

“The Blessing after the Testing”  
June 4, 2023

II Corinthians 13:5-13  
Matthew 28:16-20

The contemporary ecumenical church calls this first Sunday after Pentecost “Trinity Sunday.” This morning the Scripture lessons, our hymns, and our prayers all point to the mystery of “God in three persons,” the Trinity. We heard the command of Jesus to baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. We heard the blessing of Paul that prays for “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.”

Of course, as I’ve said before, we in the Congregational wing of the United Church of Christ traditionally has not had much to do with the church year and special days and seasons. At an earlier time in our history, even Christmas was looked upon with suspicion. Following the lead of the Reformers, we have seen each Sunday as a little Easter—and that is always sufficient reason for us to gather as God’s people in worship and celebration.

Most of the special days in the church year celebrate an event: the birth of Jesus, the resurrection, the Spirit of God coming to the disciples. Somewhat strangely, this day celebrates a theological idea. This observance started about a thousand years ago—and at one point even the Pope was not sure it was a good thing. By the fourteenth century it was a part of the church year and it appears now even on the UCC planning calendar.

It is a strange celebration, but perhaps in that strangeness we can listen with fresh ears and hearts as scripture informs our thinking and our acting.

Christians make the astonishing claim that the God who created all things became incarnate in a particular human being—Jesus of Nazareth.

To see Jesus is to see God.

To speak of Jesus is to speak of God.

Not everybody sees it that way. One UCC minister gave voice to the problem, saying it: “The idea that the almighty God could be found in something as familiar as this human life is difficult to accept, if not downright bizarre.”<sup>1</sup> My guess is that not a few members of our congregation would nod in agreement.

Even so, I am convinced that to speak of Jesus is to speak of God.

And as incredible as all *that* sounds, we also affirm that this same God still dwells with us and guides us. The Spirit of God that was active in creation and incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth continues to be at work in us and among us.

To affirm such a God is to live in wonder. To affirm such a God is to be struck by mystery—wonder to be appreciated, not figured out. When we say that God is a Trinity, we mean, as Frederick Buechner wrote, that the mystery beyond us, the mystery among us, and the mystery within us are all the same mystery.”<sup>2</sup>

Trinity Sunday reminds us—if we need reminding—that life cannot easily be put into neat little boxes. And try as we will, God is even harder to stuff into a box.

How, then, do we talk about this wonder, this mystery? Patrick of Ireland used a shamrock to illustrate the Trinity. And I remember my high school reading of *Soul on Ice* in which Eldridge Cleaver said he once suggested Three-in-One Oil as an image for this mystery. This idea was not well received.

Our understanding and our explanations are limited. In faith we recognize that our experience of God begins with awe and ends with worship. Between awe and worship, we study and pray, we work together. But we don't come up with all the answers.

This understanding is, of course, something else that marks us as Congregationalists within the United Church of Christ. While we are passionate about action in the world, and understanding the scriptures, and the presence of the Spirit of God in our lives and work and worship, we put less emphasis on “getting it right” when it comes to what we believe. As I tell participants in our new member classes, we are held together by covenant not creed, by our promises of how we will live together rather than our statements of faith.

This approach to the Christian life might be especially comforting on Trinity Sunday, since it is difficult to wrap our minds around the idea of the Trinity.

But let me be bold enough this morning to suggest a way in which our lives might open up at least a little new understanding.

For those in high school and college, spring is a time of testing.

Advanced Placement tests.

Final exams.

True or false.

Multiple choice.

Essay questions.

Math problems.

Translation of foreign phrases.

All are designed to get at what students have learned in the past semester or trimester, maybe even in the past year.

At this point, I think the current round of exams has reached its conclusion. And for those of us who are older, well, it is nice to enjoy spring—the longer days, and finally, the warmer weather—without threats of tests hanging over your heads.

So listen once more to the words of Paul at the end of his second letter to the Christians in Corinth: “*Examine yourselves* to see whether you are living in the faith. *Test yourselves . . .*” At the end of this letter, we encounter a crucial test.

There are no multiple-choice questions, no red pencils, no teachers to do the grading—still, Paul suggests it’s exam time for all of us.

And there is only one question.

Are you still living in the faith?

This isn’t a test about your intellectual beliefs. Paul is not asking anyone to “explain” the Trinity.

Nor is he examining our ability to move mountains.

For Paul, faith is primarily an attitude of trust in the God made known in Jesus Christ and a willingness to follow in the Way that Christ makes known to us. So, Paul is asking the Corinthians—and through them, a very basic question comes to us: “Are you still Christians?”<sup>3</sup>

We would not answer “yes” because we *believe* in the One Triune God—as if our belief alone made us Christians.

We would answer “yes”—we are still Christians—*because* God *is* a Trinity—beyond us, among us, and within us—empowering us to believe and to act. To say with Paul “Jesus Christ is in us” acknowledges that our lives are not yet complete and this congregation is not yet complete—that God is still at work in us and among us and through us.

I guess it is a matter of where you put your trust.

If God is a distant creator, unmoved, untouched by our lives, then it’s probably best to put our trust in ourselves. Maybe our own goodness, our own ability will get us somewhere—maybe not.

Trust in the Triune God, however, looks to a Creator who knows weakness and death, who makes weakness strong in resurrection, and who still gives us—weak as we are—strength to face each day. Love becomes possible, not because of our own goodness or the forbearance of someone else. Love grows out of God’s own experience with being hurt and still reaching out to the world. Trusting in God’s love is the only way we will learn to love.

Paul concludes this letter as he does all his letters with a blessing. As he finished writing to the contentious and troubled church in Corinth, his blessing calls upon the name of the triune God: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.”

A blessing expresses an active desire, a human echo of the divine wish that our lives would be full, abundant. The blessing that we give, and the blessings we receive, connect us with the power of God at work in the world. It is not merely a feel-good experience that descends from the heavens.

The word of blessing reminds us that we are created in God's image. Blessing calls us to live up to our high human potential. And part of our humanity is the active desire to build a world in which all people might live in peace and enjoy their days.

I for one am glad Paul ends with a blessing, for it means there is still hope. As much as I would like to have gratitude, joy, praise, and adoration characterize my life, like you, I know that much of the time my life consists of resentment, sullenness, gloom, and idol worship. And my own resolve just doesn't go very far to change that.

But if there is something like blessing in the world—something like the prayer that one person might have for the benefit of another; if God is a Trinity who works within me and in this community to create followers of the risen Christ; then I can hope to know some of the grace, and love, and communion that blessing offers.

Examine yourselves.

You be the judge.

And may we all find God's blessing and be a blessing to one another.

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<sup>1</sup> Page: 1

*To Begin at the Beginning*

<sup>2</sup> Page: 1

Buechner *Wishful Thinking*, pg. 93.

<sup>3</sup> Page: 3

E. Best, *II Corinthians*—Interpretation Series, pg, 130.