

June 15, 2014

Psalm 8

2 Corinthians 13:11-13

The Dangerous Benediction

It seems like the set-up for the perfect summer sermon. The scripture reading from 2 Corinthians is a short one. Just a few sentences of advice from Paul. Doesn't seem like there will be much to talk about. And could it be, did we just catch the benediction in there already? Way to go Pastor. Another great sermon. Now let's go home and fire up the grill. Yes, today's scripture from second Corinthians seems short and harmless. And yes, you did just hear the benediction in there. And yes, those are the words I say at the end of every worship service. And yes, I say them every Sunday and yes, they did come directly from this letter from Paul. But no, it does not mean that once I've said them that church is done. The benediction is not simply a way of signing off. It is more than just words I say with my hands up in the air at the end of church. Paul's benediction is a powerful reminder of who God is and who we are because of it. It is a confession of faith. It is a blessing. It is a dangerous, dangerous promise. "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you."

The benediction given at the end of worship is a confession and a blessing and a dangerous, dangerous promise. The word, benediction, comes from the Latin, and it means, to speak good words. And that's what Paul is doing here at the end of his letter to the Corinthians, he is giving his benediction, his last good words and ending things on a positive note. He is giving the church the blessing of God's purpose and the dangerous promise of God's presence. God will be with them.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit. One God, but three persons. Each person of the Trinity different, but necessary to the whole. This God is among them and there is no going back. "Remember, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit are with you."

The Corinthian church needed to be reminded of that. Goodness knows, we all do. As the church, we have received God's benediction, God's well-spoken words of grace and love. And we then are to be God's benediction in the world. We, as the church, need to be reminded of that. And so did the Corinthian church. Because they weren't doing well at being God's well-spoken words in the world. They were not the church

with A's on their report card. They were more of a C- kind of church. They were not being God's blessing or God's dangerous promise. They were struggling with personal problems and internal conflicts. In Corinth, there was so much drama, that some members of the church had even started to turn on Paul. This is Paul's second letter to the Corinthians and it is an unusually emotional letter. Paul switches back and forth between his passion for Jesus the Christ and the great distress and much anguish and many tears that he has shed for this church. We can only assume that it is because of the issues he raised in his first letter to the Corinthians. In which he shook a finger at them for allowing hanky panky among church members. And he lectured them for their communion meals in which the rich overate and the poor went hungry. And he scolded them for arguing about whose spiritual gifts mattered most. This church was supposed to be the church. It was supposed to be the body of Christ, and instead it was a bunch of warm bodies, sitting disconnected from each other in the pews. "Don't you know, don't you remember," writes Paul, "that anyone who is in Christ is a new creation? The old life is gone. A new life has begun. In Christ, God has reconciled

the world to himself, not counting our trespasses against us. But for our sake, he made him to be sin, who knew no sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God.” And you are here as the church to speak those good words, that benediction, to the world.

Paul tells the Corinthians that they have received a blessing and a dangerous promise. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you. Grace and love and unity. It will be with them, so that it may be in the world. Grace and love and communion together. That’s what their God is about. That’s who their God is. The God of grace and love and communing in one Spirit. Their God is not the god of war. Or the god of revenge. Or the god of orthodox beliefs. Or the god of superiority. Or the god of holding grudges. Or the god of complaining. Or the god of bad-mouthing. Or the god of keeping your distance. Not the god of indifference toward others. This blessing and promise is theirs: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” This benediction, these well-spoken words, begin with the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. It begins with Jesus. Jesus is how we see God and

know God. In Jesus, in his human life on earth, in his ministry and mission, we have seen exactly who God is and what God does. In Jesus we see forgiveness. Reconciliation. Healing. The breaking down of barriers. The opening of blind eyes. The lifting up of the lowly and the outcast, and the widow, and the leper, and the demon-possessed, and the money-possessed, and the power-possessed. Jesus was God's grace in the world. A blessing, a gift, a word of hope. "You do not belong to anything else but God. You are not lost. You are not alone. You are found and forgiven. And nothing separates you from the love of God anymore." In Christ, God gives us grace. On the cross, God gives us grace. On Easter morning, God gives us grace. In Jesus, we receive grace upon grace upon grace.

When you've received grace, there is no going back. Grace is a stranger helping you when your car breaks down. It's a child resting their head on your shoulder. It's being late and a friend saying, That's OK. It's being wrong, and a neighbor saying, I understand. It's a man at the homeless shelter bringing you a cup of water while you serve lunch. It's sitting with the sick or the lonely and knowing that both of you are

receiving a gift. Where have you seen grace? Where have you felt the kind of grace that changed the world for you?

It begins with the grace of Jesus Christ. Which originates in the love of God. It is that second part of the benediction, the love of God the Creator that brings all things into being. It is love of God that forms this world. It is the love of God that chooses Abraham and his descendants. It is the love of God that sends the prophets to call us back. It is the love of God that sends Jesus Christ to redeem us. Love is who God is and what God does. And the love of God is not just any kind of love. It is agape love. In Greek, there are different words for love. There is lustful love; there is brotherly love; there is obedient love. And then there is agape love, the highest kind of love. Sacrificial love. Unconditional love. It is love, Thomas Aquinas writes, that does not will its own good, but wills the good of another.¹ Agape love says, this isn't for me. It's for you. It's not about my good, it's about your good and your well-being. It's about your life being an abundant life.

¹ <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/2026.htm#article4>

It's love that invites kids over for a game night when your kids are grown up and gone. It's taking in a foster child and treating them like one of your own. It's bringing a basket of strawberries to that person who is stuck at home. It's going to the elementary school to read with kids who have no one to read with them. It's tending a community garden so that anyone, anyone can come and enjoy it. It's driving five hours to do four hours of work at a home for neglected and abused teenagers because they should know that someone in the world thinks that they are worth that much. It is about knowing the love that God so well that it just oozes out of everything we do. Freely and joyfully and unconditionally. Generous love because of the generous love of God. What would it look like for to be that kind of love at home and at work and at school and at our church?

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God. It necessarily leads to the communion of the Holy Spirit. The feeling that brings us together and holds us together. In Greek, the word for fellowship is *koinonia*. It means common or shared. And we know we all share some things in common. When we read Paul's letter and hear about all the

problems of the Corinthians, we don't say, whew, thank goodness I'm not a mess like them. We don't read the Bible and say, gracious, I'm glad none of that stuff about repenting applies to me. When we read the Bible, we know by the Spirit of God, that this is a message for us. And being broken and messed up, it's something all of us have in common. We need God's help and God's grace. And that God wants to give those things to each of us.

And as much as we might like to do this by ourselves, we can't. As much as we would like to do things by our own miraculous power, we are unable. It is the Spirit of God that makes all things possible. And it is only when we are together that the Holy Spirit is here. It's only when we are together as the church that the love and grace of God is revealed. I'm not saying that you can't encounter a bit of God on the golf course or on a nice Sunday morning walk. You might get a taste. But to be full and satisfied, we need together in the common Spirit of God. It is with others that the Spirit challenges us, and strengthens us, and makes us a dangerous force in the world. Last week, we had our Pentecost worship service with St. Matthew AME. It's the first time we've done anything

like that. And it felt different and maybe a little awkward as we tried to get comfortable worshipping together. There were so many differences between us. Different churches, different worship styles, different histories, different social groups, different skin colors. Different, different, different. And yet we had something in common. We all had the same need for grace. The same hope in Jesus. The same identity as children of the same Creator. If only every Sunday could be that different and that powerful and that dangerous. If only every Sunday, we could be made that uncomfortable and reminded that what holds us together and binds us together is not our hymn book or our sanctuary or our 11am worship time or the uniformity of our theology. It is the power of the Holy Spirit, the power of God holding us and sustaining us, that makes our church possible, that makes our being possible, that makes all of life possible.

It is with a blessing and a dangerous, dangerous promise that I send you out today. To be that which God has made you and called you to be.

People who practice grace. Believers who hope in love. Dreamers who believe that God's Spirit is doing things we can't even fathom. Go now

as forgivers and blessers and healers and doers of gracious and loving things. And the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.