

TRINITY SUNDAY - Blessing the Church

[2 Corinthians 13:11-13](#)

The Nature and Purpose of the Church - Studies in Acts

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Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

I want to recognize that there is sadness among us today. For those of you who are participating in worship who do not know, I have offered a letter of resignation to become effective October 20. We have a lot of time between now and then to talk about the reasons why. I do not do so with joy; I do so with sadness. I think that the sermon text for today is extremely appropriate for this situation for our church. It is easy to disparage the church on many occasions, but I believe that the heart of the Gospel is that Christ calls us to bless the church, not in naivety, but in serious consideration. With that in mind, I invite us to offer ourselves in prayer. O Lord Jesus Christ, now may your word pre-occupy our minds and our hearts, and may you speak to us in the love of God the Father, in the grace that you offer us, as Jesus the Christ, and in the community of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We are going to be discussing in our sermons for the next few weeks the nature and purpose of the church. Why are we here, as The National Presbyterian Church? The purpose of the church, I believe, is to present Jesus Christ to the world: his presence, his life, his teaching, his purpose, his suffering, his death, and his resurrection — to present all of his Good News. The church is the ongoing body of Christ. As Christ himself is no longer on earth, we become the incarnational presence of Christ here on earth by the power of his Spirit— to reveal his mind, to teach his word through Scripture, to listen to his voice in prayer.

The church is to show forth the kingdom of God; it is not the kingdom of God because the church can still be permeated by sin and driven by evil. The church is made up, after all, of people who are both sinners and saints. Saints, in fact, are sinners saved by grace, who can still give-in to sin and participate in evil. But God's continued blessing in Jesus draws us away from sin and forms Christ in us. The church is caught between two realms: the kingdoms of this world and all the value systems that drive those kingdoms; and the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. And while the church desires to live in the nature and way of Jesus, it is always tempted to give-in to the power, brokenness, and limited human practices that resist the way of Jesus. It is this double nature of the church that provides the backdrop for every letter we have in the New Testament.

The Apostle Paul particularly understood the inner struggles and the intra-communal tensions that keep a church from living into its full potential. The church is being called to become the mature body of Christ; but we are often stalled to immaturity because of our sinfulness. The Apostle Paul understood the tension that exists; and let's face it—we, the church, are far from perfect. Some of the time, our flaws and our failures are so evident that the face of Christ is blurred and the mission of Christ is blocked. We are often simultaneously 'saints' and 'sinners:' people guided, on one hand, by the Spirit; and people driven, on the other hand, by evil. In the midst of this two-faced... split... somewhat schizophrenic... 'Jekyll and Hyde' personality that's polarized... blessing is a constant need to keep us rooted in Christ, and routed on the pathway that Jesus sets for us to a better life into eternity.

The Apostle Paul always begins and ends letters, as was the custom of his day, with blessing. In the beginning, Paul says in this letter to the Corinthians: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, the God of all consolation who consoles us in our affliction with a consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God." There's a repeated word there, and it's a word of "blessing." And that is, that God consoles us in the midst of our pain. The Corinthians were in pain, and Paul wanted to make sure, at the beginning, that the blessing of God was clear to them: God will just not leave you alone to die in your pain; God is here to console you. But he ends the letter, as we have read today, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all." We could say that the letters of Paul are like 'blessing sandwiches' surrounded by blessings of God in Jesus Christ and the Father. Paul acts and speaks in ways to guide the Corinthian church to deal with its issues and to push it to a place where they no longer suffer from division or pull away from God in Christ.

What is the purpose of blessing? Blessing begins a human conversation in divine presence and gives us divine perspective. Blessing ends the temporal conversation in the eternal context and community that we are to live in forever. Blessing keeps us in the greater presence and purpose of God. It puts the meat of the church's life in-between the whole grain life of God the Father and the Son, with the Spirit helping us deal with the meat of our life together in the middle. Just as when we offer a "blessing" at Thanksgiving, a "blessing" at the beginning of a meal, which is thanksgiving, or we end our time together with a "blessing" to go our separate ways, this whole letter is meant to be a blessing; the "whole meal" is meant to be a blessing. The whole meeting is meant to be a blessing. The whole worship service is meant to be a blessing. The whole life together is meant to be a blessing. The blessing is created by God, who is the Father of our Lord Jesus, and it is consummated— it is completed— in God the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.

As we know in Scripture, Jesus said this in the last book of the Bible: "I am the Alpha and the Omega; the beginning and the end." Our humanity and our human history are book-ended by the blessing of God at the beginning and the end. From the first line of the Bible we can see the blessing: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." God created humankind, and he blessed them... to the very last lines of the Bible, the final blessing: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen." We live, from beginning to end in this life, in the presence of God's blessing. The Bible (the books, the letters) are affirmations of the blessing. This blessing is from God to human beings who live in pain, in the midst of all of that. God gives us the power to proclaim blessing or to render curse; it's our human choice. The saintly call of God beckons us to bless; but our self-centered sinfulness seduces us sometimes into the pattern of curse. Blessing brings us together; curse tears us apart. In 2nd Corinthians, Paul is using the pervasive ointment of blessing to heal the pejorative wounds of sin's curse. Every word spoken by Paul in the letter is a movement to confront the curse and to confirm the blessing.

Like every congregation from the founding of the early church, the Corinthian community was full of difference and dissonance.

Curse and blessing constantly at war with each other in the life of that church— and every church since. Because we all live somewhere between being saints and sinners; our church is no exception. A war goes on within each of us with the desire to bless, but sometimes the desperate urge to curse. And by "curse," I don't mean uttering a few bad words. By "curse" I mean: to think, say or do things that, in fact, are anathema to the very being of God— Father, Son, and Spirit. This war not only goes on within each of us, but it goes on between us— in marriages, families, and friendships, but especially in the church. There is no real church that is not a church at war, in some ways; because the church at war is confronting (as Paul is talking about) its need for God's blessing, and dealing with the truth of what keeps us away from it.

In the church, we are tempted to test God and put one another on trial; to become courts of accusation and juries of condemnation. We are tempted to take sides... to polarize... to throw angry recriminations toward one another. We are tempted to think, "Our group knows what is best; that other group is wrong." We are then persuaded to divide and conquer, to look for those who agree with us and attack those who disagree with us. We give-in to the curse and we begin to multiply the cursedness of our own brokenness and fragmentation; and this time we give over to the dark side. God, in the pattern of Jesus through constant urging of the Spirit, whispers to us in a very small voice to stop the madness, to come back to sanity. Sometimes we become so immersed in our own self-deception that our ability to hear the open air voice of the Spirit is subverted in the muffled tones of our submerged spiritual ears. In the curse, we go underground, under water. We conspire... we connive... we cover up... we sneak around... we undo that which God has brought into being. We drown our limited opinions and narrow perspectives because we shut off the willingness to listen to one another. We shut down the open communication to hear the Greater Truth because we are so bent on advocating our own smaller truths.

But like Paul with the Corinthians, the Spirit never gives up on drawing us away from that curse and calling us back into blessing. That's what the whole epistle is about. Paul never allows the curse to stand... the sin to set... or the evil to win. How does he do this? How does the Spirit, through Paul, call us back to the larger blessing of God? He continually reasserts the blessing of God on the church and in the community. He prays for the church. He confronts the church with its weaknesses and its cursedness. He names the church's dysfunction and sin. He speaks the larger truth of God in humility and love. He does not imitate the arrogance of what he has called, in this text, 'super apostles' who preach a pushy, condemning Christ and an angry, judgmental Jesus. He calls the Corinthians to a generosity of spirit and a graciousness of relationships. He reiterates that it's not the nature of God to curse, but it's the nature of God to bless— in the love of the Father, the grace of Jesus Christ, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.

There is a permanent curse that is real: and that is our refusal to accept and participate in God's blessing. If we absolutely shut God's blessing out of our lives, we will live in curse. If we reject the kindness of God, there is only one option left for us, and that is to live in the curse of our own human sin and cumulative evil. The blessing of God continually calls us to turn away, to repent— to repent of such self-centeredness; to reject the way of the curse; and to engage a life of blessing.

In confronting the Corinthian church with its cursedness, Paul names several concerns in the meat of the letter. He says, if members cause each other pain, they should forgive each other. He encourages members not to harden their hearts like people did in Exodus; they should live in the freedom of God, not in the stubbornness of their own fear and anger. He invites the members to live together in harmony, as a sweet aroma of Christ— not creating big stinks with each other, in the church. He reminds the members that they are like clay pots— they are weak and easily cracked by how they handle each other. He reminds them they are reconciled to God through the life, suffering, and death of Jesus and therefore they need to be reconciled to each other. Paul affirms there can be joy in affliction; Christ can help us develop genuine love in the midst of pain. And, facing the temptation to be tight and stingy, Paul calls them to become extravagantly generous because Jesus gave everything. Share the blessing: give abundantly of your wealth, your time, and your being. And, while they must wage war with evil, they should not do so by human standards— and that is, of human winners and losers— but by allowing their weakness to help all people to become people of growing faith.

Paul warns them about not following arrogant and opinionated leaders; that is not the way of Christ, who led out of weakness in human strength. Don't follow 'super apostles,' Paul says— apostles of hostility and vindictiveness. Don't give-in to spiritual bullies. Have the goal to become mature; perfection comes through suffering and vulnerability. Truth must lead to action, and action must lead to blessing. Think the same way. And coming to the final blessing, Paul declares six pointed but positive imperatives: Rejoice! [I don't like that word in the New Revised Standard Version, "farewell"]. It's "rejoice!" Be restored. Be encouraged. Think the same way, the way of Jesus. Be at peace. Greet one another with a holy kiss— pass out the hugs and the handshakes, and pass the peace of Christ. Do not let the meeting end in anger. Then he makes the seventh and cumulative point: receive the blessing from God— the blessedness, and the One who blesses as the Trinity of God: the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the community of the Holy Spirit.

Blessing builds community; cursing tears it apart. God the Father and the Son send the Spirit to build the church as a community. The Spirit creates a new human community that reflects the intimate community of the Father and the Son. Blessing in the New Testament is not primarily about individual faith or individual action; blessing is about God redeeming broken communities of flawed people. Blessing encourages us to move toward one another, just like the Father moves toward the Son, and the Son moves toward the Father, and the Father and the Son send the Spirit to move toward us. Blessing leads to an intimate and healthy community of the Spirit, to a healthy church. And this is my final point: during these difficult and conflicted times at The National Presbyterian Church, let us not end our days, or our conversations, or our meetings, with a curse. Let us begin and end every encounter with the blessing of God. In the middle of all that, be honest, be open, be humble, be self-aware of your own temptations to curse. Instead, choose in truth and grace, to bless— because God blesses us. Let us pray. Now may you— as God the Father in love, as our Lord Jesus Christ in grace, and as Holy Spirit in community— bless us to live out your word. Amen