

Sermon by Renata Eustis
June 12, 2017
Holy Trinity 2017
2 Corinthians 13: 11-13

So, here we are at the only Festival of the Church Year that celebrates an idea--rather than an event or a person--the Holy Trinity. And, coincidentally, after worship, we will have our Congregational Lunch and Budget meeting. One thing that both of these have in common is that it's challenging to get most people excited about either one of them. For a smaller-sized church we have a complicated budget that is not easy to understand--and most people would say the same about the Holy Trinity.

But I think there is more to both our budget and the Trinity--and that each one is worth the effort of our wrestling. The budget tells a story about how we are responding to God's call on our lives--it expresses something about who we are and who we understand God to be. Likewise, the Trinity expresses something about who we understand God to be--and if we truly believe we are made in God's image, it has something to say about who we are as well.

I'll leave it to Kendall and Artie to share the story our budget tells later on, in the meeting--and I'll work on the Holy Trinity with you now.

I'm going to do it by focusing on the second lesson--which is the closing of Paul's letter to the church in Corinth. He closes with these words that we hear so often because we begin our worship with them: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you." If you're a regular worshiper here, you automatically reply, "And also with you."

It might not be true for everyone, but one of the downsides of a familiar liturgy is that we don't really hear the words any more. So, I want to lift up these words today--these words that we say as a greeting, and that Paul used as a farewell--and give us a chance to hear them. And, I want to consider what it means to be a community who lives and moves and has its being in the grace of Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit.

So, just like there is a story behind our budget--there is a story behind this second letter to the Corinthians. Actually, there are believed to be at least 5 letters from Paul to the Corinthian church--the part we heard today is a fragment of the 5th letter.

In modern terms, Paul was the mission developer who got the Corinthian faith community started, and his letters give a picture of their relationship over a period of years--through good times and also through some very contentious times. When Paul writes these words we hear today, his relationship with the Corinthians is at the breaking point.

Let me take you briefly through the story. On his second visit with them, there was a person who verbally attacked Paul--and to his utter disappointment *no one* defended him. So, Paul left--undoubtedly feeling like a failure.

He promised to visit them again--but sent a harsh letter instead--calling them to task for what they had done. That letter is like the angry email--that maybe should not have been sent--that would have been so much better face-to-face. But we don't know exactly what it said because it's content never made it into the canon of scriptures. Somebody--maybe even the Holy Spirit--decided it was better to hit the delete button on that one.

But, it also seems like that letter was fairly effective--perhaps showing how God can work through our weakness--because most of the people in the Corinthian church rallied around Paul, and they disciplined that other person who had attacked him.

So, in another letter (which is the first part of 2 Cor.), Paul tries to rebuild their relationship. He wants to be close again--he sees himself as their "father in faith."

But there's another part to this story that has to do with money. Paul is in the midst of a fundraising campaign. He's collecting money from the new congregations--the ones he started--the ones that are primarily made up of Gentiles. He's collecting this money to support the church in Jerusalem--because at this point the Jerusalem church is really struggling. This was the place where it all started but times have changed and it is the weakest link in the chain.

These funds will be of real, practical support to the church in Jerusalem but, for Paul, this collection, this offering, tells a bigger story. It's the story of the unity of all believers--across all the societal divisions--ethnicity, language, place of origin, economic class. It's the expression of what it means to be "a faith community with no walls."

So, this collection is the crown jewel of Paul's ministry.

And it's complicated.

Paul has just found out that the offerings have been really strong in Macedonia--and that the people in Macedonia were really inspired by the example of the Corinthians--and they were motivated to follow them in generosity. But the problem is that's not exactly how it's happening in Corinth--and that might be ok, except for the fact that some members of the Macedonian congregation are on their way to visit the Corinthians. So, it's really urgent for Paul to reconcile with the Corinthians and get things back on track before they meet.

It's not really clear how effective this letter was because the pot gets stirred up by some new people who are--from Paul's point of view--trying to undermine his authority. These intruders have become a major force--They are what pastors today call antagonists or sharks--and they have aligned themselves with the Corinthians who were already unhappy and resentful.

As is often the case, money is at the center of it. These opponents of Paul question his handling of it. Among their complaints is that Paul is two-faced--hypocritical--because he proclaims a Gospel that is "free of charge" but then is pushing this collection for the Jerusalem church.

So, in all the ups and downs of their relationship--this is the lowest point. And, in response, Paul writes a "showdown" letter. Part of that letter is what makes up the end of 2Corinthians--and the close of the letter is what I want to come back to.

Even at the lowest point, Paul can write those words: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you."

Even in the midst of conflict, Paul goes back to the God who holds everything. He goes back to the God whose fundamental nature is a community of three. He goes back to the God who comes to us with grace, love and communion.

Paul reminds the Corinthians--and himself--and us--of who God is *for us*. And what flows from that is who *we can be for each other and for those beyond this community*.

Grace. Love. Communion. I've spent a lot of time over the last couple of days thinking about the difference between love and grace, and the best I have come to is that grace is an expression of love.

At its heart, grace is unearned love. We have seen it most clearly in Jesus--in his life, death and resurrection. We understand it best--I think--as constant forgiveness--not just once but always.

The love that God has for us is complete and unadulterated. It is unshakeable acceptance. It is the love of the Creator who looks at us and says, "You are so good, so very good!"

The communion of the Holy Spirit holds us together-- reconciles us--assures us that there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

We are a community who lives and moves and has its being in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and communion of the Holy Spirit. We are not left on our own power to try to be more forgiving or more generous or more trusting. We are all works in progress as individuals and we are a work in progress as a community. God is working on us all the time.

Today--as we celebrate the Holy Trinity--God is working on us by reminding us again of who God is--not in the abstract--but who God is *for us*.

In my own life, this has made an enormous difference. Several years ago, someone said, very disparagingly, that I cut people too much slack. For a split second, I was offended but then I quickly shifted to being amazed. I'd spent a lot of my life thinking of myself as someone who was a longer grudge-holder than anyone else I knew. The fact that someone could see me as a person of grace--because I think that's another way of describing cutting people too much slack--the idea that someone saw me that way made me sit up and take notice of what God had been doing in my life.

There are many ways that God has worked on me but one of the most basic is that I have been given an unwavering experience of God's acceptance of me--I really do know that even though I have many faults and make many mistakes, I am valued and loved.

And I actually think that this is what all people yearn to know in the depths of our beings.

It's why I became a pastor--and it's why we exist as a faith community.

So, the next time I greet you with the words of the Apostolic Greeting, know that they are not a stale part of the liturgy for me--know that I deeply want you to experience the grace, love and communion of the God who is the source of all that we have and all that we are. And, when you say back to me, "And also with you," know that it means everything to me.

Today, let us give thanks for who God is, for who we are and for who we are becoming.

Thanks be to God. Amen.