**2 Corinthians 13:11-14** June 11, 2017

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Trinity Sunday (Pentecost 1)

**Leaving with a Smile on Your Face**

Dear Friends in Christ,

It is fabulous how easy it is these days to communicate with people far far away. Somebody you went to school with decades ago is in Germany? You can walk out of this church and have a conversation with them out on the sidewalk. Maybe even at no cost to either of you!

Your spouse or your child is on a journey? You don’t have to wait till they get where they’re going to hear about their journey. In fact, you may get more text message updates than you really care to hear.

Gone are the old days when you went on a family vacation for two weeks and no one knew whether you were having the time of your life, stuck in Truth or Consequences, New Mexico with a blown transmission, or eaten by a bear in Yellowstone. We just had to wait two weeks to find out—or to begin looking.

Back then, when you knew you wouldn’t see people for days or weeks or months, you knew that the last things you said were really important. So when you said good-bye you made sure you reminded them of the important stuff.

Remember that as I read to you the sermon text. These are Paul’s last words to the Christians at Corinth. These are the words they will have ringing in their ears for a long time whenever they remember Pastor Paul:

*2 Corinthians 13:11 Finally, brothers, good-by. 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. 12Greet one another with a holy kiss. 13All the saints send their greetings.*

*14May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*

When Paul sent this letter he had no cell phone, landline or even postal system. By the Holy Spirit’s guidance, he wrote this letter. Then he handed it to a personal assistant who then traveled 300 miles the old fashioned way, to deliver it by hand. At the other end, the Corinthian Christians would gather and someone would read the letter. They would think about it and talk about it. But the closing words are the important ones.

Think about your own experience. Think of a dear relative who has passed away: a parent, a grandparent, a sibling or close cousin. Do you remember your last conversation? Very likely you do. In fact, very likely your last conversation colors all of your memories. If you shared many laughs over the years, but you parted with a bitter argument, the years of laughter are poisoned by those closing seconds of conflict.

It works the other way, too. There was a woman who had not talked to her own mother and a couple of her siblings for over a decade. As she lived with her terminal illness, it affected her more and more – thinking of the broken relationships, and how they argued the last time they saw each other. Whenever she thought of them, it reduced her to tears. And then, in her last weeks, her mother and brother came to visit. They were reconciled. Now memories brought smiles instead of tears.

The last thing you say to someone, it matters. It matters a lot.

**Paul’s Second Last Words – Correction**

Paul was writing a letter to these Corinthians who were hundreds of miles away and whom he wouldn’t have a chance to see in person till who-knows-when. His letter, by necessity had a lot of negatives because they were such a wayward and argumentative bunch of people. He loved them, but their behavior prevented him from speaking warm and encouraging words because so much of what they were doing was unacceptable to God. Out of love and concern he had to write hard words. But how do you close a letter like that—to people you love, but whom you must correct?

Should Paul say, “All those harsh words, well, I didn’t really mean it”? You don’t help a motorist going the wrong way down a one-way street by giving them the thumbs up, “Different strokes for different folks!” That doesn’t help anyone. You have to shout at them, correct them. But how do you make it known that you’re not angry; you just want to help?

We might think of the closing words of 2 Corinthians as a kind of pep rally cheer, ***“Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace.”*** But actually Paul was harping on a group of people who had been cliquish and argumentative. He was summarizing and repeating what he had said over the previous pages and chapters. It was one last poke, hoping that they will remember to act like Christians, like people redeemed by Christ: ***“Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace.”*** Even Paul’s directive, ***“Greet one another with a holy kiss,”*** was really meant to war against the cliques they formed. It’s pretty hard to give someone a kiss on the cheek if you despise them.

All these directives from Paul were criticisms, reminders that they had to war against their sinful natures.

Being on the receiving end of criticism is tough. Most of us are actually very sensitive to criticism. When someone criticizes us, even when they do it constructively, this is what we hear: “I don’t like you.” Right? Isn’t that what you feel in your heart? Even when you know the person likes you and wants the best for you, criticism is hard to take. Paul knew that at least some of the Corinthians would take it hard. So while Paul’s second last words we were words of correction, he uses his very last words, the last words of his letter to them, to assure them of his good will.

**Paul’s Last Words – A Blessing**

He pronounces a blessing on them, God’s blessing, ***“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”***

When a cherished grandparent has to reel in a youngster, the youngster can take it kind of hard. And so the grandparent will try to affirm that grandchild. In a similar but better way Paul tells them, “I had to say what I said, but it doesn’t mean I love you any less. In fact, it is because I am concerned you that I said that. Now look beyond me and remember that you have a special place in God’s heart.”

**Blessings in the Name of the Triune God**

But there is something else here, over and above this assurance, that we need to understand on this Trinity Sunday. You probably noticed it in verse 14: ***“The grace of [who?], and the love of [who?], and the fellowship of [who?] be with you all.”*** The Apostle Paul speaks of the Triune God. We confess this Trinity every week in our Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds, and once a year (as we will do today) in the Athanasian Creed.

When we talk about the Triune God, or call him The Trinity, what we are talking about is the truth that God has revealed himself as one God. Yet he has also revealed himself as three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Now notice: We don’t say, three *people*, because the Trinity is not like three people, three individuals. Saying “three people” would deny their complete interrelationship. While the Bible describes three persons in God, the Bible always says there is one God. This relationship within the Trinity is like no relationship in this created universe. And because we have no parallel, there is no way we can fully understand it. This is where child-like faith comes in. Like obedient children, we simply say, “If you, God, have revealed yourself in this way, then I believe it. And even if the world mocks and insults me for it, I will confess it. This is who you have told me you are. And that is all I need to know.” Three persons in one God; the Trinity.

When Paul blessed the Corinthians in the name of the Triune God, he tells us the special work of each person of the Trinity.

He begins with the ***“grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.”*** The grace of the Lord Jesus is the work the second person of the Trinity did when he took on human flesh, was born and named Jesus of Nazareth. He, though true God, took on the form of us sinful people and lived and died to pay for our sins. We call it “grace.” Not “grace” as in “graceful” like a ballerina, but closer to “gracious,” like when you meet someone much greater than you, yet who treats you like you are on an equal footing. That was the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though infinitely greater than us, he gave up all that was his so that he could have us with him for eternity.

What a comfort this is to us when we stand there like the Corinthians. What do I mean by that? Do you remember the Corinthians? The Apostle Paul had to confront them with their sins: sins they had fallen into in the past, sins they continued to fall into. When we are day after day confronted with the sins we commit, when we want to beat ourselves up and curse ourselves for doing the horrible selfish things we do, when we feel the condemnation of our sins—how good it is to hear someone tell us, ***“The* *grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you!”***

Paul talks of another person of the Trinity when he speaks of ***“the love of God.”*** In case you are wondering about that, if you look around in the New Testament, when the NT speaks of “God”, it is usually talking of God the Father. (cf. John 8:54, 2 Cor 1:2.)

But the important thing here is the love of God the Father. The plan of salvation is his. The Father is the one who chose us from eternity. He is the one who looked at a planet full of people, sinners destined for hell, and sent the Son to die for us.

Then Paul speaks of the ***“fellowship of the Holy Spirit.”*** The Holy Spirit is the one who creates faith in us. He communicates the plan of the Father and the loving work of the Son to us. He gives us the knowledge, and he fosters the trust. We call that faith. When the Holy Spirit creates faith in the Christian, he or she has fellowship with God.

Notice, Paul didn’t say, “I hope the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ will be with you.” He didn’t say, “When you clean up your act a little better the love of God the Father will be with you.” He didn’t say, “The fellowship of the Holy Spirit could, under the rights circumstances be with you.” He was speaking to Christians who confessed Jesus as their Savior. And for every single believer, though we in our weakness fall into sins, can turn in our pangs and worries of conscience and know that the grace, love and fellowship of the Triune God is truly with us.

So even while the second last words Paul said to the Corinthians were difficult, he made sure that his *last* words revealed the true feelings of his—and God’s—heart. By closing with this blessing in the name of the Triune God, he encourages them saying, “Even though you have sins to repent of, things to work on, remember that God loves you. God the Father has been and is loving, God the Son has been and is gracious, God the Holy Spirit has united and continues to unite you with him.”

That is why we end every single worship service with a blessing. Because while you may have heard many things today, and perhaps even said “Ouch!” once or twice the Law of God’s Word struck home, the message God wants ringing in your ears, the words he wants to define his relationship with you are these Gospel words: ***“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”*** Amen.