

Fully-Equipped Christians

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“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.” – 2 Corinthians 13:13

If you’ve ever wondered where the words come from that I say at the end of most of our worship services, now you know. The benediction that I use comes from the closing of Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, which I have taken as my text this morning: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.” You’ll hear me say a version of those words in a few minutes, and I do so to remind you that what we have just done in here is intended to more fully equip you to be the person God wants you to be out there. The Trinitarian language of Paul’s closing expresses what Christians have experienced across the ages of God’s presence in their lives: God who creates and loves the world, Jesus who shows us what God in human form looks like, and the constant spiritual presence of those two realities in what we refer to as the Holy Spirit.

That, in a nutshell, is the Trinity – “God in three persons” as we sang in Bishop Heber’s famous hymn at the start of the service – and today is the day in the church year set aside to celebrate that doctrine.

Now, if it were only the doctrine of the Trinity that we were celebrating today, I have to confess right up front to you that I’d find it difficult to generate much enthusiasm in myself and even less in you. But the doctrine of the Trinity, like all the teachings of the church, is designed to make nominal Christians better Christians. We learn about the creation of the world in Genesis, as Jill read in our first lesson, and we learn about Paul’s wishes for the congregation at Corinth, and we learn about Jesus’ great commission to his apostles so that we can find something that speaks to us in our situation, at this moment, that will in some small or perhaps great way enable us to improve our Christian lives. The idea is that Trinity Sunday, like every other Sunday in the church year, may provide us with some resource, some insight, some take-away that will help us work smarter, if not necessarily harder.

Most of my preacherly colleagues today, if they’re preaching on the Trinity at all, will be doing one of two things. They’ll either be trying to explain how you stuff three persons into one God box, or they’ll be talking about the essence of God being relatedness – as God the Father is related to Jesus the Son and as both are related to the Holy Spirit, so the essence of what it means to be human is to be in relationship.

Okay, there’s nothing wrong with wringing that homiletic tidbit from the doctrine of the Trinity, but I’d like to focus our attention for a few minutes on what Paul wishes for the members of the Corinthian congregation as he bids them farewell: the grace of Jesus, the love

of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit. Those three things – grace, love, and communion – Paul hopes and prays for a group of Christians he dearly loves and wants to succeed. And Paul believes that those three things can equip those Christians for the work God was calling them to do in their time and in their place. And I believe that those same three divine gifts – grace, love, and communion – can equip us for our work as well.

One of the attributes the New Testament most frequently ascribes to Jesus is grace. Paul closes most of his letters by wishing the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ to be with the congregation he's writing to, and although it's formulaic, it does mean something. John opens his gospel with the famous prologue that states that we have seen the glory of the Word made flesh, "full of grace and truth." Grace is what distinguishes the character of Jesus for the writers of the New Testament, especially Paul, and Paul wishes that characteristic to be with the people he's writing to. So what is grace?

Grace, in Christian thought, is often paired with mercy, and they both mean to treat others not as they deserve but better than they deserve. Grace is looking beyond what you see in front of you – a person, a situation, a difficulty, a tragedy – to see what that looks like in the light of heaven. Grace is what allows you to frame reality in the largest possible perspective. Grace is what allows you to step out of the endless cycle of "you did that to me so I'm going to do this to you" and raise life to a new and better plane.

Justice is giving people what they deserve; grace is giving people more than they deserve, and to that extent, grace is very closely related to generosity. There's material generosity, of course, and there's spiritual generosity, and the former flows from the latter. People who are materially generous have a largeness of spirit about them that remains focused on what matters and keeps things in perspective.

St. Ignatius of Loyola, the sixteenth-century founder of the Jesuits, is credited with the following prayer: "Dear Jesus, my captain and my king: Give me the grace to be generous: to give and not to count the cost, to fight and not to heed the wounds, to labor and not to ask for any reward save knowing that I do thy holy will."

Grace allows us to do those things – to be free of a strict accounting of our gifts, to bear the inevitable wounds of daily living without the egotistical whining of our age, and to strive to do God's will for its own sake and not for our own salvation.

Grace frees us from the narrow world of our own interests and allows us to live for others, which is what we were created to do – recall our reading from Genesis – and which is why grace is so often attributed to Jesus. He was the quintessential human being because of his living for others – first for God, and then for those around him. That's what it means to be a human being, and that's where Jesus' favorite title for himself, Son of Man or simply The Human One, comes from. In Bonhoeffer's words, it means "the one for others." We are all put here for the others – the other humans, the other animals, the other living beings, and above all else, the great and mysterious and loving Other we commonly call God. Grace is the perspective that looks on the world that way, and grace is one of the attributes that equips the Christian.

Love is another. Love we all think we know, but the truth of the matter is that we don't know the love of God, as the Bible presents that love, very well at all.

God's love begins with creation – again, that's one of the reasons we read the creation account from Genesis on Trinity Sunday – and God's first act of love for each of us is our

creation. In the Christian faith, we don't share Hamlet's famous question, "To be or not to be." That is not a question for Christians. In the absence of any knowledge whatsoever of non-being, we believe, as an article of faith, that being itself is God's first and greatest and most loving gift to all of us.

When it comes to being, science can tell us how, but it can't tell us why. Science cannot tell us why there is something instead of nothing. That's not a scientific or historical question, it's a theological or philosophical question. And even the Bible doesn't dwell on the why of creation. The Bible simply states the fact of creation and proposes a very brief sketch of the broad outlines of what that creation consists of – the earth, the sky, the water, heavenly bodies, sea and land creatures, plants and people. Those are the realities that ancient people encountered on a daily basis, and although our view has been extended enormously by advances in science and technology, that quotidian reality is still pretty much what you and I experience.

The sun still appears to rise and set even though we know, from science, that the sun doesn't move at all. The earth appears to be flat, although we know from science that the earth is a sphere. The sky appears to be where heaven is, although we know from science that if Jesus went straight up on ascension day, he's not in heaven, he's in orbit.

And for some folks, this gap between what we personally experience of the natural world and what generations of scientists have learned about that world seems too vast to cross, and so they see religion and science as antagonists in a battle for truth.

But not us. Progressive Christians recognize that the way ancient people looked at the physical world may differ from the way we look at the physical world, and that those views don't have to be the same. We don't go to the Bible to tell us about geology or astronomy; we go to science for that. We go to the Bible for moral guidance and spiritual comfort. As Galileo put it, "The Bible doesn't tell us how the heavens go; the Bible tells us how to go to heaven." They're different.

But whether we're talking about the heavens or heaven, we're talking about God's gift of existence to us and to all things, which is the first thing we're talking about when we talk about the love of God. We're also talking about God's call to women and men across ages and cultures to bring change to the world for the better – that, too, is an expression of God's love for us. Whether it's Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, or even Jephthah and Samson, people responding to what they believe is God's voice is evidence of God's love.

Can they get it wrong? Of course they can, but God's call and what we do in response to that call are two different things, and God can't be held responsible – or be accused of being unloving – because people behave badly in God's name.

Just as God cannot be accused of being unloving because of disease or suffering or natural disasters or the reality of death itself. It takes the effort of a lifetime to hold the various pieces of life together in such a way that they make at least some sense, and the wise person recognizes that what we know doesn't even compare to what we don't know. There may be 200 billion or more stars in our Milky Way galaxy alone, and we barely know anything about the eight planets that orbit our sun, one of those 200 billion stars. Scientists have spent 250 years cataloging earth's flora and fauna, and the signs are that about 86 percent of earth's living organisms remain unknown. And even in our most intimate relationships, we recognize that there are depths and abilities in other people that we know nothing about.

And as we bore deeper into the reality of knowledge, we discover, to our dismay, that we don't even know ourselves as well as we think we do. We often don't know why we behave the way we do, or why we don't behave in a certain way when we know we should do. Paul famously confessed in his letter to the Romans, "For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing" (7:19). Paul couldn't even figure himself out, and he had the courage to admit it.

But that mystery of human nature never caused Paul to doubt God's love, for him and for the world, even for a second. In his most famous description of love, in his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul concludes that description by saying that we see now through a glass but dimly and we know love only in part, but that someday we will see face to face and know fully as we have been fully known. You and I accept Paul's ecstatic words about love on faith, believing them to be both true and comforting.

And that's what we believe when it comes to God's love – it is both true and comforting, despite all the troubles and perplexities that would cause us to doubt its existence. For the Christian to be equipped with the love of God is to be equipped with far more than a subjective emotion; to be equipped with God's love is have the will to do good that is both unhesitating and boundless.

Finally, Paul hopes and prays for the communion of the Holy Spirit to be with all those in the Corinthian church. Communion, unfortunately, has become fixed in many of our minds as that symbolic meal that we partake of from time to time in the context of worship. And that's one meaning of the word. But what Paul means by the communion of the Holy Spirit is two things, neither of which has to do with the Lord's supper directly.

The first is a bringing into one's daily life that awareness of the divine that we call the Holy Spirit. This isn't simply thinking about the Holy Spirit from time to time, or what the Holy Spirit might be, or who it might be, or whether it has feathers or wings, or looks like Casper the friendly ghost. To have communion with the Holy Spirit is to welcome the Holy Spirit into your life as eagerly and as unselfconsciously as you welcome fresh air. You don't think about it, you don't wonder if it's a good idea, and you don't weigh the pros and cons of being in communion with the Holy Spirit. If that Spirit is genuinely present in your life, you don't really have much of a choice except to be glad that it's there.

And one of the realities we've simply got to come to terms with in our time is that you can't multitask the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God dwells in the depths of reality – Paul Tillich called it not being, but the ground of being – and you can't get to that place where the Spirit is waiting if you're constantly being distracted, either by your gadget, by relentless demands on your time and attention, or by your own skittering thoughts.

"Be still," Psalm 46 says, "and know that I am God" (v. 10). We cannot know God unless we are willing to withdraw from the world's ceaseless clamor to the place where the Holy Spirit meets us and communes with us – shares our life with us, fellowships with us, recreates with us. Paul doesn't wish for the Corinthian Christians simply the company of the Holy Spirit; he wishes for them an ongoing, regular relationship of depth and significance with the Holy Spirit – that's communion with the Holy Spirit.

I think there's a second aspect of communion with the Holy Spirit and that is that the fellowship that we share with one another as Christians is different from the relationships we have with other people. It is, after all, the Holy Spirit that has brought each of us here today,

and has brought each of us into the Christian church. As church people, we look at the world differently and we play by a different set of rules. There is such a thing as church culture, and that culture is created by the Holy Spirit. In the church, the Holy Spirit is the air we breathe, it's the atmosphere in which we live and move and have our being. It's the "how we got here and why we stay." It's the gas in our tanks. It's what gets us moving and it's what brings us back when we go off the rails. Without the Holy Spirit, we are nothing and we have nothing.

Some of you may recall last week's epistle reading, in which Paul wrote to the Corinthians that "No one can say that 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:3b), which reveals the importance of the Spirit among the three persons of the Trinity. Whenever I've had to teach young people the doctrine of the Trinity, I've always felt that starting with God the father was a mistake; the person that allows the other two to make sense to Christians is the Holy Spirit. The story of Christ crucified, which Paul preached, was rightly described by the apostle as "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Cor. 1:23), unless the Holy Spirit reveals its truth. And many of us in America are still waiting for that revelation, as our trust in violence makes abundantly clear.

So there are the three things – the grace of Jesus, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit – that fully equip a Christian. Armed with those divine gifts, we can face any challenge, surmount any obstacle, overcome any difficulty. We are ready to live and live abundantly. Thanks be to God.