

## **“All We Need”**

**Trinity Sunday**

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**Gene McAfee**

**Forest Hill Church, Presbyterian**

**Cleveland Heights, Ohio**

*“Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.’”* — Genesis 1:26

*“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.”* — 2 Corinthians 13:13

If you have ever wondered where the words of the benediction come from that ministers often use at the close of worship, now you know. They come from the final verse of Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.”

Those words are more than a polite farewell. They are Paul’s summary of what Christians need in order to live faithfully in the world: grace, love, and communion. In many ways, that is the Trinity in practical form.

Now, I will admit that Trinity Sunday can become overly abstract. Christians have spent centuries trying to explain how God can be three-in-one. We’ve just completed an adult class on the reluctant parting between the followers of Jesus and mainstream Judaism, and one of the irreconcilable differences that made that separation necessary was the deification of Jesus—turning Jesus into God or a god, as some saw it, or another god, as others saw it, but to most Jews of those early years of this era, you can’t have God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit and say you’ve only got one God, and one of the core theological tenets of Judaism is monotheism. One God in three persons is the classic Christian formulation, but worshiping a stand-alone Jesus as the cosmic Christ makes some people skeptical about Christianity’s claim to be monotheistic, and I can understand their uncertainty.

But Paul in today’s reading is less interested in explaining the Trinity than in describing what the living God actually gives us. The Trinity matters because, like everything else in our religious tradition, it is intended to help equip us for living a faithful life, a life devoted utterly to God.

And perhaps one of the best ways to understand the Trinity is not as a math problem but as music.

Think about jazz, the wonderful music we’ve enjoyed in this service.

A great jazz trio or quartet contains distinct voices. The piano is not the guitar. The guitar is not the drums. The saxophone is not the trumpet. Each instrument has its own sound, its own role, its own integrity, its own identity. Yet only when they play together do they create something larger than any one musician could produce alone.

And the beauty of jazz is not rigidity but relationship — listening, responding, improvising, making room for one another, building something together in real time.

That is much closer to the Trinity than most diagrams ever get.

Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer are not rivals competing for attention. They exist in eternal relationship — distinct yet united, different yet harmonious. The Trinity is divine communion. It is an assertion of the fundamental truth that relationship is at the center of reality itself.

Which may help explain the curious language in Genesis 1:26: “Let us make humankind in our image.”

“Let us.”

From the very beginning, long before Christians were a twinkle in God’s eye, scripture suggests that relationship belongs to the very being of God. And because we are created in God’s image, relationship belongs to us as well.

None of us arrives here on our own. We are in a relationship with our mothers even before we’re born. And without that relationship—or some substitute for it—none of us would survive for very long after birth. We cannot live solo. Even those of us, like Jesus, who do not marry and do not produce offspring, we, too, necessarily live in relatedness to others. If I had to produce my own food, make my own clothes, or build my own house, I couldn’t do it, and even those mythologized pioneers of our national history and their latter-day descendants living off the grid aren’t nearly as self-sufficient as we tend to think. None of us lives or dies to ourselves, as Paul told the Romans long ago.

And that matters, especially on a Sunday when many churches recognize those who are graduating from various programs of study. Graduation season celebrates achievement, and rightly so. Diplomas matter. Discipline matters. Hard work matters. Accomplishment matters.

Did any of you watch the national Spelling Bee last week? That’s an annual ritual in my house because I want to root for the nerdy kids, as I once was. And although it’s tempting to think of those kids toiling in secluded isolation with the dictionary, the fact of the matter is that they, too, are in relationship with each other between competitions and with teachers and parents and coaches and sponsors and their schools and communities as they make their way through a grueling process leading to Bee Week. We need the inspiration of those whose intelligence isn’t artificial.

No meaningful life is ever built alone.

Behind every champion or graduate stand parents, teachers, mentors, friends, coaches, congregations, and communities. Someone encouraged them. Someone helped them recover from loss or failure. Someone believed in them when they didn't believe in themselves.

And the happiest and most successful of those achievers realize sooner rather than later that life itself is improvisational. Very few people end up exactly where they expected to be at eighteen or thirty-eight or sixty-eight. Careers change. Relationships change. The world changes. Plans unravel. New possibilities emerge.

And in the midst of all that improvisation, what matters most is not having complete control over the music of one's life. What matters is learning how to listen — to God, to others, and to the deeper rhythms of grace.

Which brings us back to Paul's three gifts.

First, the grace of Christ.

Grace means treating people better than they expect. Justice gives people what they deserve; grace gives more. Living a life infused by grace means refusing to live trapped inside the myth of meritocracy or in the iron cage of resentment, revenge, and scorekeeping.

And in a politics of a perpetual grudge match and a culture increasingly shaped by outrage, cruelty, and mendacity, grace becomes a radical lifestyle choice.

Grace loosens the grip of ego. It reminds us that we are not the center of the universe. Jesus embodied that kind of life completely. His preferred form of self-designation was simply "the human one," and Dietrich Bonhoeffer described him as "the man for others."

That is grace: a life turned outward in compassion, intelligence, and generosity. Such a life, we believe, is salvific, saving us, as the UCC Statement of Faith puts it, from a life of "aimlessness and sin." And our ability to live such a life comes finally from God: it is "a gift to be received with gratitude and a task to be pursued with courage," as the 1967 Presbyterian *Confession* says.

Second, Paul speaks of the love of God.

For Christians, God's love begins with creation itself. Before we ever achieved anything, before we succeeded or failed, we were loved into being.

Existence itself is a gift. It's all gift.

Progressive Christians need not fear science or modern knowledge. We do not turn to scripture for astronomy or biology. We turn to scripture for meaning, moral wisdom, and spiritual truth.

And scripture tells us that beneath all the complexity and confusion of life is a God who creates and sustains in love.

That does not erase suffering or answer every painful question, including the painful riddles we sometimes are to ourselves. Even Paul confessed that he did not fully understand himself. “I do not do the good I want,” he wrote.

But Paul never allowed the brokenness of life to convince him that God was absent. He trusted that beneath all our uncertainty stands a love greater than our understanding.

I still remember the pain of that awful Thursday afternoon when I had to put down my beloved Jonah, a character of a cat who brought me a mixture of delight and aggravation for the nine years that we were together. It was the hardest thing I’d ever had to do.

And yet, as Barb and I were leaving the vet’s office and Jonah’s lifeless body, I told her I was going to do it again. I was going to adopt a pair of kittens knowing full well that I would almost certainly have to face this pain again, but the love of however much time we’d have would make the pain worth it. My years with Jonah had proved that truth to me. As Rob Bell put it in the title of one of his books, *Love Wins*.

And finally, Paul speaks of the communion of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is not merely an idea to discuss. The Spirit is the living presence of God moving through ordinary life — guiding, comforting, unsettling, renewing.

But communion with the Spirit requires attentiveness. It requires stillness.

The modern world trains us to be distracted every waking moment. Yet the Spirit speaks in the depths. “Be still,” the Psalm says, “and know that I am God.”

If we never become still, we may never hear “the music of the spheres,” as one of our beloved hymns puts it.

And perhaps that is one final lesson jazz can teach us. Great musicians know that silence matters too. Space matters. Listening matters. Music is not merely noise; it is disciplined attentiveness.

So too with the spiritual life.

The grace of Christ.

The love of God.

The communion of the Holy Spirit.

Distinct gifts, yet deeply connected. Different movements in the same divine song.

And for graduates preparing to step into an uncertain future, perhaps that is the good news they most need to hear: you do not go alone. The God who created you, redeemed you, and sustains you accompanies you still, wherever you go.

In the end, those gifts — grace, love, and communion — equip us for life. They are all we need.

Thanks be to God.