

we could have imagined: the vision of himself as the Creator of the universe who, ultimately, is on our side. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deut. 6:4).

And now let us say together, "I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth . . ."

AMEN.

Trinity Sunday, May 30, 1999

The Trinity in the Last Ditch

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The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

(2 COR. 13:14)

Imagine for a moment that you are the parent of a child, or young person, who appears to be on the verge of destroying himself, or herself. Maybe he is hooked on drugs and failing in school, maybe she is anorexic and starving herself, maybe he has run away from home. You are like most parents — you would do anything, anything at all, to reverse the situation. You would spend huge amounts of money for professional help; you would fly across the country; you would pay a ransom, mortgage the house, go without sleep, neglect your own health, jeopardize your standing in the community, throw yourself on the mercy of anyone you thought might intervene. You are desperate. You would make a complete fool of yourself if you thought it might get your child's attention.

This is the position in which the Apostle Paul finds himself at the end of his second letter to the Christians in Corinth. The Corinthian church has gone completely off the rails and, furthermore, is on the verge of rejecting him as their leader and teacher. He is planning a trip to Corinth, but trips in those days took months, and he knows that by the time he gets there it might be too late. In desper-

ation he writes an impassioned, erratic letter to the congregation, trying first one tack and then another. The last four chapters of Second Corinthians form the most agonized portion of the New Testament. One commentator called it almost too painful to read. It is crabbed, tumultuous, disjointed, wildly uneven.¹ If I came across a letter like this written by a person I loved, I might delete parts of it, because I wouldn't want the author to look bad for posterity. Indeed, it is rather surprising that some of these chapters were saved by the church. Very little of 2 Corinthians appears in our lectionary, and it is rarely taught in its entirety.

So, frankly, it is amazing to find chapter 13 turning up in the lectionary for Trinity Sunday, one of the glory days of the Christian year. It seems a most peculiar choice. I would be curious to know if any of you noticed, as it was read, that it has a very strange tone, very unlike the Paul that many of us know and some of us love. "Examine yourselves to see whether you are holding to your faith. Test yourselves. Mend your ways." We don't think of Paul barking orders like this. It sounds uncharacteristically brusque and didactic. Paul of all people knows that commands of this sort are problematic, for as he wrote to the church in Rome, "the very commandment which promised life proved to be death to me" (Rom. 7:10). What's actually going on, however, is that he is trying first one approach and then another. Appeals to the Corinthians' better nature alternate with sarcasm: "Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you? — unless indeed you fail to meet the test." He continues, "We seem to have failed." By "we" he means "we apostles"; the Corinthians have turned away to "false apostles . . . disguising themselves as apostles of Christ" (2 Cor. 11:13). The Corinthians are dazzled by these interlopers, calling them "super-apostles"; they are leaders who have more charisma and glamor than Paul.² Like a parent agonizing because a child has fallen in with a fast crowd, Paul will try almost any argument to see if he can somehow rebuild trust and affection. Some of what he says doesn't even seem to make sense; as he dictates the letter, he jumps from one point to another, interrupting himself with exclamations about his own foolishness. This portion of 2 Corinthians is a helter-skelter, last-ditch effort to bring the Co-

rinthian church back into the fold. He even does the thing he hates most of all and seeks to avoid at all costs — he is driven to defend himself by touting his own credentials as an apostle, even though he recognizes that in doing so he is "speaking as a fool" (11:21).

So what in the world does all this have to do with Trinity Sunday? Well, theoretically, this lesson was chosen for today because of the benediction at the end. When Paul signs off, he does so with a Trinitarian formula that is well known to us all: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (13:14). This threefold blessing is the reason for the text being read on this day. However, the passage still seems like a poor selection. The blessing seems tacked on almost as an afterthought. There are several other passages from the Epistles that would have been happier choices. How can we find something profitable in this reading when the surrounding context is so full of frustration and pain?

Sometimes it is more rewarding to struggle with problem passages than it is to try to find something new in the best-beloved ones. Over and over preachers have learned that wrestling with the text, like Jacob's wrestling with the angel, brings an unexpected blessing. Let us see where Paul's agonized letter takes us.

We're going to have to go back a few verses. Look at 13:3: "You desire proof that Christ is speaking in me," Paul says. Apparently the Corinthians, with a high degree of spiritual arrogance, are now questioning the credentials of their own founder! If that happened to me, I think I would have washed my hands of the ingrates and transferred my loving attention to some other church where I would be appreciated. But you see, Paul does not do that. He is hanging tough. He *will not* let them go. He is with them to the last ditch. He is willing to forego his own reputation in order to win them back. The super-apostles have apparently referred to Paul as weak. This seems unlikely to us, but we know from other places in the Corinthian correspondence that Paul was not an electrifying personality.³ He was not one of those professors that gets voted most popular year after year. I remember a situation similar to this in my former parish. We had a layman in the congregation who of-

ten taught our large Bible study group. He later went on to become a New Testament scholar of world reputation. His Bible studies were by far more substantive and more artful than anyone else's, but many people in our congregation preferred other teachers who told jokes, were less subtle, and had a more scintillating style. In comparison to the super-apostles, Paul probably did seem lacking in razzle-dazzle. What Paul had, though, in full measure, was apostolic devotion. He was ready to die for his churches. Even more difficult than dying, he was ready to suffer for them. In this way he was truly conformed to Christ, his crucified Lord. Listen to this: "[Christ] is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful in you. For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we [true apostles] are weak in him, but in dealing with you we shall live with him by the power of God" (13:3-4).

Now let us return to Paul's benediction at the end of his painful letter. "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." At first glance it sounds a bit tired and formulaic to us, because we have heard it so many hundreds of times. However, we need to compare this benediction at the end of 2 Corinthians with those in his other letters. The one that we read today is the longest, richest, and fullest of all his valedictory blessings.⁴ Usually he says, "The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you" (1 Cor. 16:23). Even to his best-beloved Philippians he says simply "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit" (Phil. 4:23). Now, therefore, we are ready to see that Paul was not being perfunctory after all. The church that was breaking his heart is the one that gets the full Trinitarian blessing.⁵

Here we begin to move into the heart of the Trinity. We spoke yesterday about the unique nature of our three-personal God as self-giving love. That is what it means to believe in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The inmost being of God is a dynamic interrelatedness that pours itself out for the other without ceasing. It is not dependent on the worthiness of the other, or the response of the other, or the tractability of the other. God's love spends itself to the very last drop of the blood of the Son. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians in

one of his previous letters, the love of God "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Cor. 13:7).

And so now I ask you to reflect on your own life. Think about those people who have borne with you. Think of that person, or those people, who have loved you and stuck with you in spite of everything. Think of that person, or those people, who did not seem to care about themselves at all as they poured all their resources into you, even if you were ungrateful and unresponsive. Think of how, when you were at your very worst, there was someone who cared about you in spite of it all, someone who would not let you go, someone who was willing to make a fool of himself or herself if only it would help you. For many of us, this was our parents, but not for all of us; some of us will have had parents who failed us. Some of you will think of an aunt, a brother, a grandmother, a teacher, a youth leader, a spouse. That person has conveyed to you a measure of the love of God in three persons. It is only a small measure, for the love of one human being for another is only a hint of the perfect love of God, but it is the most important hint that we have in this fallen world. Human love is a glimmer of the full radiance of God's love. As the Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father and the Holy Spirit pours forth from that love, so God loves you. This is our God, of whom the Psalmist says,

Whither shall I go from thy spirit?

or whither shall I flee from thy presence?

If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there:

if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there also.

If I take the wings of the morning,

and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea;

Even there shall thy hand lead me,

and thy right hand shall hold me fast. (Psalm 139:7-10)

And so, dear people of God, you have drawn together this morning to offer worship and praise not to a vaguely imagined Something but to the Someone who is eternal and inexhaustible, yet personal, relational, and intimately loving, the God who pursues us

The Nature of God

even beyond the grave with his Resurrection power. The God whom we adore on Trinity Sunday is the Three-Personed God whose own inner core of being is love, and whose nature it is to give that love to his creatures without restraint, without measure, without calculation, without ceasing. As the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity says himself in today's Gospel, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (Matt. 28:20). This is no dry scholarly doctrine that we celebrate today. Nor is this a vague, romanticized version of human love. This is the love that upholds the universe, the love that has become incarnate in history through Jesus Christ, the love that persists in breaking through our resistance, the love that is with us even into the last ditch of our messed-up lives. And so I may leave you today with renewed confidence and trust in our God who is truly God, invoking with renewed faith the apostolic blessing, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."

AMEN.