make fun of Paul's appearance and his poor speaking ability, and say he is inferior in knowledge.

Paul responds to these super-apostles saying they preach a Christ without the cross, promote a life without suffering, and are trying to create a church and a faith that does not worry over the mundane details of real-life, that is untouched by weakness and hurt, wants resurrection without crucifixion, and a life of glory without defeat.

I am reminded by a statement from several years ago by the Air Force's Chief of Chaplains, as he complained about the controversy at the Air Force Academy where Air Force chaplains, officers everyone, were blatantly evangelizing the cadets. What do you do when you're a cadet and a captain comes and tells you that you need to accept Christ as your savior? Do you say, "Not now." or "Yes, sir!" Well, the Air Force Lt. General who was the chief of chaplains, was upset that the chaplains were having to apologize, back-up, and so on. The general complained saying, "When does Christianity get to win?"

He might be a three-star general and the chief of chaplains, but he doesn't get it. **Christianity is not about winning. It is about following Jesus Christ to the cross, to servanthood, to suffer, and to die, and trusting in the resurrection. The winning part is in God's hands; not ours. The New**

Testament says that the way of God is to be victorious by dying and suffering, by serving and giving mercy. Paul told these very same Corinthian Christians in his first letter, “We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to gentiles.... For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength. ... God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God” (I Cor. 1: 23, 25, 27-29).

Someone has defined a heretic as a person who has a complete grasp of a half-truth. This false gospel of the super-apostles was and is dangerous because it is a half-truth parading as the whole truth. They want a gospel of power and success. So did this Air Force chief of chaplains and so do many religious folk these days who want to rule and be powerful and impose their super-gospel on everyone else. And during these days where we feel much chaotic change in us and around us, the zeal to impose some kind of control and power is ever more tempting. But hear me: I am more and more convinced, in reading the New Testament, and in reading history, that Christianity ceases to be Christianity when it rules. If it is imposed, it is not Christian. If it is about power; it is not about Jesus. And when it seeks to win, Jesus Christ loses, and the world loses.

Do you see why II Corinthians, a much-overlooked letter in the New Testament, is so pertinent for today?

Paul is like a parent agonizing with a child who has fallen in with a fast

crowd. He tries every argument he can think of to see if he can somehow rebuild trust and affection with the Corinthian church.

So what in the world does all of this have to do with the doctrine of the Trinity? Well, we read this passage from Paul because of the benediction at the end. When Paul signs off, when he concludes his letter, he does so with a Trinitarian formula that is well-known to many of us: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (13: 13).

At first, this might sound routine and formulaic to us. But Paul does not use this benediction anywhere else in his letters. This one is the longest, the richest, and fullest of all his blessings he leaves with his churches in his letters. At the end of his first letter to Corinth he says, “The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you” (I Cor. 16:23). To the Galatians, with whom Paul had a rambunctious relationship, he ended saying, “May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters” (Gal. 6:18). Likewise, to his best-loved Philippians he says simply, “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit” (Phil. 4:23). So, I think it is interesting that the very church that was breaking his heart, the very church chasing after power and glory, is the one that gets the full Trinitarian blessing.

Notice that our Austin Heights’ mission statement is based upon this very Trinitarian blessing: “We are gathered in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, growing in the love of God, and empowered to serve by the Holy Spirit.” Note also that this mission statement is printed in condensed form at the top of our Order of Worship every single Sunday.

I don't think it is an accident that Paul concludes with his apostolic benediction naming the Trinity. A benediction is a blessing. It means that what Paul says is: may the blessing of God be upon you. So here is this congregation hell-bent on becoming a super-church, led by super-apostles, who could be super-politicians, and Paul blesses them with the grace and the love and the fellowship of the Triune God.

A blessing is not something imposed or coerced. It is a prayer but it is a powerful prayer. It is the prayer that holds up the very nature of God-self to the congregation saying this is who God is and this is who you are in God.

The Triune God is the very essence of perfect grace and love and fellowship (or communion). The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit's very nature is mutual self-giving, mutual sharing, mutual love. Within the One God is perfect relationship: perfect communion. (There is no competition, no conflict for example, between God the Father and God the Son over the nature of human sin and what to do about it, with God the Father bringing wrath while the Son pleads for forgiveness. None of that.) The inmost being of God is a dynamic inter-relatedness that pours itself out without ceasing. It is not dependent on the worthiness of the other, or the response of the other. God's love and grace and communion spends itself out, even to the last drop of blood of the Son.

Rather than being a super-church which is built on power and glory and domination with self at the center, Paul is holding up the very nature of God to the Corinthians. This God we worship gives and shares love. Augustine said that the

Triune God shares so much love that the love overflows, so God creates in order to share the overflowing love. Furthermore, when we are in Christ, another of Paul's favorite terms, we participate in this very God. It is not simply that God is someone for us to look at or ponder, but that in prayer and worship and community with one another in the name of Christ, we participate in God and God participates in us.

For Paul, his greatest hope is not that the Corinthians will turn it around, but that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit will turn them around. So that the Corinthian Christians will embody and practice this same grace, and love, and fellowship with God and with one another. In our life in and with God, we in turn share grace and love and communion so much so that it overflows out into the world around us. When we live in this God, we live generously and with gratitude toward one another and beyond.

I'm worried. Along with you, I'm worried about a lot of things: I am worried about politics of domination, violence, wealth, and power, and the destruction of democracy. I am worried about a society and world economy that seeks domination and power that is fast destroying our climate and the Earth. Furthermore, I'm worried that as a result gun-toting power is increasingly seen as the way to survive and dominate in such a changing world. I am worried about the destruction of the common good that believes in public schools and that we care for all our children. And as a pastor and a theologian, I am worried about these super-apostles and super-churches, who think God is a White super-man whose job is to dominate. The issue is no different than it was for Paul; the very nature of who is God and who are God's people called to be in this world? Then, like now,

the slick and powerful want a bullying God and a bullying church of empire, of glory, of victory, of domination. Then, like now, Paul calls us to God we know as Trinity. The God who shares love and serves with grace and mercy.

In the reading from the last chapter of Matthew, the Second Person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ, says, “Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you. I’ll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age.”

Our calling is to train people and instruct them in practicing this life known in the Trinitarian God. We do not get this by breathing the air, we have to be intentionally trained, taught, and instructed. We are to show it, demonstrate it, and then, we leave the results up to God.

And we have witnesses, exemplars of who God calls us to be, models that we can look to every Sunday, to help reorient us and keep us on the Way of the God we know as Trinity. Kay Chism has been and is one of those exemplars, one of those witnesses to the Christ-like way of service and giving. For over 40 years she was an outstanding public-school teacher, and for the past 32 years she has taught and trained our children the Bible, taught them about this God we worship who gives and not dominates, the God in Christ who shares love and does not engender fear. Kay has done this quietly and humbly, without calling attention to herself, and reliably, always showing up Sunday after Sunday.

Kay has the incredible ability to engage students who have otherwise been

disengaged, and who have not responded to other teachers, but they have responded to Kay. For all these years, she has taught children the nuts and bolts, the basics, of the Bible, and the basics of knowing God.

Years ago, at Youth Camp, there was some kind of big game show kind of fellowship. Around 20 churches, with close to 500 teenagers were gathered in the theatre at Austin College. Each church sent representative youth to the stage to participate in a kind of Bible Jeopardy. I have a clear memory of a young woman from a big church in the camp, a star of youth camp with her beauty, her charm, and social skills, who was asked, “Name one of the first five books of the Bible.” And she couldn’t do it. Our youth were shocked! Dumbfounded! They had been taught such basics by Kay Chism since they were six or seven years old. If they showed up Sunday after Sunday, and listened to her, our kids knew the books of the Bible. They knew how to find their way through the Bible, and they knew Bible stories, especially the basics of Jesus.

Why is this important? I’ll tell you another quick story. Years ago, I was in the back seat of a car with three other pastors. They were senior to me and all three were front-line, varsity pastors of top-of-the-line-churches. Their conversation was about their youth graduating and going to college and being unprepared as Christian young people for what they were facing. Their smart, talented, top-of-the-class kids went to college and ran-up against other smart, talented kids who were greedy for wealth and power, often racists, and most always ruthless, competitive to the point of getting very close to, if not crossing, the line of cheating, all in the interest of being number one, being the top, the best, but also being the meanest stepping on others in their pursuit to the top. These pastors said

their kids were not prepared for such and were becoming as ruthless and mean as the rest.

In short, these kids were in danger of becoming mean super-kids in super-churches, led by super-apostles like what the Apostle Paul opposed.

Kay Chism has committed her calling as a teacher to being a witness that in the Trinitarian God we know in Christ, there is another way. Today we honor her, as she has honored us and our children for all these years of excellent teaching and service.

When we say in our Mission Statement: “We are gathered in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, growing in the love of God, and empowered to serve by the Holy Spirit,” Kay shows us and shows our children what this looks like.

Now, who will come and serve in the same way?

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.