

Trinitarian Blessing

2 Corinthians 13:11-13(14)

June 4, 2023

First Presbyterian, Luling

Today is Trinity Sunday, which gets even less attention than Pentecost. Trinity Sunday is the only day on our church calendar that commemorates a doctrine. It wasn't formalized until the 1300's and set as the Sunday after Pentecost.¹ Various Protestant denominations do observe Trinity Sunday, but that didn't happen until an ecumenical liturgical renewal movement in the 20th century. So if you're trying to remember celebrating Trinity Sunday when you were a little kid, you likely didn't.

So maybe Trinity Sunday has been neglected, but the Trinity itself has not, I don't think. There's a handful of Presbyterian churches named Trinity or Holy Trinity Presbyterian. There's a river. A university you might have heard of in San Antonio. There's even a holy trinity of cooking, for Cajun and Creole recipes, that is bell pepper, celery, and onion.

In our worship each week, the Trinity pops up every few minutes, if we're paying attention. Taking things in the order they usually appear, think about the words of the Gloria Patri: "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost. As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end, Amen, Amen." Trinity Sunday every week.

A bit harder to find, but we usually use the Apostles' Creed to affirm our faith, to say what we believe. It's in a Trinitarian structure or outline. "I believe in God the Father Almighty....And in Jesus Christ his only son our Lord...I believe in the Holy Ghost." Trinity Sunday every week.

Occasionally, our hymns will reference the Trinity, too. They do today. Holy, Holy, Holy, is obvious. We're going to sing "Come, Thou Almighty King" after the sermon. It's helpfully located in a section of the hymnal called "The Triune God," and here is why: Verse 1: "Father all glorious, o'er all victorious." Verse 2: "Come, thou incarnate Word," which is Jesus. Verse 3: "Come, holy Comforter," another name for the Spirit. And verse 4, just in case we might have missed all those allusions, "To thee, great One in Three." It's not the only hymn like this. Keep an ear open for more.

And the Doxology. "Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Praise him all creatures here below. Praise him above ye heavenly host. Praise Father, Son, and

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trinity_Sunday

Holy Ghost.” I think the “God” referenced in the first three phrases is the Triune God, and then the three persons of the Trinity are named in the closing phrase. Trinity Sunday every week there, too.

One more place. The benediction. Different pastors use different benedictions. Some switch them around every week. I’ve stuck with this one for a lot of years, though I also used to say it in Spanish. “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.” I hope you heard that in the Scripture reading, straight from 2 Corinthians.

The doctrine of the Trinity doesn’t appear in Scripture, all clearly laid out and explained. Actually, there’s no clear explaining it at all. Each time a person tries, they veer into heresy pretty quickly. God is One in Three and Three in One. The three are distinguishable from the others, but not separable. I mean, this is one of those things I think we just have to take on faith and decide we’ll really understand it, along with the purpose of mosquitoes, when we meet God face to face.

But there are pieces of Scripture that early theologians found enlightening as they developed the doctrine of the Trinity. This from 2 Corinthians is one, along with a few other places in Paul’s letters. The very end of the Gospel of Matthew, where Jesus instructs the disciples to “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” A few others, all of which get put in the lectionary for Trinity Sunday, because there aren’t very many.

Let’s take a closer look at the Trinitarian benediction. That’s the place it holds in 2 Corinthians, at the end. Paul is saying farewell and giving a few last minute instructions and reassurances. There’s even a mini-benediction in verse 11: “The God of love and peace will be with you.” Benediction just means blessing, so it’s a blessing to the people, the people Paul has both praised and chastised, the church he has loved. It’s not contingent on their behavior or their fulfilling all of the things he’s just listed off in these last few verses. It’s a blessing, a full blessing.

The three nouns: grace, love, and communion, are all common words in the New Testament. Grace is *charis*, the root of our word charisma. It means a gift that can only come from the divine, a gift given freely, without condition or strings. It’s connected in this benediction with Jesus, the human gift from God, the gift of God that brings us the grace of eternal life.

Love is *agape*, one of the Greek words for love, that specifically refers to self-giving love, usually connected with God. Paul has already mentioned the God

of love in verse 11, not to mention the whole chapter on love in 1 Corinthians 13. Love and grace are wound up together in ways that a mere human can't really separate.

Communion is *koinonia*, also translated fellowship. As we talked about last week, the Spirit is the instigator of the church, and the church is the location for communion and fellowship, for siblinghood in Christ.

Grace, love, and communion are three in one and one in three, all tied up together, interacting and mutually reinforcing each other, in a similar way to the interaction of the three persons of the Trinity. I don't think we can separate grace from love, because love motivates grace. Nor can we separate love from communion, because love leads us to neighbor and connection. I originally had thought of preaching a whole sermon just on those three nouns, but then I realized quickly how difficult it would be to delineate them from each other. And then I decided not only was it difficult but unnecessary and perhaps moving toward that heresy idea we already talked about. Grace, love, and communion are parts of the same thing, are the whole thing, are less than and more than the sum of their parts, all at the same time. And I know that doesn't make a whole lot of sense and is a contradiction in terms, but so is the Trinity.

What I can say is that this benediction is a blessing. Paul uses it as a farewell blessing, and we use it at the end of worship, but it's not an ending. It's a beginning. Like a graduation is not really an ending but is a commencement, a new beginning, so is this Trinitarian blessing. It's a benediction as we enter a new week, as we go out into the world to be the grace, love, and communion of the Triune God in the world.