

June 4, 2023

2 Corinthians 13:11-13

11Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. 12Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you.

13The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

Grace, love, and the power to get together. That is what God has given to us as the church. This is what unites us; the grace of Jesus Christ; the love of God the Creator; and the communion of the Holy Spirit. These three things are the marks of the church; the evidence of God with us and in us, as brothers and sisters in Christ. Grace and love and the ability to get together.

These characteristics are the characteristics of God as the apostle Paul tells us. God is three and one. And one in three: Father, Son, and Spirit. Three persons who are distinct and yet the same. Like three different articles of clothing cut from the same cloth. Or three expressions on the same face. There is great diversity and great unity in God. There is great variety and great cooperation. What Jesus does cannot be done without the Father and what the Father does cannot be done without the Spirit. There can be no love without the grace of forgiveness. There is no grace

of forgiveness without the togetherness of communion and no true communion without love. There cannot be one without the three. Nor can the three exist without being one.

The church cannot exist either without grace, love, and communion. The church cannot be the church with these three expressions of God. And Paul is telling the church at Corinth in our reading today, that there is something missing. What's missing is the communion part. The get- it-together part. The church in Corinth does not have it together. The portion of our reading today comes from the end of his letter to the church. And at the end of his letter, he is giving them his last point: "FINALLY, brothers and sisters," he says. "FINALLY, put things in order. Listen to what I've told you. Be in agreement with one another. Live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you." Get it together. Find your communion with one another. The Spirit has put you together, so be together in God.

Paul finds himself having to say this quite a lot to the Corinthians. That's because they don't have it together. There was a lot of squabbling going on in that church. A lot of fighting and gossiping and back-biting. In

Paul's words, it was a place full of jealousy, envy, resentment, and selfish ambition. You can almost hear it. The people whispering together: "Well, well, did you hear about so-and-so? Really? Oh, you don't say. Well, listen to what I heard about you-know-who. OH, do tell." It was not what communion in the Spirit was meant to be. It was not order.... It was disorder. It was not unity.... It was disunity. These people were supposed to be one in Christ, one in new life, one with a new spirit, but they had a spirit of division. They differed from each other because they wanted to differ from each other. They wanted to be above each other. To be better than each other. To feel greater than others. Just like James and John wanting to be the greatest in the kingdom of God. That feeling is still among us. It's still in us. We want to assure ourselves that we are above someone, we are better than someone else. "Well, look here, I got to church first today. I paid my pledge first. My family was one of the first to belong to this church. I wear nicer shoes to church. I have a better job. I have a better car. I have better friends. I have better children. I have a better, more successful sports team I support." The competition is still in us. It's still with us in

the church. It's part of who we are as humans. But Jesus reminds James and John as he reminds us gathered here today: "That's not how it is in the kingdom of God. No one is greater, no one less. We are in this together. You are one with me and I am one with you. We are all one as the Father, Son and Spirit are one."

There should be unity in the church. Communion, fellowship. Not division, separation, and superior attitudes. We believe in the togetherness of God. And the togetherness of the church. If God is One, then so are we. Even though we are different, we are the same. Even though we have different histories and cultures and experiences, we are still human beings in need of mercy. We all need forgiveness. We all need second chances. We all need hope that keeps us from drifting away into despair. We all need the good news that we can die to ourselves and be raised to new life in Christ. We all need the truth of God's steadfast love revealed to us over and over. Get it together, Paul says. Put things in order.

Live in peace, Paul says. Agree with one another. Have communion with each other. Be unified in world that is not unified. Instead it's been

shredded into tiny little pieces. You as the church are called to be one in the Spirit. And to do it with grace and love. You can't have communion with grace and love. You can't fake it. You can't sweep problems under the rug and get together and call each other brother and sister and say glory, halleluiah and share a potluck and call it good. You can't ignore your past. Or erase your history or pretend everything is fine and not talk about inequality or injustice because it makes someone feel uncomfortable. We have to have in us the love of God who loves the world more than it loves itself. We have to have in us the grace of Christ who gives all he has to the world. We have to have in us the Spirit that wants to put the world back together. As God is one, we are ONE. With none of us greater or better or above the other.

As the church, we give people a glimpse of what the kingdom of God is like. We give the world a glimpse of unity and togetherness that exceeds what the world expects. Here different people gather, gotten together by God. Sharing a communion that is unexplainable. Working together without fighting or fussing or trying to push others down or put

themselves first. Because of the grace of Jesus, the Love of the Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

Grace, love, and fellowship are what make us the church. Let's talk about those words. The first word, grace is from the Greek word, charis.

It means good-will or favor. It's someone giving you something you don't deserve. It's a gift. This is the same word Gabriel uses when he visits Mary and with a request from God to bear the Messiah. "Do not be afraid Mary, you have favor with God." You are the one. You have

God's approval and God's unconditional positive regard. You have this grace and it is a gift, pure and simple. This grace is what we have in

Jesus, Paul says. This favor is ours. "In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their sins against them...For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him WE might become the righteousness of God." It's a gift. To you and to me. To each of us.

And that makes us brothers and sisters. Because we can admit that we need that gift. Brothers and sisters, we know where we stand, and we know we can't do this without some kind of help. We need grace. We

need help. We need healing and reconciliation and redemption. We need

the demons cast out of us like Legion. We need the welcome home just like the prodigal son. We need the forgiveness of our sins like the thief on the cross next to Jesus. You and I, we need that. We need the gift of Jesus taking on our suffering, so that we can take on his glory.

And that second word, love, we need that too. In Greek there are four words for love. There is eros, which means passionate love, like the hoochy smoochy love of an Elvis song. There is philos which is love for good friends. There is storge. Which is love for family and loyalty to relatives. And then there is the word Paul uses: agape. Agape is love that loves beyond itself. It loves friend and enemy. It loves great and small. It is patient and kind. It is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way or rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. It is a divine kind of love. A holy kind of love. The kind of love from a God who will not be God without us. Who loved us from the very beginning and will love us until the very end. That's what love means to us.

In addition to love and grace, we need God's fellowship and communion. The Greek word here is koinonia. It means togetherness. It is the tie that binds, the unity that holds us together. It is the urge to gather and be with one another. We don't just say we are brothers and sisters, we act like it. We show up for each other. We listen to each other. We find ways to be in agreement and work for peace together. Not just for some of us. But for all of us. I have a feeling that there will be a time in the not-so-distant future when we will need each other. When the organization of the church will change and we won't be so independent anymore. We won't be able to make our budgets, or care for our buildings. But people will need us more than ever. And we will need each other. We will need to show them how to be together. That none of us can go it alone. That we WON'T go it alone. That real life is about communion and grace and love. And if we can't get it together here in this life, then the life in the world to come will sure be a shock. Because there will be one church. One baptism. One table. Because there is one resurrection in our one Lord and Savior. In Jesus, we will all be a new

creation together. We will share it all in eternity, so why not get ready for it here? Why not prepare for it now?

Today, brothers and sisters, in this fellowship, in this communion, we have a foretaste of the feast to come. We have a glimpse here of the kingdom of God. In this get-together, powered by grace and love and unity. All of us different, but all of us the same. God bringing us together in our diversity to be part of one body. Overcoming the barriers between us. Helping us be more than just another place where people fight and disagree. More than another group trying to be above others and over others. More than just a creation, but a new creation. Look, people will say. Look how they get together WITH each other and FOR each other. Look how they share a life that points beyond this life. It looks like love. It feels like grace. Could it be that this get-together has really got it together?

Brothers and sisters, we are the church. When we have grace for one another and love for one another and communion with one another.

When we give up trying to make something of ourselves and let God make us into something bigger and more delightful. When we remember

that we are cut from the same cloth, created by the same Creator,
redeemed by the same Lord, sanctified by the same Spirit, then brothers
and sisters, we are God's church. And the kingdom of God has arrived.
In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.