

God Be With You
2 Corinthians 13:11-14
9/12/2021
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If you have your Bibles, please turn to 2 Corinthians 13. As you're turning in your Bibles to 2 Corinthians, this morning, we're going to look at the final few verses, chapter 13 and verses 11 through 14.

Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Let us pray.

God, help the teacher this morning. Add to your word where it is a blessing to your people. Take away those parts that are distracting and not helpful to hearing your voice. May your voice be more clear and more crisp and more warming to our very soul as we engage in these words from your scriptures this morning. We pray this in Jesus's name. Amen.

Brothers and sisters, visitors, welcome. I come to you today with really no lofty words or no crafty sermon. It might actually come across as kind of mish mashed. And maybe it's not going to be very polished. But I come to you today with a very simple message to share. And this message is both a declaration of truth, but it's also a blessing of hope from the scriptures. We see it from the beginning to the end all over the place. And that message is God be with you. God be with you.

You see, there is an air of change that's on the wind. Maybe you feel it. Maybe you smell it. School has started. Sports may be resuming. People are even returning to movie theaters, if you can believe it. Of course, some areas with public health are more stable than perhaps other areas that are facing more difficult challenges. Maybe it's been an inconvenience to you, this past year and a half. But maybe for others, this has touched very close to your lives. And all the while, we desire for life to be less blurred, and we want to find our rhythm again. But we still experience frustrations, confusion, and fatigue.

Our lead pastor is transitioning to a new call and a new place. His last day is officially Wednesday, the 15th. I'm personally sad to be saying goodbye. But I'm happy for what the Lord has in store for Randy and Kate. I have a quietness and a somber sense in my soul of the unknowns that are facing us. But I am excited about the possibilities as we begin to sort out these next steps for Columbia Presbyterian. And while I'm trying to understand my life, as I'm trying to understand our place, I'm clueless with what the needs are for Christ Community Church in Franklin, Tennessee, where Randy's going. But as I'm excited about the possibilities here, I'm grateful for how the Lord will provide for her, too. Randy is not here today because he was invited to preach at the 20th anniversary of the church that he helped start in Montclair, New Jersey. He spent ten years there, and he served ten years here. 20 years, a life lived, lives impacted, stories to be celebrated.

This weekend marks another moment in time. As I walked out the side door of my dormitory at Western Carolina University as a sophomore for my Tuesday morning classes, I walk out, and a student passed by me and just kind of said foggily and vaguely, but flippantly, "The U.S. is under attack." And I was just like, "What do you mean?" He said, "The U.S. is under attack." Now, that was all I had going off of the very first thing out my door that morning. And I walk to class that ended up not being there that day.

I ended up not having classes the rest of the day either. But I went back to my dorm, and I vividly have memories. Perhaps you've been recollecting where you were on that morning as well these past few days. But I was with friends in my dorm watching all day just shocked, in disbelief, not knowing how to process, not knowing what's going on, watching it happen live.

I was reminded through a documentary this week of how much technology has changed in 20 years. That that morning when President Bush learned of the news at that elementary school in Florida, the teachers didn't know about it yet. Nobody had the notifications on their phone. We're not getting the news before the news tells us what's going on. And you're left wondering, what's going on? How do we react? What does this mean? As I was with my friends shocked and in disbelief, again, lives ended. Many lives were impacted and stories to be grieved.

Now, we've concluded our series this summer in the Psalms. We've looked at laments. We've seen confessions. We've seen praises and thanksgivings. And we're transitioning to a new series next week as we begin the Book of Philippians. So even with the start of school, the start of Sunday morning classes, the start of a new sermon series, we have another marking of time as the seasons change.

And I'm preaching fairly simply this morning on this passage as a way to just draw our attention to what God might be doing in our lives in the moment now, in your lives now. As we go about our lives experiencing the ups and the downs, those small victories and what seem like crushing tragedies, as we might experience the kindness of a family member or a friend, or the evil that occurs in our experiences as well, we long to know what God is doing.

Today's scripture passage comes from the Apostle Paul's second letter to the believers there in Corinth. And letters are wonderful things. I like fountain pens. I like paper. And I still engage in a very slow archaic process of writing letters. An individual letter may, of course, stand on its own. It could be sharing good news of being accepted at college. It could be sharing bad news of those test results that have come back, and they don't look so good. If you collect your letters or keep them in any way, letters mark time by the dates that we scribble on the top of the pages. And letters tell the stories of our relationships, our experiences, our emotions and reflections. And they may share, you know, celebrations and even fits of romantic love in poetry, and expressions of our appreciation and gratitude. But they also can just be as simple and mundane as just telling what's going on with the weather. But all of these things make up a life and a life impacted.

Paul likely exchanged more than two letters with the Corinthians, although we only have two in the scriptures. And in his letters, Paul addresses a wide variety of topics. They're on his mind for them. Also, as you can see as you read through them, he's engaging topics that they'd written to him about. You can almost see this back and forth dialogue. Although we don't have their letters, we see this conversation happening between them. But here, we are at the end of his letter where he gives his parting words. And they are wrapped up with a warm desire for Christ's church to be walking in the love of God and experiencing the riches of God's grace, God's peace that just abounds and overflows through God's redemptive love.

And so as we think about stories, as we think about time, as we think about what washes over us and what we are impacted by in our daily routines, or the moments that just pop and wake us up because they're jarring, they're disruptive to our lives. As we look to the word, one of the over-arching stories of the Bible involves receiving God's blessing to you. We practiced that this morning with two young children receiving God's blessing.

To receive is to receive. You can't do anything. You can't earn it. You can't lose it. If someone is graciously giving you something out of kindness, in some sense, there's a transaction, and that

transaction is just receiving it with thanks, with appreciation. And in that, there is a kind of meeting of the hearts between the gift giver and the gift receiver. As we're receiving God's blessing, that is to you and to me.

And we see this throughout scripture. The God who creates, and the God who sustains all things is holy, righteous, and just in all His ways and has marked us out as those creatures that bear His image. We, being male and female, reflect His very likeness. Truly a mystery. And all that was intended was undermined by our first parents as they breached that perfect communion between God and creation and God and mankind. And so even in His righteousness and justice, the Lord God showed Himself merciful as He set the stage for telling a story, telling a story to His people, a love letter that goes across cultures, across the world, across languages, across time. A love letter to His people. And He has made Himself known through those glories and wonders of creation, but He has also showed Himself through His mighty acts and redemptive purposes. And in the telling of this story, we see God's promise of returning all things that are undermined to the way they were intended.

Now, it's not a going back to the beginning, but rather it's a raising up. It's raising up a new life out of the old, making right the wrong, making whole the broken. We learn in Romans 5 where Paul says, "Just as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned." And later he goes on. "For if because of one man's trespass death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the man Jesus Christ."

You see, this story is a story for me. It's a story for you. It's a story of how you and I are a part of something that came before. And it's a story of how we are part of something that's yet to come.

Paul gives the Corinthian believers then and from God's word Christians from all time this wonderful benediction, this good word. "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." In this one verse, Paul captures the totality—although not being exhaustive. But he captures the totality of the living God who reveals Himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And he captures the fullness of God's gracious redemption. So he focuses on three things here in verse 14, the grace of Jesus, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

In referring to the grace of Jesus, it is encompassing all of God's salvation that is accomplished through the life, through the death, and resurrection of Jesus. God's salvation is accomplished totally, fully, and freely, but at great cost to Him. And yet in that being bestowed upon us freely, we are to receive it by faith. And though we do not deserve it, and though we cannot earn it, God's grace is goodwill. It is favor. It is kindness. It is mercy. It is wrapped up in the very essence and character of who He is that is completed fully and finally through the redemption that is through Jesus. This is receiving God's blessing to you.

The love of God—which we may have an abstract understanding of the love of God. But it's interesting that he puts the love of God here in the second position. On one hand, you can't make too much out of order of things, but it still flows very nicely. For you see I may have an inkling that there has to be something. Maybe I can look out upon the skies. I can look upon the oceans. I can look in a microscope. I can look in my child's face, and I can have an inkling that there is something. And we might insert love. There's something, I think, innate to that, of being human made in the image of God that we might have some yearning for that, some vocabulary for that. But here, Paul is emphasizing something that is true of God. He is emphasizing His character and His very disposition to His creation and His creatures. Creation was bound up in His love, and He redeemed us for no other reason than His love.

John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him

shall not perish but have eternal life." John in another place in one of his letters, 1 John 4:19, said something simple and profound. And it had impacted me, and I pray that it's impacted you. John simply says, "We love because he first loved us." We think we are good lovers, but just focus on that a little bit. How profound is that? We think, "Oh, it's natural to love." I beg to differ. It is against every fiber of my nature to love well. I want what I want when I want it and how I want it. It requires something to be transformative in you. "We love because he first loved us." Love transforms.

Now this does happen in some ways apart from God. I mean, humans have the capacity to love in a way that changes your life. We have a recognition of what it means to lay down your life for the sake of someone else. It's a beautiful thing that is not unique to Christianity, and yet it is fulfilled and completed in the God of love.

Third, he mentions in this benediction the fellowship with the Holy Spirit. Here, he's highlighting the close relationship that the Holy Spirit in receiving this great salvation. And with that, all of the riches, all of what abounds in our union with Christ, all that is in God is yes and amen. The Holy Spirit is not detached from us as if it's just some sort of force or kind of wind, although Jesus Himself uses wind as a metaphor to explain it. We don't see wind, but we see the effects of the wind. We see the leaves moving. We see the trees swaying. We see our hair blowing. The Spirit is moving and active. And He's active in the fellowship of what it means to be brought up in recognizing that God is love. And I come to know that because I have experienced His grace as my redeemer. These things taken together, the work of the triune God bringing about full knowledge of Himself and full knowledge of who we are, both in what we're created to be, what we long to be in our spirit, our hopes, our dreams, and recognizing where we fall short of that and our need for forgiveness, our need for reconciliation. And so together, we see how this is participating together. And not only it's not detached as some force or some kind of mysterious wind chimes. It is very active in our communion with God in our unity with one another. The Holy Spirit gives to each according to the measure of grace.

Paul talks about this earlier in 2 Corinthians around chapter 12 and elsewhere in Romans 12. But the Holy Spirit in this giving each according to the measure of grace provided so that the members of the whole body mutually participate with one another. I am in Christ as a renewed image bearer. If you are in Christ, you are in Christ as a renewed image bearer. It is not yet complete in one sense unless we are experiencing that unity together in the church, this mutuality of what it means to be participating in Christ's body. God's grace, God's love, and God's fellowship is for you and for me. It's to you. Receive all that is given to you.

Likewise, this overarching story—it certainly involves this aspect of receiving God's blessing, but that's not complete until you take the next step. This overarching story of the Bible compels us to live God's blessing among one another. I referenced it earlier. But in Genesis 12, really verses 1 through 3 and following, but I'm not going to read all of Genesis. But particularly there in verse 2 where the Lord speaks to Abraham, and He says, "I will make of you a great nation. I will bless you, and I will make your name great so that." You see, if you go back to the previous chapters, Abraham wanted to be great. He wanted a great name. He wanted to be a great nation. And so do all people. But the key phrase that the story that God is saying hinges on that phrase. "I will do those things, Abraham, so that you will be a blessing." He goes on in verse 3, "And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." This is the flow of God's kingdom, to receive and to give so that others may receive, to experience and then extend so others may experience.

If we are to experience the blessing of God's grace, love, and fellowship, then how are we to live that blessing with one another? Through the affection and the unity that we have for one another in Christ's body as fellow members of His church. Jesus said this in the gospel of John. And it is convicting

because I long for it, and I know I fall short. And yet Jesus says, "By this, all people will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another." The very essence of receiving God's love, to be welcomed into God's family, to be transformed by God's grace is to then be compelled to love one another. And that is how the world will know that they are His disciples.

And here in the closing remarks of this letter, we see Paul's affection for them and his desire for their unity through mutual greeting with one another in the local church. But also bigger than that, it's the unity that's shared with others in the broader universal church. Such greetings demonstrate trust and intimacy, even involving what Paul calls a holy kiss. We're not instituting holy kisses in our worship, just to let you know. Just remove that off the table. Holy kisses, though, are mentioned in the scriptures. In three other places in the New Testament, Paul talks about it in Romans 16 and in 1 Thessalonians, and then Peter mentions it in 1 Peter 5. This could've been part of the liturgical flow of corporate worship, but it also could've just been easily the informal interaction between believers.

This is something that was unique to the holy church in the sense of how it was practiced amongst the whole body being the family of God, being brothers and sisters in Christ. This extended beyond social barriers, class, ethnicity. And to have that mutual experience of being knitted together in love as you're following Christ, there was something special about the consecrated set-apart greeting in this way. It certainly communicates family relationships as brothers and sisters, but it is important to note how it is also based on local customs. Even early on even in Greek society, there's a story of a philosopher who comes in from the rural kind of outskirts, and he comes in and greets someone and gives them a kiss. And everybody that's standing around watching just kind of nervously, awkwardly laughs. And they're like, "Hey, we don't do that here in the city." He's like, "Oh, okay. Well, that's what we do with my people back home." So there's customs here of how to greet one another, and those should be taken into account.

We may greet one another with hugs, or handshakes, or fist bumps, or elbow pops right now. I don't even know what you call these things. Elbow bumps, a smile, a greeting, a word. Christians also talk about this as passing the peace. "The peace of Christ be with you." "And also with you." The greetings of giving and receiving, being knitted together in Christ's bond of peace. The point, however, is not so much what you're doing, but it's what is true of your affections for one another and what is communicating with those words and actions that embody that affection and demonstrate the unity between one another.

Now, we do live in a time, unfortunately and tragically, that we must engage in ways and be even more cognizant of how we engage with our bodies and ways that honor God and demonstrate trust and safety. We must never engage touch with others that pretend to honor God but breach that trust and safety with another person. So in this way, we do it in God-honoring ways but that seeks to demonstrate and communicate that greeting with one another.

As we move closer to the end, just these last kind of exhortations that he gives in verses 11 and 12. He gives five parting encouragements. "Rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace." You may have a translation where a couple of these might be different. So "rejoice" in the ESV may be "goodbye" or "farewell" in your translation. It's to experience gladness, happiness, and wellbeing. Here, it can be the act of rejoicing, but it fits very well with what happens in a greeting. Whether that's a hello or a goodbye, there is a rejoicing that's shared between you.

The "aim for restoration," this idea of restoring to a former condition. It is a picture of mending. "Aim for restoration." Pursue mending. Pursue mending in your own lives. Pursue mending in your own relationships. This is the way the body of Christ is pursuing these bonds of peace.

"Comfort one another." Again, this might be an example where your translation differs. It's very

interesting to look at. We don't have all the time in the world to go into it. But the original language actually—it's appropriate to translate it either way. So how does that help you, right? But it can lend itself to here in the ESV where it's "comfort one another." The NIV, for example, says, "Listen to my appeal." Now, they both make sense in light of how the word can be used. It's making a strong request. It's making an appeal. But it also has a sense of instilling someone with a sense of courage and comfort. And so different translations make a different choice with respect to the subtleties of the word. They both fit in the flow. And so I wouldn't go so far as to say the NIV is incorrect, but I am showing my cards. I prefer the other translation because—although I think Paul is making an appeal, and he wants them to believe him and follow his words. I think in these final exhortations, it flows more smoothly to have these, like—because in the actual original language, they're like one word. It's just like these boom, boom, boom. "I'm parting. I'm saying goodbye. Here are my last thoughts to you, my brothers and sisters." Paul wants them to heed his words. But how does it mean to comfort, to strengthen, to encourage one another? That is an aspect of what it means to be in communion with each other, of receiving God's blessing and living in light of that blessing.

"Agreeing with one another" means to hold an opinion with regard to something, being of the same mind. Now, of course, this doesn't mean conformity of opinion or thought with one another, but it does point to how followers of Jesus need to be shaped and formed to live in light of the mind and hard of God. We see things differently. We express those things that we see in different ways. And so to pursue that work of communication and translation is an important part of understanding and seeking what it means to not conform to one another in our opinions but to agree in the matters that shape and form us as we seek to follow the mind and the heart of God.

And lastly, to "live in peace," which simply means keep the peace. To do this is really a twofold endeavor, to live in the peace that currently exists and continue in that peace in your lives and relationships, but it also necessarily involves the work of what happens if you don't have peace. And you need to be about the work of reconciling and mending those relationships.

So here, we are called to something to live in the body of Christ. And if you are with me being human—I'm assuming you're human. There are obstacles here, are there not? There are obstacles in my heart to living these out. There are obstacles in my relationships to experience these more fully. I have fears. I have anxieties. I have resentments. I can be confused based on misunderstandings. I can have incorrect assumptions. I can be swayed by those opinions of others that shed kind of faulty light on something else. All of these ways are ways that not only my own sin can contribute to the breakdown of those relationships and your sin being a breakdown of those relationships, but it's just also the hard knocks of living life with a life of love. It's fatiguing. It's exhausting. You're pouring yourself for someone else that may not return in kind. And Jesus likewise says, "What is it to you to love someone because they love you first?" The love that comes first is the love that comes and flows from God Himself first to us to fill us up and to pour us out so that we might be a blessing to others in passing along and showing and demonstrating that love.

So we work through those obstacles. It's confession. It's repentance. It's honesty. It's openness. It's asking for apologies. It's saying, "I'm sorry. I made a mistake." It's seeking forgiveness. These are the ways that we live in the body in seeking to live out the blessings that we receive from Christ and experiencing the peace that comes from Christ.

And so there's certainly obstacles. But where do we go to find them? Where do we live this out? And as we talk about the many parts of the body, there are the local church. Columbia Presbyterian Church, we're participating even this morning. When you get up and you come to worship, and you're like, "I don't want to come to worship today"—we're doing livestream still. So that's kind of nice. Or, "My

child's having a hard time this morning." All of these things, again, that can contribute to the obstacles, it is something that is a blessing. Even if you don't hear my sermon, even if you think I'm boring, even if you think you have to go out in the hallway because you're distracting other people, all of those things don't bar you from the grace of God that is for you and to you.

We experience this in corporate worship. We experience this in private worship as we read and study God's word and pray. I encourage you to live this out with others, your family, your neighbors. May that even be the experience of your community groups, your Bible studies, Sunday classes. These are ways that we participate in the body to have the means by which God communicates his love, and mercy, and kindness, and goodness, and grace. We see His righteousness, His holiness, His justice, His pursuit, His persistence. We stand amazed by God's grace. We do it by participating in our ministries. We do it by assisting in what it means to serve and lead in things. Serving, setting up chairs, serving the nursery, all of the things it takes to be a part of even coming together on Sundays. But what it means to gather in prayer with two or three or four and praying for God to bring about renewal, praying to God to bring about the church to explode in Iran, in Afghanistan, in China, in Japan, in the United States, that we would be praying for what God is doing throughout the world. These are the ways that we experience and extend the blessings of what it means to live with God and with one another.

One writer says this. "By this prayer," kind of these closing remarks of the letter, but specifically here again in the benediction in verse 14. "By this prayer, Paul is reminding the Corinthians that their mending roles do not lie within themselves but with the grace of Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Spirit." Where there's obstacles, hear this good word. "The grace of Christ removes aggressiveness. The love of God dispels jealousy while the fellowship created by the Spirit destroys bitterness. As God answers that prayer, the problems so manifest in Corinth and every troubled church will be overcome." And as we receive God with us, we seek to live as God among us. To be made in the image of God is to reflect glory to one another, and to have that mended and restored, and reconciled and redeemed in Christ. We are mirroring. We're reflecting a far superior glory as we are in Christ than when we are apart from Him.

The Japanese American artist Mako Fujimura is an abstract painter. He does techniques that is Japanese art that takes years and years to perfect. And it goes back centuries. But he's a very contemplative man. I have appreciated both his writings as well as his art. He's recently made a short film in commemoration of 9/11, and it's entitled *Ground Zero*. It's a very short film. It's very beautiful and moving. I encourage you to Google it and find it. *Ground Zero*, Mako. He does something that's powerful in the storytelling. He's both acknowledging the 20th anniversary of what has happened to New York City, what's happened to the United States, what happened to the world on that day. He's also recognizing something that is universal, and he speaks about it in terms of trauma. We are united by trauma. It is a universal language that connects us all. Think about that. He's speaking about that day, and in his own recollections, he's also thinking about an event much further in the past as he's thinking about Nagasaki. And he said something very striking to me that I did not know about, and it broke my heart. On that day, more Christians were killed in Japan than martyred in over 300 years.

And that is sobering to think about the devastation of how we traumatize one another. It is a universal language that connects us all. And when we experience it in our lives, we certainly can feel shame or isolation and loneliness. But yet when we find each other and how we maybe have been hurt in the same ways, there's something life-giving about that. "You, too?" It's like friendship. It's like, "Oh, I thought I was the only one." So there's something unifying about that. An event like 9/11 is also unifying in the sense of who might be our common enemies? How do we rally together? And there were beautiful moments. There are also things to reflect upon that were not so beautiful about those days and months

after.

It's very poignant, too, because of trauma not only of the lives impacted of that day, but the lives of a generation. Friends of mine who have been broken by war, have been devastated to write letters to family members that he was not able to save, his soldiers. And here is again devastated and exhausted because he's writing letters to senators to say, "Bring my translator home." Whatever you think or feel about the politics of the matter, that's not my point. The point is it is something profound that Mako brings up. We are united by trauma. It is a universal language that connects us all.

But that connection is fleeting. That we all have our journeys and need to experience the grace of God and forgiveness that comes through that, but there is something here today in God's word of "God be with you." Mako goes on to say, "It is the trauma of God, the pain of God that heals us." To think about the triune God creating and sustaining you, creating and sustaining all things and saying, "I know it's broken. I know it's not right. But I am mending it. I am making it right. And it is finished." It is finished by the work of Christ. And this is transformative love. It is redemptive grace that comes by God's love. May God be with you today.

Our Father in heaven, we give you thanks and praise for your good word, your benediction, your gracious love that is poured out through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. May we hear and see and respond by faith. May we see and desire what it means to be mended, to be transformed, to be made right not only with you, but that gets fleshed out in our very lives and circumstances. Not only heal us, but then make us ambassadors of love to others, ministers of reconciliation in the lives of others, that we together as we worship you are equipped by your Spirit to love, to serve in your name. We pray this in Jesus's name. Amen.