

Triune Blessings

This is the day of the Christian year that we call Trinity Sunday. Did you know that there are some pastors who don't like to preach on Trinity Sunday? That may be because it can be a bit intimidating. Down through the centuries, theologians have spilled a sea of ink attempting to explain and expound on the doctrine of the Trinity.

Now if you're like most congregations, as soon as you hear that word *doctrine* come out of the preacher's mouth, your eyes start glazing over. So before you all begin nodding off in your pews, let me reassure you right up front that the Trinity is not a conundrum to be solved. Or a riddle to be figured out. Or an exam question that has to be answered correctly before you can enter the kingdom of heaven.

Neither does the Trinity fit into any of those well-meaning analogies you may have heard in children's messages over the years. Some people show the kids a shamrock and tell them how the Trinity is like that shamrock. Some compare the Trinity to an egg, which consists of yolk, white, and shell. Still others talk

about the Trinity in terms of ice, water, and steam—the same thing, but in frozen, liquid, and gaseous states. But all these comparisons that liken the Triune God we worship and serve to material substances created by God’s very self? Somehow they just don’t seem to work too well.

Because no matter how hard we try, we just can’t wrap our finite human minds around this infinite, eternal God who has created us. This God who is incarnate in Jesus Christ. This God who is ever-present to us in the Holy Spirit. Of all the great mysteries of our Christian faith, none is deeper than the Trinity. Although the word *Trinity* doesn’t appear in sacred Scripture, biblical writers attest to the abiding presence and the mighty works of the one God who is Father, who is Son, who is Holy Spirit.

From the beginning to the end of today’s reading from his Letter to the Romans, Paul affirms this Triune God and lists a trio of blessings that you and I have received from God’s hand. Paul wants us to understand these not as blessings we’ll receive at some future time, but as blessings already bestowed. Blessings that already are ours!

The first of these is peace. Peace with God. This is a peace that truly does surpass our understanding.

For there has existed an incomprehensible distance between God and us human creatures. A distance that fills the psalmist with wonder and inspires the prayer he sings. Have you stood on the shoreline and considered the vastness of the ocean? Have you gazed at night into the canopy of heaven pricked with stars uncountable? Have you witnessed ridge after faraway ridge of lofty mountains gradually fading into the tender blue haze of distance?

If you have, you've probably been stricken with a sense of your own finitude. You've been confronted with the overarching power and majesty of the Creator—and with the glory of the creation. You've caught a glimpse of the amazing greatness of God. And, over against that greatness, been humbled by the insignificance of your own small self. Of your own self, which you confess to be frail, fragile and flawed.

Were there ever those in more profound need than we, in our human condition? Were there ever those who needed more desperately to be reconciled with God? We have separated

ourselves from God and failed to care faithfully for God's good creation.

That's why Paul's words should astonish us and fill us with gladness and gratitude. This is Paul's gospel.

This is Paul's good news, my brothers and sisters: we have *already* been reconciled with God! *God* has accomplished this reconciliation, and not we ourselves. We have been pardoned. We have been justified. We have been made right with God. This God who has stooped down to us and has made it possible for us to live with God in peace.

The blessing of peace. Peace that the world can't give. Peace whose only Source is God. This God of peace is also a God of justice. So in the United Methodist Church, this is a special Sunday known as Peace with Justice. The two go hand in hand—and the Church calls you and me to work for both. There can be no authentic peace without justice. For God despises injustice.

Surely this God was with the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., when he penned a letter from Birmingham City Jail. When he wrote that “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

And surely this God was with the apostle Paul, another Christian who composes letters in a prison cell. Paul: another believer who knows something about injustice. Paul, another follower of Jesus Christ.

Christ who opens his arms wide and forgives you and me. There's nothing we could ever do to *earn* his forgiveness. We don't deserve it. That's why it's called grace! Greater than all our sin is the grace of Jesus Christ. And this blessing, too, is ours! Ours through him who, after we fall, picks us up and sets our feet in a place called grace. This grace in which we stand.

You've been standing in grace, walking in grace, from your very beginning. This grace that comes *before* your faith. You and I weren't *born* with faith. Faith is a *gift* that makes it possible for you to turn around and respond to the grace you've received. The grace of Jesus Christ.

Who suffered. Who knows what it is to suffer. My brothers and sisters, suffering is not from God. God does not send suffering. God has sent Christ Jesus, the One who knows when we suffer. In the suffering that comes to each of us, Christ is with us.

And knowing that he's with us in suffering produces endurance. Produces patience. When we remember the story of Job, we reflect on great suffering and great patience.

But you know, we live in a society that doesn't set much store by the quality of patience. Ours is a culture that's all about instant gratification. We want what we want when we want it. We think of ourselves as managers of time. We think of ourselves as being in control of time.

"I heard recently about a type-A kind of guy who prided himself on being exceedingly punctual. He followed a very precise regimen every morning. His alarm went off at 6:30 a.m. He rose quickly, shaved, showered, ate his breakfast, brushed his teeth, picked up his briefcase, got into his car, rode the ferry across to the downtown business district, got off the ferry, walked briskly to his building, marched to the elevator, rode to the seventeenth floor, hung up his coat, opened his briefcase, spread out his papers on his desk, and sat down in his chair at exactly 8:00 o'clock. Not 7:59. Not 8:01. Always at precisely 8:00 a.m.

He followed this same routine without variation for eight years. Until one morning, his alarm didn't go off. And he over-

slept fifteen minutes. When he did awake, he was panic-stricken. He rushed through his shower, nicked himself when he shaved, gulped down his breakfast, only halfway brushed his teeth, grabbed up his briefcase, jumped into his car, sped to the ferry landing, jumped out of his car, and looked for the ferry. There it was, out in the water a few feet from the dock. He said to himself, *I think I can make it*, and he ran down the dock toward the ferry at full speed. Reaching the end of the pier, he took an enormous leap out over the water and miraculously landed with a loud *thud* on the deck of the ferry. The captain rushed down to make sure he was all right.

The captain said: ‘Man, that was a tremendous leap. But if you would have just waited another minute, we would have reached the dock, and you could have *walked* on.’”

Eventually, we learn to let go of trying to control and manipulate time. Eventually, we learn to let go of our hurried, fervent strivings to multi-task. To accomplish. To accumulate. We learn patience.

And Paul wants you and me to understand that out of enduring, out of patient waiting, springs character. Now in this twenty-first century, some regard *character* as kind of an

outdated concept. But has character ever mattered more than it does in today's world? *You* know what character means. Having convictions. Being true to them. Character means integrity. Character means humility. Character means gratitude. Character means constancy. Character means kindness.

Character is the good soil, the fertile soil out of which hope grows. Of course, the word *hope* has more than one connotation. If I say something like, "I hope the Carolina Panthers win the Super Bowl," what that really means is I realize that maybe what I hope for will actually happen, and maybe it won't.

But the biblical meaning of hope is radically different. This hope is sure and certain. This hope stands on tiptoe, looking into the future with joyful anticipation. In confident expectation. Because *this* hope never disappoints! With this hope, you can be absolutely positive that you won't be disappointed. With this hope, you rejoice.

For you have the assurance that God the Spirit has opened your heart and filled it to overflowing with God's love. Once again, you are blessed! You are God's beloved. God loves you more than you can possibly imagine. No one can take this measureless love away from you. Nothing in the world can take

this love away from you. For you have received the gift of the Holy Spirit. Always present with you. Always pouring out the love of God in Christ Jesus.

And inviting you to share in the intimate communion among the Persons of this Holy Trinity whose name and whose glory we praise and celebrate. Persons who dwell in the fullness, in the depths, in the unity of one another. For this God—who creates, who redeems, who sanctifies—is a God of relationship. Who has made you and me to be in relationship with one another and with God. In whom is your life. A life in community—patterned after the community of our God who is One in Three and Three in One. Who draws you close and enfolds you into the ever-moving, ever-flowing, eternally loving circle of the Triune God, in whom—today, tomorrow, and forever—you are truly blessed. In order that you may be a blessing!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.