

“Love Incarnate”

*A Homily Written by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver
for First Congregational Church of Lebanon
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2 Corinthians 13:11-13

¹¹Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, 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. All the saints greet you.

¹³The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

Matthew 28:16-20

¹⁶Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

It’s been said that preaching is like flying a plane. Take off, travel somewhere, land. Supposedly, the hardest thing to do as an aviator is to bring one’s craft in safely. I don’t know if this is true, having no piloting experience myself, but I can see why people would make this argument. What I do know is that this dynamic applies to delivering sermons—or to writing books. Any author or reader wants their narrative, whether fictional or factual, to come to a neat, definitive, even decisive conclusion.

Using these criteria, Matthew’s Gospel is a resounding success. These final verses have it all: they wrap up the story, set the parameters for what is to come, and leave us with crucial information about Jesus, God, and the Spirit, concluding with the divine promise of companionship.

The same might be said for the end to Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians: here we find a farewell, some advice on what to do, and then a benediction, a blessing.

Both of these lessons offer great reading for Trinity Sunday. We can bring the Easter season to a close and pivot to the next part of the Christian calendar, looking to our mission, reminded of the Triune nature of our God, reassured that we will never be alone.

Okay, that sounds great.... But aren’t these just words, theological gobbledygook?

I think not.

We see how in the 50s, just a short time after the death of Jesus, what we know as the traditional Trinitarian formula was already in use. Paul uses it here to sign off, without explanation, and he's explained a lot in both of his letters to the church in Corinth. We see here something that tells us that the body of the faithful would be familiar with this formulation.

Matthew's Gospel may have been written a few decades later, but if we accept that it was based in part on already extant materials about the life of Jesus, we can then assume that the Matthean community also was familiar with the Trinitarian idea.

More important, though, is what else we see: the context, the situation.

Look again at the letter to the Corinthians: agree with one another, be peaceful, welcome God, who will want to be with you. Greet one another like you mean it—and you will be greeted. We see here reciprocity, community, and affection: these are the foundations of the Christian life, a way of being that is grounded in worship of the God who is himself the epitome of living in community, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is the God who had been working so hard to make himself known to his people, traveling with them in the desert, into their own land, staying by their side when they went into exile, being patient when doubts arose, and then, finally, coming in Jesus, and after that, giving them—and us—the Holy Spirit.

And in Matthew we see a call to bring the Good News to others, to be partners with Jesus and apostles to all people, sharing the Way of Christ through baptism and promising always to be with his followers. It's especially worth noting that though the eleven disciples came to worship, some entertained doubts—yet Jesus still welcomed them all. Here is trust and encouragement and commitment.

This is the God we worship when we gather on Sundays or when we pray at home or go into the wider community to serve: the God who is relational by definition, the God who sought us out, who cares for us, who will work with us, who knows we will have questions and reservations, but who believes in us, and thus has expectations for us. Ours is the God of grace, communion, and love.

Grace.

Communion.

Love.

Oh, how our fallen world is in need of these now.

Not yelling, not jealousy, not narrow or particular agendas, but a broad and deep commitment to all of God's people, those who are like us and those who are not.

Earlier in this service in the children's moment, I made reference to the first letter of John, chapter 4, verse 8. Though this was not one of the assigned lessons for the day, it does tell us who and what God is: love. It tells us that those who do not love others do not know God.

One of the most dynamic Christian leaders today is the Most Rev. Michael Curry, Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in the United States. You may have seen him when he preached at the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle a couple of years ago. He gave a great homily—but it wasn't the first time he'd shared that message. Curry has long built his ministry around the idea that God is love, and from that proposition all else should follow.

This is an especially important message for us to hear and to share at the present moment. In a time of division and rancor, when the Bible and churches are used as self-serving political props, or dismissed out of hand, the Christian Church is called to make known to all people, of all dispositions, the God who made us, whom we met in Jesus, and who is with us in the Holy Spirit: the God of love.

The Trinity is not just an abstract proposition. It is a statement about the reality of God. Not a weak polytheism or bungled intellectualism, but a dynamic view of the One who we confess is Three-in-One and One-in-Three. That idea might be challenging, but that is because of our own failure of imagination.

Yes, the Trinity has an air of mystery about it.

So? Are we really to know all that can be known about everything in existence? What hubris! It may make us feel small that all is not readily available to us, but it should not. After all, God still came to us—not seeking power or affirmation, but out of a love that is unfathomable.

We Christians are called to emulate the one who made us: that means we are to be creators, we are to be healers, we are to be servants, we are to be like Jesus as best we can. We need to try. And try again. And yet gain. We may not love as well as we might, but we should never stop loving one another, even when our love is imperfect, or incomplete, or hard to summon.

Love takes commitment.

Love takes work.

Love takes sacrifice.

Frankly, love is hard.

But why should any of that be an obstacle? Should we turn our backs on love because it might require some effort on our part? Should we fail to love because it is inconvenient? Of course not.

God loved us so much that he gave his only Son for us. It doesn't matter whether you believe in the theology of atonement. God had to spend time with us. I don't know about you, but I know I'm not always easy to be around. That doesn't stop God. It never has.

And our lessons this morning remind us that it never will.

We may be ornery, we may be ugly, we may be difficult, we may be different. God doesn't care. He promised to be with us always, unto the end of the age.

That is what our Trinitarian God does: he is in relationship with us, no questions asked.

But we all know that a working relationship requires two participants. As God has reached out to us, we need to do likewise. And we do that through worship, through being involved in church, through serving our neighborhood and the wide world beyond, through standing with those who are on the edges, through sharing some of what we have, through inviting everyone to be part of the community.

As I wrote to you last week, this is a tough moment in our nation's history. We see that people are hurting, that anger is rising, that if we choose to sit on the sidelines, we will be complicit in the pain and suffering that follows.

These are things we know:

What happened to George Floyd was wrong.

What happened to George Floyd had happened to others before him.

What happened to George Floyd should never happen to anyone, ever again.

You might say, fine words. What's to stop it? The answer is simple: you and me.

Remember, the Risen Jesus met his remaining disciples in Galilee to entrust them with carrying on his work. It didn't matter that they were an odd sort, often self-interested goofballs or dorks, definitely not the beautiful people or the men you would put in charge of a recruiting effort. They were people like you and me. And guess what? They knew the love of Jesus, they felt the Spirit at work in their lives, they knew that God would always be with them.

They did amazing things. And so have women and men throughout the ages, all with the love of God at their backs.

The Triune God has called upon the faithful throughout the ages to rise to the occasion, to do what needed to be done, to take risks, to share the news through word and deed that God is love. Now, God is looking to you, to me, to all of us.

This is the question we must grapple with: what are we going to do?

For starters, we might pray, learn, get involved.

I don't know about you, but having a replay of 1968 isn't on my list of things I want to do. America is a better place than it was. There is more opportunity than before, but expectations have justifiably risen. And why not? Should we not want to be part of a society in which everybody has a chance to make the most of his or her God-given talents? Look at the Trinity: working together, yet each person distinct. That is the model for how we as Christians are to live, both in the Church and in society at large.

I know I don't have all the answers. But I will offer some suggestions:

Let us look again to Paul's letter to the Corinthians.

Let's get our communal house in order.

Let's pay attention.

Let's try to get along.

Let's live in peace.

Let's greet one another with love.

Let's encourage one another.

Let's share the message that God is love. Not judgment. Not anger. Not the author of an inscrutable rulebook. God is love.

That's the first thing we need to know about the Trinity.

And if we do these things, life *will* be better: for you, for me, for all of God's children, wherever they are, whoever they may be.