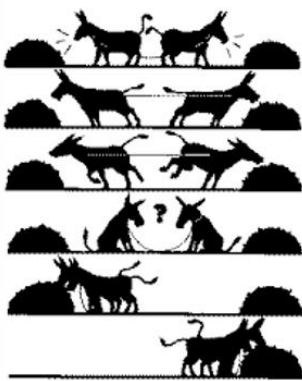


The Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all!

Sermon for Trinity Sunday

Sermon Text: 2 Corinthians 13:11-14



Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, 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. ¹³All the saints greet you. ¹⁴The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

People would like to decide for themselves how they live and which decisions they want to make for their lives. However, if someone gets too close or even becomes aggressive and wants to control or manipulate someone else's life, we react angrily and separate ourselves from them, disillusioned. Yet we don't want to live alone but to share our lives with others. We want to share our joys and sorrows and need others to do this with us. However, where more people live together, there are differing opinions that can lead to insurmountable divisions which destroy community because people can't agree with one another. An example of this is conflict within a congregation that gets out of control due to mutual insults and exclusion. At first it's about something small, like the style of music during worship. Some wanted more contemporary music and others wanted more traditional. But that was just the beginning. New points of conflict kept appearing: some wanted a completely different style of worship, others preferred various musical instruments, and still others wished for a different preaching style. Ultimately, the conflict became so intense that it was almost unbearable. Some who were upset left the church, possibly forever.

Paul had a similar conflict with the congregation in Corinth. The conflict was personal and hurtful so that reconciliation was no longer a possibility. Then came this greeting: "agree with one another, live in peace... greet one another with a holy kiss." Can you imagine it? After a difficult conflict, you suddenly see your brother or sister at your side and you are now supposed to greet them with a kiss? This personal greeting with a kiss was a sign of the Christians at that time. It conveyed to others that these people belonged together. It was an expression of closeness and love. But what if this closeness and love are not present? What if the differences are so great that it is impossible to even look at the other person, let alone to kiss them? I don't think that Paul means we could erase all differences and disputes with a kiss. That would be unnatural and cruel. With this short greeting, Paul is not calling for difficulties to be swept under the rug. Instead, he calls on us to engage with each other, to talk to each other, to seek common goals, and to find peace. With these words, Paul recalls the conflicts of the past and calls on us to speak about them and work on them. Conflicts are a part of our life together. You can't live without conflict of some kind. Even Christians don't live in heaven yet and can't avoid conflict. We are still a part of this world and share all the problems that other people in this world have. Our lives as Christians don't steadily get better and better, rather, the path of a Christian and the Church is paved with hurts, disappointments, and conflict. Whoever is in such a conflict first only sees the thing that hurts or upsets them. Even if it is something small, it becomes so great that it takes up your whole life and, like a cancer, destroys all relationships. That is a hopeless situation. Paul's aim is to avoid such a total breakdown at all costs.

But how can you produce reconciliation when the relationship is broken? I'd like to explain this with a short story: In the sermon picture, we see how a conflict begins and how it can be resolved. First, we see two donkeys. Each of these donkeys has a pile of food in front of them. Both make an effort to reach the pile of food before them. But that doesn't work because the donkeys hold each other back from their own pile of food. (In terms of a congregation: one donkey wants contemporary music; the other donkey wants traditional music. The two desires are contrary to each other and can't be brought together). What makes life together harder for these two donkeys is the fact that they are tied together. If they were independent of one another,

they could do whatever their hearts desired. But now they are tied together and pursue different goals which makes life difficult for them. Both donkeys think they could get out of their predicaments by overpowering the other to reach their goal. But that doesn't work as long as both are pulling in opposite directions at the same time. I often see this exact same thing happen. It doesn't matter what the conflict is about, everyone thinks they are the only one who is right. People fight with one another until they are completely out of energy to cope with the situation. Many people are unfortunately at this precise point: completely drained because they exhausted themselves in a conflict with one another. And in the end, no one has reached their goal. Both donkeys in our picture do this at first. But then they are hopefully like Paul's church members in Corinth. Suddenly, the one donkey sees not just his own goal, but also the other donkey to whom he is tied. You not only see each other, but you also begin to talk to each other. Instead of just seeing your own side of things, you meet in the middle. In the picture of the two donkeys, the same thing happens. The donkeys meet in the middle and make an amazing discovery: they both strive for the same goal, even when this goal at first goes in the opposite direction. As the donkeys discover that they actually want the same thing, it's only a small step to a real compromise which consists of both pursuing the goal of one donkey first and then the goal of the other. In the end, it's surprising to discover that the food of the one donkey tastes just as good as the food of the other donkey!

Paul's advice to the Corinthians is exactly this. He wants to draw our attention to the big picture. He does this by showing the way to the Triune God. The confession to this Triune God is the midpoint of our worship service today. This Triune God is the unparalleled fellowship that surpasses everything. In the Triune God, differences, independence, and fellowship come together as in no other relationship. On the one hand there is the closest possible fellowship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that is conceivable: one goal, one love, perfect trust in one another. And on the other hand, three different persons: the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Father, the Holy Spirit is not the Son nor the Father. For all their unity, they are distinct and independent persons. Fellowship and autonomy come together here as in no other relationship.

By pointing to this God during a conflict situation, Paul shows how practical and part of our lives the Triune God is for us Christians. When we have a conflict among one another, we need a foundation upon which we can stand. When two argue, they need a third person to hold their hand. God is the one who is more than everything and who gives you His hand, just as He gives His helping hand to your brother or sister. Jesus Christ is the open door to this living God by forgiving our sins. That's why we can also forgive the sins of our neighbors. And the Holy Spirit who dwells among us, creates fellowship and love among us. He not only connects us with God, but He also connects us to our neighbors and to the whole Church throughout the world.

Paul tells us all this not only as an important catalyst that we should now all make an effort and be one just like the Triune God. Paul doesn't say: "Suck it up and be one like the Trinity!" No, what Paul says here is essentially a powerful promise! He literally pronounces the name of the Triune God as a blessing over the Church. That is more than just a reflection. It's also more than just an example that we can and should now follow. The living presence of God is transferred from one person to another. In our baptism, we are baptized in the name of the Triune God. In this situation, Paul refers to this name, which is upon us all through our baptism. Paul therefore makes it clear that we all live from one source and from one power. When he calls on us to be of one mind or to greet one another with a holy kiss, these are not just empty words, but words that are only effective among us through the power of the Triune God. There will certainly always be differences among Christians. There are different ways of thinking, different cultures, and even various languages in a worship service. But what unites us is the living God to whom we all belong and who blesses us. In awareness of this God who blesses us in all our diversity, I say: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." Amen.