

Sermon for Trinity Church, Bend      Trinity Sunday, 2017

"I urge you brothers and sisters to make a habit of practicing peace, and the God of agape love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you."

The Corinthian church Paul founded gave him headaches and hassles for years. Early in the church's history, the Corinthians, did what the Greek society at large did; they divided their community according to social status. The wealthy and influential sit up here, the poor down there. The well to do received wine at communion, the poor just water. Some had good food to eat, some just bread. Paul deplored those divisions and urged the Corinthians to live another way. He told the Corinthian church, "We don't live to promote ourselves, we live to encourage the faith of others." As you can sense, anyone who likes to talk about how great the church used to be hasn't really read the New Testament! But Paul has an answer to the Corinthian challenge, a Gospel answer, for the discord we hear today. It's as simple as this--we must make a habit of Godly peace among ourselves.

You may have noticed that the translation of Second Corinthians I used at the beginning of the sermon doesn't match that of the bulletin. There's a simple reason for that—it's my translation. Paul frequently used terms that are uncommon in today's world and so translators take care to avoid those terms. But I want to take this part of Paul's letter head on. Paul liked to talk in terms of habits or virtues as the means to grow strong in our Christian way of life. He wants us to understand that being a Christian isn't just a matter of "one and done" conversion. Instead, Paul wants us to know that we can get better in our Christian life, that we can make faith a habit, a virtue that grows. If we can get better at chess, bowling and bicycles, we can get better in our life of faith.

Talk about habits and virtues has fallen on hard times. True, a couple of pundits have taken up the cause of virtue. But it's the case that we tend to spend far more time talking about what we're "against" rather than what we live for. We can be mad as can be about something but we shouldn't want to make that anger our life. Instead we want to live FOR something, for family and friends, for hope and knowledge, for love and faith. Paul believes our faith can grow, and that the way to growth is through cultivating Christian habits. And chief among those habits, we need to live for the habit of peace.

You may think I'm channeling the Sixties, talking about peace as I am. That sounds like the old idealistic peace of decades' past, of an idealism that brought no

peace. But know this, peace is not a hopeless, impossible ideal. Instead, peace, the peace among people that's mutual and affirms one another's value, the peace that feeds our eternal hope, is more real than the divisions of our day. Peace is so real many of us believe it is the character of God.

How can peace be more real than the divisions we all suffer? Paul writes about how we can accept God's peace in his summary today. He urges the Corinthians to make a habit of peace by practicing 'agape love' among themselves. By now, you likely have heard many a preacher talk about at least three different kinds of love in the New Testament. But today they bear repeating. Erotic love, a fundamental bond, is the love that attracts us physically to other people. Filial love, brotherly and sisterly love, is the love we feel for people like friends and family, colleagues and neighbors. These loves feed the one who loves as much as they feed the beloved. The lover gains as much from these two loves as the beloved. But there's a kind of love, a love so radical and exceptional that it can only come from God. It's the love that's all about the other person, about their fears and their cares. That love is agape love, the love that puts the interests and needs of others before our own.

English doesn't reveal the number in pronouns the way other languages sometimes do. The English "you" can be either singular or plural. But here in Paul's letters we need to remember that when Paul uses the pronoun "you," just as Jesus used it, he almost always is referring to the corporate "you," the community "you," the all of you, "you."

Why's that so important? Because there's a simple and straightforward antidote to the corrosive impulses of self-centeredness, to valuing ourselves over all others. If we allow ourselves to be used by those impulses, we can only find violence. How do we avoid that? By practicing peace, by taking up the example of our God and making a habit of agape love.

Where does that agape love come from? It comes from God in three persons, the Holy Trinity. I can say that the character of God, the bond of God, the habit of God among the Three Persons is peaceful, agape love. How do I know it? Because that's the nature of the relationship among the three aspects of the Trinity, the Creator, Redeemer and Teacher, God, Jesus and Holy Spirit. That relationship, the most real of all relationships, is the source of agape love.

Today we celebrate our paternal feast, the feast of the Trinity or Trinity Sunday. We need to tread carefully here. There's a grave danger when we talk about the Trinity. If we think we can talk about the Trinity as distinct elements

of God, Son and Holy Spirit, we have missed the point. The point of the Trinity is not the individual elements. The point of the Trinity is relationship. Trinity and relationship are one in the same thing. When the three aspects of God speak of one another, they speak with appreciation, affirmation and mutual support. We never hear Jesus make an aside such as, "You know, if the Holy Spirit just pulled its weight, the world would be better off." The relationship among the Three is nothing less than agape love, the love that puts the interests of others before ourselves, the love that's natural to God.

The early church struggled with explaining this mutuality and came up with the term, "Perichoresis." Try that, perichoresis; trips off the tongue, doesn't it? Perichoresis is Greek for dance, where the three aspects of God dance together in infinite harmony and immeasurable peace. The three live as one because of the dance of agape love.

You may well be thinking, well that's great for God, Jeff, but what about us? I think we can find that peace as well. I think we can, even in our lifetime, put an end to violence, self-centeredness and the lust for power. We don't need to struggle to be defined by what we are against. We only need to be for love, for agape love, as God loves. Why shouldn't that start here? Why not here at Trinity on this our feast day? Why shouldn't we take up Paul's urgent call, to make a habit of peaceful love with all creation. Amen.

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