

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church -- Watertown, WI  
Pastor Mark Gartner  
Sermon for Trinity Sunday – May 15<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>, 2008

## **2 Corinthians 13:11-13**

**Finally, brothers, good-bye. Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints send their greetings. May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.**

Dear children of God who long for our heavenly home. Amen

The story is told about a leader in the early Christian church who was struggling to understand the doctrine of the Trinity. (We can certainly appreciate his dilemma. God's revelation of himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is a challenge to anyone's reason.) It is said that after wrestling with the "tri-unity" of God this man took a walk along the ocean. As he walked along he saw a little boy digging a hole in the sand with a seashell. Then he watched the boy begin running to the ocean, filling the shell with water and rushing back to the hole to pour it in. "Little boy, what are you doing?" the man asked. "I'm trying to put the ocean in this hole," the boy replied. Quickly the man realized what he had been doing with God. He was trying to put the ocean in a hole in the sand. He had been trying to fit a great mystery of God into his limited mind. As the boy's goal was impossible so was his.

This morning I do not intend to stand before you and offer you an explanation of the Trinity. That would be like that little boy trying to put the ocean in a hole in the sand. My words couldn't possibly make the truth any less challenging for any of us. Instead let's simply take comfort in God's revelation of himself as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – three persons and yet one God. Contrary to what some critics might say God's revelation of himself as three-in-one is actually meant to clarify his love for us not confuse us.

As we direct our thoughts to the inspired words from the end of the Apostle Paul's second letter to the Corinthians we will be comforted in what he declares about God. Here we see the blessing that comes to us from the three persons of the Trinity. We may not find a clearer understanding about how God can be what he is but we will find comfort in His love for us. May these familiar words lead us to:

### **Sermon Theme: Enjoy The Blessing Of The Triune God**

- 1. Grace from the Son**
- 2. Love from the Father**
- 3. Fellowship from the Holy Spirit**

I don't believe it would be inappropriate to say that this prayer by Paul for the Corinthians was a lot like a hug from a father who has just disciplined his child. In his first letter the Apostle Paul dealt harshly with the members of the church in Corinth. There were divisions in the church, sexual immorality was applauded, there were lawsuits among believers, and a great deal of misunderstanding about marriage and divorce. Their worship services were disorderly, their fellowship time was a disgrace, and even their celebration of the Sacrament was not at all good.

Although things seem to have improved after his first letter Paul had to write this letter we call "2 Corinthians" to deal with those who remained unrepentant. After saying what needed to be said Paul closed his letter with words of comfort. As a wish, and a prayer, and a blessing, Paul wrote, "**May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with**

**you all.”** From the Triune God Paul knew that the Corinthians would receive everything they needed for salvation. Grace – Love -- Fellowship.

## 1. Grace from the Son

When we read this familiar blessing in its context we might be surprised at how Paul simply mentions the Trinity without any explanation. But that is the way the Scriptures treat so many of the wonderful truths about God. The Bible doesn't give us explanations to convince us to believe the truth it simply states the truth and calls on us to believe. "Let there be..." That is the only explanation we have for how God created the world. "I am with you always..." Jesus didn't tell us how he could keep that promise he simply asks us to believe it. "Because I live you also will live..." Nowhere does the Bible give us a scientific explanation of how our mortal remains will live again. It just tells us that we will. In the same way this benediction doesn't give us insight into the inner workings of God. It doesn't explain or defend the fact that God is one and also three persons at the same time.

**"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ."** Grace is one of those abstract words that has to be seen to be understood. The eternal Son of God showed us God's grace by physically bringing it into the world. How would creatures like us understand that the invisible, immortal, almighty God loved us and wanted to make it possible to save us unless he showed us? Just as we are too dense to comprehend Him we are too dense to grasp the love in his heart for us without seeing it. So the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit demonstrated their love for us through the visible work of the Son.

2 Corinthians 8:9 reminds us of this proof of God's undeserved love, **"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich."** In his gospel John wrote about God showing his grace through the second person of the Trinity. **"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."** (John 1:14) There is no explanation in Scripture for how Jesus can be God along with the Father and the Holy Spirit. In these words Paul simply points us to the blessing found in God's revelation of himself as Triune. Through Jesus we are shown and given God's grace.

But how is God's grace a blessing to us on an ongoing basis? Don't we just receive God's undeserved love once? Doesn't he forgive our sins, credit Jesus' holiness to us, and accept us as his dear children forever? Well, yes and no. It is true that we received God's grace when we were brought to faith. He declared us innocent of all sin. He chose to look at us differently than we really are. But we also need a supply of grace every second of our lives. Think of the sins that you have committed just this morning? Did you jump out of bed with eagerness and joy to come and hear God's Word? Have you been kind and loving in your thoughts, words, and actions? Has your worship been heartfelt and sincere? Yes, even on Sunday we need this blessing from the Triune God. We need the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ-- the second person in the awesome Triune God. 1 John 2:1 mentions this continual working of God's grace in Jesus, **"But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense -- Jesus Christ, the Righteous One."** As long as we are on this side of eternity we are always in need of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Far from explaining how the Son can be one with the Father and the Holy Spirit and yet carry out a unique role in our salvation this blessing reminds us of how we received God's underserved love. It comes to us through and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

## 2. Love from the Father

Although not as visible as the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ the love of God carries equal comfort for us. But someone might ask, "How is the love of God different from the grace of his Son?" On one

hand it is not different because God is not divided. What the Father loves the Son loves. With the depth of love that the Son has for someone so too the Father loves that person. And as the Holy Spirit loves so do the Father and the Son. Remember that God is a “triunity.” But the way the love of God is shown varies from person to person in the Trinity. When the Apostle Paul mentioned the “love of God” in this blessing he directed the Corinthians to other aspects of God’s love. Through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ their sins were forgiven and they were dressed for heaven. But because of that grace they also had the love of the Father. Jesus said that anyone who loves him **“will be loved by my Father.”** And he also said, **“...the Father himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God.” (John 16:27)**

“Grandpa walked into the family room and found his little grandson, Jeffy, standing up in his playpen, crying. He looked so pitiful, standing there in his little baseball T-shirt and diaper. His face was red and tear-stained from crying. When Jeffy saw his grandpa, his face lit up in a way that touched the old man’s heart. He immediately reached up his chubby little hands in supplication. “Out Papa, out!” “What grandpa could resist such a plea? Not this one! He walked over to the playpen and reached down to lift his little buddy out of captivity and distress. “Just then, however, Law and Order stepped into the room. “Jeffy’s mother walked out of the kitchen with a dishtowel in her hand and spoke sternly. “No, Jeffy! You are being punished. You have to stay in bed! Leave him right there, Dad.” “Oh, fine. Now what’s a grandpa to do? His grandson’s tears and reaching little hands tugged mightily at his heart- but he didn’t want to interfere with a mother’s discipline either. “He couldn’t stand staying in the same room with the boy, reading his newspaper and pretending to be aloof. Nor could he turn around and walk out the door without feeling like a betrayer to his little pal. What could he do? “Love found a way. “Since Grandpa couldn’t take Jeffy out of the playpen, he climbed in with him. “If you’re in the playpen, Buddy, I’m in the playpen. What’s your sentence? How long are you in for?” And finding a big, jolly grandpa suddenly filling his little prison cell, the little boy found comfort even in his captivity.”

As rebellious children every human is excluded from God’s presence. We cannot go to him. Our sin and his holiness don’t mix. So our loving God says, “Since the children cannot come to me, I will join them. Through the **“grace of the Lord Jesus Christ”** we enjoy **“the love of God”** as he comes to us.

What is the love of the Father that the Apostle Paul wanted to rest on the Corinthians? What is the love of the Father that rests on us and how does it expand the grace we enjoy from the Father’s Son? Here we could point to the blessings of creation. As the Apostle Paul declared to the people in the city of Lystra, **“He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.”** (Acts 14:17) The love of God the Father also brings us protection. Jesus said of his followers that, **“No one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand.”** The love of God gives us the assurance recorded in Romans 8:28, **“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”**

1 Peter 3:12 points us to another aspect of the love of God, **“For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer.”** Because of the Father’s love for us he hears and answers our prayers. At first glance this blessing recorded by Paul may seem to be out of order. Normally we refer to the Father first and then the Son but here it is reversed. **“May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God...be with you all.”** Without trying to separate the Father from the Son the Apostle Paul simply directs us to the awesome nature of God’s love for us. Through the Son we receive grace which in turn brings us the love of the Father in its many aspects.

### 3. Fellowship from the Holy Spirit

The third part of this familiar blessing directs us to the work of the third person in the Trinity. It is the work of the Holy Spirit that brings us fellowship. Through the Holy Spirit, people are brought into a

special relationship with God through faith and also into a special relationship with their fellow believers. Once again we see that the mystery of God being three in-one is not explained. It is just stated as fact. It is stated to comfort us in the knowledge of God's great love for us that reached out to save us.

This time of the year provides one of my favorite ways of illustrating the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Imagine that you have two trees in your backyard. One has slowly shaken free from winter's grip. It has developed leaves and is turning green again. The other tree still looks like it did all winter. There are no signs of life on it. What happened in the one tree that didn't happen in the other. Let's assume that both trees got the same sunlight, the same amount of water, and they are planted in the same kind of soil. No disease nor damage has afflicted the tree that appears lifeless. The missing element is the sap inside the tree. It is the sap that brings life to a tree in the springtime. That liquid carries the nutrients from the soil and allows the tree to produce leaves and appear alive again.

In a similar way the Bible says that the Holy Spirit brings the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God to us. Without the Holy Spirit we would not have any fellowship with the Father or the Son and have all that they give us. In his letter to Titus the Apostle Paul wrote about this work of the Holy Spirit, **"But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit."** (Titus 3:4-5) Ephesians 4:18 tells us that we **"have access to the Father"** by the Holy Spirit. 1 Peter 1:2 tells us that we have fellowship with God **"through the sanctifying work of the Spirit."**

The final part of the blessing is the fellowship we enjoy with fellow Christians through the work of the Holy Spirit. Once the Holy Spirit brings us to faith he compels us to worship with other believers. He leads us to set aside our personal preferences and pride for the good of the Kingdom. Through the truth of the Scriptures he leads us to a unity in the faith. There are many illustrations for the Trinity. ( three parts of a clover, interlocking rings, water in three forms, triangle, three triangles, etc)... These will always fail to portray the Trinity correctly because it can't be explained. Yes, they may help us but they harm us if they take us away from the main point about God's revelation of himself. It is still like trying to pour the ocean into a whole in the sand. It is for our comfort! Let's simply enjoy the blessing of the Triune God. **"May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."** Amen