

The Benediction

A sermon taken from 2 Corinthians 13: 11-13, and preached on June 19, 2011 at Providence United Methodist Church by Dr. Ken Carter.

I want to begin with one of my favorite stories. A business woman was in an airport on a Friday afternoon. It had been an arduous day, nothing remarkable, but not easy either. She was on the way home, ready to be reconnected with her family. She sat in her seat in the waiting area, looked up at the monitor and began to process the bad news: her flight would be delayed by an hour and a half. This was not good.

So she decided to take a short walk, and then it occurred to her that she would reward herself for the day's work, and now for enduring a delay. She went into a store and saw a box of her favorite cookies; she purchased the box, put it into her bag, and walked back to the seats near her gate. She sat down, opened her bag, pulled out a few things, began to read the newspaper, and then she reached into the box of cookies. She took a bite, it was good, she took another bite.

Sitting adjacent to her, just out of the corner of her eye, was a man, and she noticed a moment later that he was holding a cookie in his hand, the same cookie, her cookie! He began to eat it, until it disappeared. He had a satisfied look on his face.

"*What is going on?*", she wondered! Well, it had been that kind of day, she thought to herself, one more thing, but she ignored it. She reached down, took another cookie, and ate it, slowly, one bite at a time. She got back into reading her newspaper and tried to take her mind off of the situation. When she looked up she saw that he had taken a cookie, again, and was eating it! He had that same smile on his face.

At about this moment the announcement came over the system that boarding would begin, and her section was called. She stood up, got her things together. The man beside her smiled again, but it was just too strange, she did not know what to make of it, and so she moved along. She boarded the plane, sat down, put her seat belt on, and looked in her bag, again, for the newspaper.

What she found, when she reached her hand into the bag, was a box of cookies, a box of her favorite cookies. To her astonishment, she knew in that moment that the box of cookies, her box of cookies, was unopened.

She thought she had been sharing her cookies with a stranger. But it turned out that the stranger had been sharing his cookies with her.

Good stories don't need much explanation, but this is what the story means to me: in the ministry I sometimes think I am doing something for other people, but I know---and in this moment it is very clear to me---that others are actually doing something for me. I think I am giving someone a gift, but, to be more accurate, I am the one who is on the receiving end.

Eight years is a short time and it is a long time. For me it seems like a very short time ago that I arrived here on a Sunday and met many of you for the first time. Week in and week out you have given me the gift of leaving your routine, coming into this sanctuary, listening to the sermon, and then, because I know you, you have tried to make sense of it in the places where you live, sometimes the hard and unexpected places. I know the church makes a difference in your life, I know that Christ makes a difference in your life, I know that all of this makes a difference in the world, and I have been a part of that, and it is not just that I have given you something, eight years, or whatever I have said or done; you have given something to me...you have changed the way I live as a disciple of Jesus.

The cookies----whether I understand that to be faith or talent or life itself----never belonged to me in the first place. We just got to share them together.

The scripture for today is taken from 2 Corinthians, which is, according to the scholars, Paul's most personal letter. In particular, the scripture is the conclusion of the letter, and it is a benediction.

Finally, 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 be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

Paul's benediction is a blessing, a transferring of power from one person to another, but it is also a set of instructions:

Put things in order, listen to my appeal, meaning, he cannot control or coerce them, their response must come from within them. The second letter to the Corinthians is correspondence shaped by the cross of Jesus, under which Paul stands, and it is marked by a deep humility. **"We do not proclaim ourselves"**, it is not about us, it is never about the preacher, but the message. **We have this treasure [the gospel] in earthen vessels, Paul knows, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us.**

Throughout 2 Corinthians the message is one of confidence in the power of God who has reconciled the world to himself through Jesus Christ, it is about the living presence of Jesus Christ, **if anyone is in him there is a new creation, the old**

has passed away, all things are made new, it is about the Holy Spirit that breaks our hearts of stone and sets us free to become children of God.

And so **we do not lose heart**, Paul says, again and again. Maybe he was writing the letter to encourage them and us, to stay with it. But all letters, all communication, all ministries come to an end, and they need closure, last words, a benediction.

Which reminds me of an experience from years ago. My wife was sitting in the balcony with our children, another church in another city, several parents were sitting with their kids, trying to hold it together. The service was especially long and full that day, the children were active, the parents were juggling all of this. Finally the service came to its conclusion, there was a benediction, and then the three chimes of the Trinity. And when the first one sounded a little boy looked up at his mom and made his hand into a fist and thrust it into the air and said "yes"!

Reading a passage of scripture about a benediction leads me to say a word about the benediction that I have shared with you these eight years.

Go now in peace to serve God and your neighbor in all that you do. Bear witness to the love of God in this world, so that those to whom love is a stranger will find in you generous friends.

Then the Trinitarian name of God... A benediction is a good word...and in our Sunday worship, it is a last word...but it is a misunderstood act of worship. A benediction is not so much a prayer where we close our eyes as a good word among friends and a sending forth, and so I keep my eyes open in a benediction, and I try to scan the congregation and think about the places you will be going this week and the challenges you will encounter and the people you will influence.

I am grateful that the church gathers to worship God. Yes, we do sometimes think we are doing something for God, but on most Sundays, by the time we leave, we see the face of God, glancing at us, maybe even smiling at us, and we know that we are the ones who have received, and the name for that is grace.

The benediction gathers up all of that. The benediction is finally God's "yes" to us, to life, to the creation, to all things. How did I come upon this benediction? I first heard it in when the current United Methodist Hymnal was published, in 1989. This benediction is taken from the Wedding service and it is found on page 869. From the first time I read it, this benediction began to take on a deep meaning for me, and I have been saying it in congregations in Greensboro, Winston-Salem and now Charlotte over the past twenty years. It reminds me that now that we have had the privilege and grace to be together----and, we believe, in the presence and at

the invitation of God---we now go out to respond in some way, we want to serve God and our neighbor in all that we do.

But what does that mean? To bear witness to the love of God in this world is to take seriously the claim that reconciliation is stronger than hatred and forgiveness is stronger than bitterness and life is stronger than death. And it is to live this out in this world! It is not to imagine that people will somehow know that God loves them at some other time and place in the future. It is to bear witness to the love of God in this world.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit.

The name for Jesus Christ is grace, something *we do not earn*, something *we did not deserve*, something *we will never repay*. And so, brothers and sisters, if you were going to put things in order, I would appeal to you to live in and by grace. I cannot coerce you to do this, or control the outcome. In this life you will often have the decision to respond with judgment or grace. I appeal to you: Err on the side of grace.

The name for God is love. Some people think grace and love are easy and law and judgment are hard, but grace and love are hard. Throughout this life you will find yourself trying to love those who do not love you. This is what God does, most of the time, this is what God has always done.

The communion of the Holy Spirit. A spiritual life is not a warm feeling you want to have in some quiet place, or religious goose bumps you get when you hear a certain sound or a sequence of code words. The communion of the Holy Spirit is the gathering of God's people into a family, a community, into one Body. Sometimes you will want to go away by yourself and enjoy that box of cookies and you will think that is having a spiritual life. But the spiritual life is something we share, it is a fellowship, it is a communion, something God, who often comes in the form of a stranger----Mother Teresa called this his "distressing disguise--- shares with us. It is a gift.

And so, 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 be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.