

Sunday, January 1, 2017 –

The Grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ Be With You

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Isaiah 63:7-9 and 2 Corinthians 13:11-13

We're starting the new year with a series of old things. I hope it is clear that I am not speaking of the pastoral staff. I am referring to the sorts of things we say at church that are so familiar we may forget what they actually mean, misunderstand what they actually mean or do not hear what they mean at all much like a child does not hear the parent say "pick up your shoes or turn off the TV." The series is called "the things we always say" which implies among other things that we say many of the same things over and over. But a new year is a good time to stop, reflect and refocus on things that matter. Hopefully, these sermons will help us all remember what matters especially the things we say in worship.

We begin at the end. That is we are reading the conclusion of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, listen for the word of God....

New Year's usually begins with a reflection on the year that has past. We begin the new year by looking back. As does Paul in this letter. Being a people that do not write letters much anymore certainly not ones that are several pages long, perhaps just a few lines on a Christmas card or a note on some other occasion Paul's letters seem very long, even sermon-esque. And his letters conclude much like they begin: a recapitulation of his main points. His second letter to Corinth is a roller coaster of tears, rebukes and affection that he wraps it up nicely, with a tight little bow. He wants the Corinthians to put things in order, agree, live in peace he even mentions a "kiss" as in "kiss and make up" perhaps. Like I said, it's a tidy little bow. And he ends with words that have become customary in Christian worship, in the spot known as the benediction with these words "may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the holy spirit be with you all". It was the first benediction I ever memorized as a student in seminary and I'm sure I'm not alone. It is the go-to blessing for the end of a service of worship.

But what is meant by a blessing such as "may the grace of Christ be with you"? What did Paul mean... what do *we* mean when we send people away with ...grace? There is a hint to what Paul means at the beginning of the verse. This is his "farewell", his best way of saying goodbye but so much more. "Goodbye" is an example of English being such a limited language. In other languages a word of greeting or parting can have many meanings. Aloha, shalom, Namaste.

Those words mean hello, goodbye, peace, compassion, welfare, prosperity, completeness, I recognize the divine in you. One word has multiple meanings. Both “farewell” and “goodbye” convey a desire to send someone off with goodness. But that isn’t what we’re usually thinking about when we say “bye”, is it? Often times, especially when concluding a phone call it’s just an ending, it’s a signal that we are done nothing more. But that isn’t what Paul meant, he wasn’t saying ‘bye!

Look at what else he is saying here: mend your ways, put things in order, agree...it all suggests people working and living together, not parting ways but joining ways. When he says “grace be with you” Paul is sending them into community, into togetherness.

In fact everything that comes after “farewell” in verse 11 is what he means by “farewell”. And it is not a simple message. It is the opposite of whatever “bye Felicia!” means. What Paul says means welcome in, it means love, it means you are the church, act like it! You are receiving God’s blessing to be the church! You are loved, you are needed. You are valued and perhaps the hardest part to live of this farewell is: you need each other.

Paul beautifully and subtly ties together a greeting with communion. Paul calls it the holy kiss: This holy kiss was a common way for family to greet each other at the time, with a kiss on the brow and shoulders, so in the early church it reminded people that in the faith they were family. And eventually it became associated with the Eucharist or communion.

My Aunt Marge turned 91 this year and her health has not been good. She lives in California so I don’t get to see her so I try and call now and then, not as often as I think I should, but when I do get to talk to her, and maybe it’s because I can tell it takes more from her to speak, I try and chose my words carefully especially when I first say hello and most definitely when I end the call. Because I think each time, “I must take care in case these are the last words we will exchange”. I want my words to her to express my appreciation, my love and my hopes for peace in her final days, weeks or months...because who knows? Who knows if I will have ten more conversations with her or none. It’s not sad to think that way, it is love.

This is love Paul wishes to grant upon the believers in Corinth. These are the things he desires for them and what he wishes they will take with them as he says farewell not knowing when or if he will speak to them again. Although he speaks of difficult things earlier in his letter, even hard to hear things, he signs off with love not just because he loves the church but because he knows God loves them.

As often happens in Paul’s letters there is an eschatological flavor here. Which is a fancy way of saying we see God’s vision for the future. Throughout scripture, especially in the words of Christ, his parables and some of Paul’s writing, we see the hope God has for humanity. We see explained the way we shall live and relate to one another, creation and to God. Communion is the church coming together, gathered around one table of believers without shame, judgment, class or division. It is not God’s desire for people to be alone or divided. I want to share with

you one of the earliest communion prayers from the first century church, listen as it describes God's vision for the church:

*“As this broken bread was scattered over the mountains, and when brought together became one, so your church be brought together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom.”*¹

The bread is a symbol and a reminder of how Christ brings people together. Grain and seed from many fields kneaded into one loaf. Communion also paints a picture of the future time when all shall gather as one. This vision is enacted when we *serve* one another communion “this is a communal meal, not an individual snack.” That’s how we do it in the Presbyterian church, we serve one another, it is not the priest or pastor who serves each person, but the people who serve one another. With love.

This is the grace we wish to leave people with. That is what we want people who worship here to leave with, an experience of Christ’s grace and all that Paul tried to convey with that - A message that God’s love is immense and designed to be served to everyone. Grace is for you and for you and for you. The church’s call is to keep telling people that again and again until they believe it. God is for you. God’s grace is for you. Share it with friends and strangers because we cannot know the burden they might be carrying.

Leave each person you meet with a spoken or silent benediction. The Benediction is part of the liturgy: those are the words we say in worship like the Call to Worship and the prayer of confession. Liturgy comes from an ancient Greek word which means “the work of the people”. The way we live our lives is the liturgy after the liturgy: the work we do after the work we do. Paul’s familiar words: The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is a reminder of the work we do between the moments we see each other again.

“Grace” is a powerful word, one that can carry us for a long, long time. It is a good word to start the year with. But before we finish our work this morning I am going to ask you to choose another word for your own reflection. On Friday the church will celebrate Epiphany, that is 12 days after Christmas when the church celebrates the tradition of the 2 wise men finding the baby Jesus after following a star. A new tradition in some churches is for each person in the church to receive a paper star with a word on it. The work is to reflect on that one particular word until the next holy day, Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. The people are invited to ponder what significance this word might have in their lives, and how God might be speaking to them through that simple message. Just outside the sanctuary you’ll find baskets with little stars, please take one, don’t choose one, just grab one randomly.

Put it someplace where you’ll see it everyday, take some time to learn the meaning of the word and how God might want you to use it in your life these next few weeks. In the weeks between

¹ Didache, ch. 9, Prayers of the Eucharistic, from the book “A More Profound Alleluia” by Leanne Van Dyk

Epiphany and Lent (Jan. 6 and Feb. 10, Ash Wednesday) And may that single word also remind you that...

You are the carrier of grace. You are the good news God wants transmitted throughout creation. You are God's grace in the world! Go be grace!

The trick isn't to make church cool; it's to keep worship weird.

You can get a cup of coffee with your friends anywhere, but church is the only place you can get ashes smudged on your forehead as a reminder of your mortality. You can be dazzled by a light show at a concert on any given weekend, but church is the only place that fills a sanctuary with candlelight and hymns on Christmas Eve. You can snag all sorts of free swag for brand loyalty online, but church is the only place where you are named a beloved child of God with a cold plunge into the water. You can share food with the hungry at any homeless shelter, but only the church teaches that a shared meal brings us into the very presence of God.

What finally brought me back, after years of running away, wasn't lattes or skinny jeans; it was the sacraments. Baptism, confession, Communion, preaching the Word, anointing the sick — you know, those strange rituals and traditions Christians have been practicing for the past 2,000 years. The sacraments are what make the church relevant, no matter the culture or era. They don't need to be repackaged or rebranded; they just need to be practiced, offered and explained in the context of a loving, authentic and inclusive community.