

Today is Trinity Sunday, which means it is the Sunday most preachers avoid like the plague. Why? Because the doctrine of the Trinity is very difficult to explain and if one attempts to do so, they'll probably commit a heresy or furthermore confuse people and/or bore them. I saw a meme this week with Jesus wearing a nametag that said, "God." He was in a coffee shop, and the sign on the counter read, "1 Free Coffee per person." Jesus says to the barista, "So I guess I'll take 3 coffees!" You see what I mean? At the end of the day, the doctrine of the Trinity is a mystery, yet it is the best way we, as humans, have found to begin to describe God; however, it's completely inadequate. The concept of the Trinity didn't become a doctrine of the church until three hundred years into Christianity; therefore, the word "trinity" isn't found in scripture. There are only a handful of scriptures that reference Father, Son, and Holy Spirit or a threefold blessing like Paul gives here. I'm sorry to disappoint you but we aren't solely going to talk about the Trinity because that's not the main focus of today's text. The focus is simple: God is the source of grace, love, and community. Today it is my hope that we have an encounter with the living God rather than discuss a treatise about God (Matt Skinner, *WP*). That is for a study or class later. So, let's turn to the context of today's closing passage in 2 Corinthians. It is custom for Paul to close his letters with final words concerning his sense of what is most needed in that specific faith community. Well, the church in Corinth is a community torn by factions. Paul wants them to be made aware that "God provides all that heals and benefits God's people" (Skinner). The three chapters before today's final one in 2 Corinthians involve a "tense and combative communication to a church

that had begun to oppose Paul and question the validity of his message” (Skinner). There are super apostles, as Paul refers to them, or other missionaries who are claiming that they preach the Gospel better and articulate theology better than Paul. Paul completely disagrees. “As the letter draws to a close, Paul is still stung by the charges of his opponents and the Corinthians’ failure to commend him (12:11). He warns that a third visit to see them will be a painful time of mourning over those who continue to harm the community. By now the vices that he lists are of no surprise- ‘quarreling, jealousy, anger, selfishness, slander, gossip, conceit and disorder” (12:20). On this Sunday that celebrates the mystery of the Holy Trinity, Paul’s final words to the Corinthians underscore the church’s reliance on the power of the divine for hope of its transformation” (Carla Works, *WP*). Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Before turning to God’s word for us this day, let us first pray.

PRAY. READ.

Perhaps it’s because it’s Trinity Sunday but as I approached today’s text, I was thinking in threes. Maybe it’s because one of my favorite verses in the Bible comes a chapter before today’s text. When Paul says, “Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness”” (2 Cor. 12:8-9). I can’t help myself. I keep seeing the number three in today’s text. Ok, I also see five as well, but I digress. Here in Paul’s final words to the Corinthians in contrast with these last three or so chapters, he offers words aimed at building up the Christian community in Corinth from its current fractured existence to a new

integrated whole. He charges them to rejoice- yes, the word is translated “farewell” in the translation I just read; however, scholars have determined that a much better translation is “rejoice.” Again, he charges them to rejoice, to mend their ways, to encourage one another, to agree with one another (or really to be of the same mind of Christ Jesus- not necessarily unanimous in politics or even what brand of coffee to serve but united in their desire “to see, know and serve the Risen Christ”- recognizing “the light of Christ within” others despite disagreements), and to live in peace. These are the five imperatives or commands Paul offers them. Rather than focus on these five, in honor of Trinity Sunday, I’m going to go with three other connections found here that seem just as important at this time. The first connection or observation is that Paul offers these final instructions to the community as a whole, not to individuals. Paul is speaking to second person plural here. He’s saying, “Y’all.” “All y’all.” “Brothers and sisters” in the faith. Paul is speaking to the church at large with each individual as a member of the Body of Christ. “Even in the church, community is not just a collective noun but a collective task. We are to take care of each other and watch out for each other” (Paul T. Nimmo, *Connections*). While walking up the sidewalk, along the wall on Stone Ave, last week, I witnessed something incredibly humbling. Who am I kidding? I do that most days around Triune. While I sometimes see things I don’t want to see, like fighting or bad behavior, I saw a man take off his shoes and put them on another man’s feet. And then he placed his hand on his shoulder, looked him in the eyes and said, “Here, your feet will feel better now.” Right there on the sidewalk, my heart was both convicted and warmed- much like the tone of Paul’s final

words. This is what Paul was talking about- the community of faith caring for one another as Jesus cared for others.

The second connection in today's text is the way in which Paul calls for peace. "In our culture and in churches today, it can be all too easy to declare peace or agreement on the surface without ever embracing genuine reconciliation. For Paul, peace is more than this; it is not simply a cease-fire, but a new alliance, a fresh commitment, a striving together and moving forward in which there is deep common purpose born or and forged by the gospel" (Nimmo). This is not a peace that the world gives; it's a peace that only the Lord can give: a peace that passes all understanding. I observe the staff here at Triune most days, including the Housing Surge Team, and I am amazed by how God called each them here individually with their different gifts and opinions and yet how they strive together as a team, even when they disagree, moving forward with a deep common purpose born and forged by the gospel. People ask me, "How is the staff at Triune so even keel with the intense work that they do? Why do you all laugh a good bit of the time?" We laugh and we cry. How are we able to meet people where they are and yet challenge them to become who God is calling them to be? Because God is among us at work in this church and beyond. Rejoice! That's what Paul invites us to do, even when life is hard.

The third connection in this text is the way in which Paul's instructions are followed by a promise- an affirmation- that the Corinthians will not be left on their own in their journey. No. Paul assures them that the God

of peace and love with be with them. Notice there are no conditions here. No “if” you do this “then” this will happen- No. There is only an “and”- only a promise of God’s peace and love accompanying them and us along the way. What does this look like in real life? It looks like being able to have difficult and honest conversations in love, knowing that God’s love is the driver and sustainer. These conversations are rarely easy, but they many times do eventually bring peace. It is in such assurance that we find ourselves realigned as one body, sharing the peace of God. It takes continuous practice of getting it wrong before we get it right. Believe me, I know. Don’t you?! We keep trying our best!

And through it all- the ebbs and flows of life- God promises peace; even in situations where reconciliation seems humanly impossible, it becomes possible by the power of God. I posted a quote a week or so ago by minister and author, Frederick Buechner. It made me pause. He said, “Wherever people love each other and are true to each other and take risks for each other, God is with them and for them and they are doing God’s will.” This is what I witnessed in the shoe exchange out here on the sidewalk. I witnessed God’s peace and love being lived out in the most humble, simple, and selfless way. That, in turn, inspired me to go and do likewise, not only looking for Jesus but following him in how I live.

And then Paul ends his letter with a threefold blessing or benediction that many of you may recognize, as it’s pretty much the same benediction I give every time I preach. These words are a fitting way to

send us out at the conclusion of worship to be God's people in this world, and they speak powerfully for how believers experience God and salvation. And these instructions Paul gives in these three verses charge us with how we are to live together in community while also reflecting on the experience of who God is and what God has done to save them/us. Notice the order in this benediction though. It's not God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. It's Jesus, God and the Holy Spirit. I appreciate that Paul begins with Jesus and with grace. Yes, there are three gifts that Paul mentions here- the gifts of grace, love, and communion. Starting with Jesus and grace reminds us that we can't earn grace- it is the unmerited "work of reconciliation between God and humanity effected in the cross of Jesus Christ" (Nimmo). Then Paul references the love of God, which grounds this reconciling work in the being of God whom Paul has already described as the God of peace and love. And then the fellowship or communion of the Holy Spirit. This "highlights the new work being done by God, tearing down barriers between people and creating and sustaining fellowship, both vertically, between the believer and the Spirit, and horizontally, between believers" (Nimmo). "Paul knows something very important: without God's Holy Spirit, our community, our communion, our fellowship- is impossible. For it is only the power of God's Holy Spirit that makes it possible for us to live together in our differences. Indeed, it strengthens and grows us as Christ's body to live together in our difference" (Sarah S. Henrich, *Connections*).

While some scholars' attempts to find the doctrine of the Trinity here in Paul's words are premature, I will say that Paul does "clearly articulate a

distinction between the three spiritual gifts invoked and their givers, and in this way serves (and did serve) as a starting point for further reflection on the Christian experience of the being of God as triune” (Nimmo). None of Paul’s other letters’ sign-offs mention the other members of the Trinity. Yet here, Paul stretches his customary benediction to include such references. Paul’s words help to remind us that God is the source of grace, love and community and that with God, all things are possible, including reconciliation. Friends, we are all in need of a relationship with the triune God and with one another. It’s not about being right, it’s about hearing other voices and agreeing that even among our differences, we all have commonality in Christ Jesus our Lord. The other differences shouldn’t matter- though we allow them to divide us and take up so much energy! I am reminded of this every time we receive communion here at Triune on the first Sunday of each month- one of my most favorite times in worship! “God invites us to this feast and gathers us at table so that we all receive, together. No one is better than the other- no matter our social status. It is a feast for all shining with the light of cross and resurrection, reminding us, informing us really, that God never gave up on life for God’s creation. Neither do we give up on each other when the going gets tough. That is what Paul models with this generous benediction and this is the infusion and empowerment and assurance we need each week- or perhaps the kick in the pants. May it be so...for God’s kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven. Thanks be to God! Amen.