

**"The Church of the Trinity"
Sermon for Trinity Sunday
Lectionary Year A
May 18, 2008**

**Texts: Genesis 1:1-2:4a; 2 Corinthians 13:11-13;
Matthew 28:16-20
Dr. David T. Howeth**

"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you." With this benediction, the Apostle Paul concludes what we have in our New Testament as the letter of 2 Corinthians. This benediction has been called the most explicitly trinitarian formula in all of Paul's writings [Craddock et al, p. 302]. As some of you know, the word "trinity" never appears in the Bible. But as a result of trinitarian expressions such as this one, in which there is a distinction made between the three persons of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—the early church began to develop a doctrine of the trinity which understood that while we worship one God and only one God, that God is, by nature and by the way we experience God, one in three ways of being one.

We could spend a lot of time this morning unpacking the meaning of the trinity, but that is not where I want us to go. On this particular Trinity Sunday, I want to focus our attention on the church which is to live in relationship to our trinitarian God. After all, theology is only useful as it helps us better to live in relation to God, to ourselves, and to one another. The Bible makes it clear over and over again that we are to seek to be like God. That's what God wants for us, to be like him, individually and as a community. So the church is called to be like God,

and if God is a trinity, then we are to be the church of the trinity. But what does that mean in practical terms, to be the church of the trinity? I think we can look at what our passages of scripture say about God the Creator, about Christ the Redeemer, and about the Spirit the Sustainer, and we can come to see how the church of the trinity lives.

The church of the trinity lives in an orderly fashion that reflects the image of a loving God. We have as our Old Testament lesson for this morning the first creation story in the Bible. As you know, there are two creation stories in *Genesis*, and this is the first one found there. This story reflects the basic Hebrew understanding of what God's creative activity entails—it is bringing order out of chaos. For the ancient Israelites, water represented chaos, and so we have a vivid picture in this creation story of God separating the waters, marking boundaries for the waters, and bringing the waters under control. And at every step of the process of bringing order out of chaos, God declares that it is good.

As it is with creation, so it is to be in the church. *What is good with respect to the church is what is orderly.* That is why in our scripture lesson from 2 Corinthians, the first word of instruction Paul leaves with the congregation in Corinth is the command to "put things in order." Put things in order. Things in the church are to be orderly. The church is to be characterized by organization, not chaos. Things in the church are not to be wholly accidental, entirely random, or left completely to chance. Things in the church are to be done thoughtfully, intentionally, with planning, and with a following-through on the plans made. The church building and grounds are to be well maintained, the

business of the church is to be administered efficiently, worship is to be done in a structured manner, and the ministries of the church are to be well organized. The church of the trinity puts things in order.

Why? Just for the heck of it? Because God is obsessive compulsive? Because the pastor is anal retentive? No. Please look again at the trinitarian formula at the conclusion of the lesson from 2 Corinthians. It speaks of the love of God. Why did God create the earth, bringing order out of chaos? Because God so loved the world. Why did God enter into a covenant, an orderly agreement, with Abraham, the father of our faith? Because God so loved the world. Why did God give the Ten Commandments to his covenant people, Israel, establishing boundaries with which to order their life as a community? Because God so loved the world.

Why did God give his only Son to redeem a fallen creation? Because God so loved the world. Why did God send the Spirit to allow all creation to experience the reconciliation with God made possible in Christ? Because God so loved the world. Why did God establish the church as an alternative society in the world, so that the order of the church's life would stand in contrast to the chaos of the world? Because God so loved the world. Why did God through the church establish the institution of marriage to counteract the sexual chaos of the world? Because God so loved the world. Why do we find three times in the New Testament a set of household codes by which Christians are to order their family life? Because God so loved the world.

Love and order go hand in hand. Where there is love, therefore, there will be order. *Where there is love, there is order.* So it is with

respect to the church, our family life, our individual lives, and all other aspects of our existence. As it is with God, our own love for institutions and for people is reflected in the degree to which we are seeking to "put things in order."

The church of the trinity lives in an orderly fashion that reflects the image of a loving God, and **the church of the trinity lives under the gracious lordship of Jesus Christ.** Please look at our Gospel lesson for this morning. In it, Jesus is pictured as taking his disciples to the mountain to give them final instructions before he ascends into heaven. He commissions them to go and make disciples. These new disciples are to be baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, the trinitarian baptismal formula. But that is not all the new disciples are to do, be baptized. Disciples are to be taught to obey everything Jesus has commanded.

For the church of the trinity to live under the lordship of Jesus Christ, the church must decide not to live under any other lordship. That's what lordship meant in the ancient culture out of which the New Testament was written. Feudal systems were still in operation. There were lords and masters, and they were to be served and obeyed. Jesus makes it clear in his own teaching that we cannot serve two masters at the same time. We must choose between one or the other.

In our world today we are offered the opportunity to serve many different masters. We have a choice of lords. We can serve ourselves. We can serve the lords of position, prestige, material possessions, popularity, success, power, control, independence, and a whole lot more lords from which to choose. But to be a Christian means to profess that

"Jesus is Lord." That means he is lord alone. There is no room for any other lords in our life. The good news is that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him. In other words, *there are no other lords but him*. Lordship starts and ends with him. So he is our best bet when it comes to serving a master, since all other earthly lords are mere wannabes.

Notice again the trinitarian benediction that concludes our lesson from 2 Corinthians. What is mentioned in connection with the Lord Jesus Christ? *Grace. Grace.* This Lord, in whom we trust and to whom we surrender in humble obedience, is the Lord of grace and mercy and unconditional love. But grace and obedience are not any more opposites than are love and order. *It is an act of the Lord's grace that we are given the commandments we are to obey.* They are in our best interest and are given to us for our welfare. Yes, we are to obey Christ. That is what it means to acknowledge him as Lord and live under his lordship. But I would much rather submit to *his* lordship than to any other, because his yoke is easy and his burden is light. The church of the trinity understands that it is a good thing to obey Christ. It is how we acknowledge his lordship, and it is how we appropriate his grace.

Not only does the church of the trinity live in an orderly fashion that reflects the image of a loving God and lives under the gracious lordship of Jesus Christ, **the church of the trinity lives in the communion of the Holy Spirit.** That is what the benediction from 2 Corinthians associates with the Holy Spirit—communion. What is the meaning of communion in this sense? *It means getting along together.* It means showing care and concern for each other. It means being a

genuine community. Look at the instructions Paul gives that lead up to the trinitarian benediction. He says that in the church we are to agree with one another. We are to live in peace. And we are not only to tolerate one another, we are to be genuinely affectionate toward one another. That is the meaning of the command to greet one another with a holy kiss.

The church of the trinity is not a church characterized by turmoil, strife, divisions, anger and animosity. The church of the trinity is to be characterized by love and peace. There is to be agreement, the setting aside of differences for the sake of the church. There is to be love—accepting, caring, affirming, embracing, forgiving, non-judgmental love—between church members. There is to be peace within the congregation, not simply the absence of war, but the mutual striving together for the well-being of each and every member of the church.

Paul makes a conditional statement in our epistle lesson for today, and whenever a conditional statement is made we ought to pay close attention to it. Conditional statements are those in which a set of conditions is set forth. If such and such is true, then such and such will be true as well. Perhaps the most well-known and often quoted conditional statement comes from the movie *Field of Dreams*. The voice in the cornfield says to Ray Kinsella, played by Kevin Costner, "If you build it, they will come."

Notice the conditional statement we find in verse 11 of our passage from 2 Corinthians: ". . . live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you." In other words, to the extent that *we* work to live in peace with one another in the church, to that extent God will be present with

us. God won't do it for us. God loves us and respects our freedom too much to force anything on us, even those things which are for our own good. Peace within the community of faith won't happen without our honest efforts. We can't leave it up to the Spirit; *communion in this sense is up to us*. We have to strive to put an end to turmoil, strife, division, anger and animosity. But when we work hard to be a peaceful congregation, we discover that the God of love and peace will be present with us.

I believe that this is what it means to be the church of the trinity. It means to live together in an orderly fashion that reflects the image of a loving God. It means to live together under the lordship of Jesus Christ as a means of experiencing his grace. And being the church of the trinity means to live together peacefully in the communion of the Holy Spirit. May we be such a church to an even greater degree than we are already. And as such a church, may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of us.