

May 31, 2026
2 Corinthians 13:11-13

The Holy Trinity
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“Blessed Trinity”

“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.”

Barnegat Light is a small community on the northern tip of Long Beach Island along the New Jersey shore. It is named after the Barnegat Lighthouse, which for decades has guided boats safely into Barnegat Inlet, which connects the Atlantic Ocean to Barnegat Bay. While most of Long Beach Island is dedicated to summer tourists, Barnegat Light is home to a major commercial fishing fleet that goes far out into the ocean waters and brings back significant catches of all kinds of ocean fish. It is an enterprise that is both profitable and dangerous; the waters of the Atlantic can become very dangerous and many boats that left the harbour at Barnegat Light never returned. This treacherous reality was the inspiration for the annual Blessing of the Fleet, which is held annually on the second Sunday in June and features an interdenominational worship service that honours local fishermen, blesses the fleets and their crews, offers prayers for safety on the ocean waters, and pays tribute to those who have been lost at sea. It is part of a long-standing tradition in many fishing ports to bless the fleets so that they might be safe as they fish the abundant but perilous waters of the North Atlantic, praying that God will *“hear us when we cry to thee for those in peril on the sea.”* (ELW Hymn 756).

The Blessing of the Fleet is part of a tradition of offering prayers of blessing at significant times and on important occasions. Many schools and universities offer worship services in which prayers of blessing are offered for students and teachers at the beginning of a school year. When a family moves into a new home, they may call upon their pastor to offer a blessing for their new dwelling, offering prayers of blessing that God will *“watch over them in all their going out and their coming in; keep all evil away from their door; and let them share the hospitality of this home with all who visit, that those who enter here may know your love and peace”* (ELW Blessing of a Home). Last weekend, I was privileged to offer marriage blessings to a couple who were recently married as well as a couple celebrating their seventieth anniversary. We offer prayers of blessing so that God’s loving presence blessing people at significant moments in their lives and so that they may receive the fullness of the blessings of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ who came *“that they may have life and have it abundantly.”* (John 10:10).

Today's second lesson is from the end of Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians in which the Apostle offers his concluding admonitions and blessing to the people to whom he has written this difficult letter. It is often been said that if all of the issues Paul addresses in First Corinthians had been resolved there would be no need for a Second Corinthian letter; but sadly, not only had the issues of the first letter been left unresolved but the problems in the Corinthian church had only intensified, including hurtful words that had been aimed at Paul. This is often referred to as "Paul's Painful Letter," since on many occasions he shares the hurt that he is experiencing and the need to defend his ministry against baseless charges being spoken against him:

- "For I wrote to you out of much distress and anxiety of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain, but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you." – 2:4.
- "We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you. There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. In return – I speak as to children – open wide your hearts also." – 6:11-13.
- "I do not want to seem as though I am trying to frighten you with my letters. For they say, 'His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible.' Let such people understand that what we say by letter when absent, we will also do when present." – 10:10-11.

Even though this has been a difficult letter that reflects the difficult relationship between Paul and the Corinthians, the Apostle still concludes his letter with the usual concluding admonitions and blessings that are marks of his apostolic epistles. After bidding those to whom he refers as brothers and sisters "farewell" (*chairete*), which can also be translated "rejoice"), Paul offers a series of exhortations to his readers on how they might live together as those who have been reconciled to God in Christ and entrusted with the "*ministry of reconciliation*" (5:18): "*put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace*: (13:11). Paul stresses the need for corporate action in the church that is necessary to counteract the division and quarrelsomeness that has afflicted the work of the faith community in Corinth; "*the members of the divided church need to learn to act together*." (Ernest Best). Paul's appeal to the Corinthians to be at peace with one another is sanctioned by its identification with God as the one who champions love and peace. Since the Corinthians cannot do this by themselves, Paul promises that "*the God of love and peace will be with you*" (13:11b). In situations of conflict, what is needed above all is the peace and love that God alone can give; "*the love of God expressed in Christ's death results in peace with God for those who believe in him and this peace with God structures the life of the community so that peace reigns there also*." (Stephen Chester). The Corinthians can enact their being God's people of peace and love

when they “*greet one another with a holy kiss*” (13:12a). Such an admonition is spoken frequently by Paul at the end of his letters (“*Greet one another with a holy kiss*” – Romans 16:16). Calling this kiss “holy” suggests that it is a social convention taken over from the larger culture and made acceptable for believers as an intimate greeting, the start of reconciliation. The kiss was given on the brow and shoulders, and since it was the way in which family members greeted one another it would serve to remind believers that they are members of the family of God; “*the Corinthians are not set apart by God by themselves but are also united as a single family with believers in every place. The church is both local and universal*” (Chester). Paul reminds his readers of the universality of the church as the family of God when he reports that “*all the saints greet you*” (13:12). This mention of “all the saints” shows that, despite opposition at Corinth, Paul has vast support from other believers about whom the Corinthians surely know.

Paul’s concluding words to the Corinthians are what is often referred to as the “Apostolic Blessing,” a blessing he offers as part of his ministry as “*an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God*” (1:1): “*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.*” (13:13). The emphasis of Paul’s apostolic blessing lies on the grace, love, and fellowship as three things for which Paul prays for the Corinthians. “Grace” (*charis*) opens and closes every undisputed Pauline letter, “*just as grace encompasses every moment of the life of faith for all believers*” (J. Paul Sampley). The life of faith is dependent from beginning to end on God’s unmerited, freely bestowed gift. “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ” is a shorthand way of referring to salvation in general; the human beings who receive it “*do not do so because of any form of worthiness that they possess but only because of divine mercy*” (Chester). Grace expresses in action the truth that God “*chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love*” (Ephesians 1:4). From Christ comes the grace by which people become Christians; no virtue or accomplishment in themselves can make them such. Behind this grace lies the “*love of God*” from which all redemptions begin and in which it will end. It is this love of God that propelled Jesus to die for us: “*God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us*” (Romans 5:8). Christ and God are active in creating the grace and love that leads to the “*fellowship*” (*koinonia*) of the Holy Spirit, a participation in the Spirit that leads into a fellowship with one another created for them by God. The communion created by the Holy Spirit is the Body of Christ; this communion with fellow believers can also never be other than our communion with God; “*the Spirit is the bond that unites those who believe not only with each other but also with God*” (Chester). It is this grace, love, and fellowship that Paul desires to “*be with all of you,*” which once again affirms that “*all the Corinthians stand on the same*

ground and belong to one another because of God's love, the grace in and from Christ, and the fellowship generated by the Holy Spirit." (Sampley).

Paul's apostolic blessing includes a confession of faith in what we refer to as the Holy Trinity, our God who has been revealed to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. While Paul and the early Christians did not yet have a well-formulated understanding of the Trinity that would be established in the historic creeds of the church, the Apostle uses references to the Three to express the complex and rich divine engagement with the people who have been blessed by the one who is confessed as "*God in three persons, blessed trinity.*" This trinitarian blessing is at the heart of Jesus' Great Commission to his apostles at the end of Matthew's Gospel, in which the Risen Lord Jesus Christ proclaims to his followers that "*all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me*" (28:18). Invested with this authority, Jesus confers a missionary mandate on those who will continue his work: "*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*" (28:19). The entire world is declared to be a mission field; after Christ's resurrection, the invitation to discipleship is open to all people of all nations. Their incorporation into the Church which is the Body of Christ is through the act of Baptism that marks the transition from being outside the community to discipleship within it. In being baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity, Jesus makes clear that those who are baptized will be far more than disciples of a beloved rabbi; "*they will be agents of the very God of the cosmos, one on whom they may call as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*" (Brian Maas). The apostles are commissioned both to baptize and to teach the newly baptized "*to obey everything that I have commanded you*" (28:19). After baptizing disciples, the continuing Christian community is to instruct them in all that Jesus has taught so that they may understand that Christian discipleship is a total way of life, a commitment to pattern one's daily actions and decision after the example set by Jesus and his followers ("*Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ*" – 1 Corinthians 11:1). Discipleship begins with a sacramental initiation, begin baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity.

- "And since we are baptized into these names and are consecrated and hallowed by them, and since they have thus become our names, it follows that God's children should be called and also be gentle, merciful, chaste, just, truthful, guileless, friendly, peaceful, and kindly disposed toward all, even toward our enemies. For the name of God, in which we are baptized, works all this in us." – Martin Luther, 1519.

The words of blessing that Paul bestows on the Corinthians at the end of his second letter are the words we share with one another at the beginning of our worship

gatherings. As Paul's words offered encouragement for the Christians in Corinth to greet each other in peace and love, in worship these words convey the very grace, love, and communion of which they speak. The worship assembly is meant to be the communion of the Holy Spirit around the grace of Jesus Christ and the love of God, spoken and given in word and sacrament:

- “In this mutual greeting, with apostolic authority, the presider and the assembly are established and held in the triune life of God ... The assembly, by its response, acknowledges and prays for the triune God to be with the one who presides. This moment of mutuality in the living Word of God constitutes one of the seminal moments in all Christian liturgy.” – Loraine Brugh and Gordon Lathrop.

It is the blessing we receive from “*God in three persons, blessed Trinity*” that we celebrate on this Sunday of the Holy Trinity, proclaimed in our opening hymn in which we rejoice in the God in which “*all thy works shall praise thy name in earth and sky and sea.*” The hymn “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty” (ELW Hymn 415) is based on Revelation 4:8 (“*And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and inside. Day and night without ceasing they sing, ‘Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come.’*”). It was written by Reginald Heber, an English clergyman who served for many years in India. He wrote many hymns but never published them during his lifetime; after his death, his wife put together a collection of her husband's hymns and had them published. The repetition of “holy, holy, holy” reflects the Jewish tradition of using repetition for emphasis, like our use of exclamation points in English. Jesus often used repetition in his teachings to call attention to his teachings (“*Truly, truly I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life.*” – John 5:24). If the repetition of two words is the equivalent to an exclamation point, a repetition of three “*is equivalent to someone waving their arms and screaming at you!*” (Taylor Brontley). Of all God's attributes, this is the only one in which repetition of three is used, emphasizing the good news of the “blessed Trinity” who is “merciful and mighty,” a description of the Triune God who has strength and authority to enact absolute justice, yet chooses to show compassion, forgiveness, and restraint toward those who are vulnerable.

- “If God limited himself to only justice, he would cease to be God and would instead be like human beings who ask merely that the law be respected. But mere justice is not enough. Experience shows that an appeal to justice alone risks destroying it ... With mercy and forgiveness, God goes beyond justice,

he subsumes it and exceeds it in a higher event in which we experience love, which is at the root of true justice.” – Pope Francis.

As we celebrate the God who has been revealed to us as the Holy Trinity, we acknowledge that it is often difficult to understand how our one God is known to us as three persons, proclaimed as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. But as we hear the Trinity proclaimed in today’s readings, the Trinity is not about understanding so much as it is about relationship, about how God relates to us as the God of grace and love through whom we have fellowship with God and with one another. It is about our relationship with our God who is “merciful and mighty,” who loves us unconditionally and is the good shepherd who lays down his life on our behalf. It is about the “strong name of the Trinity” with which we offer blessings of strength and hope, especially for those who are in dangerous or vulnerable circumstances. It is the name in which we are blessed so that we might be a blessing to others as we share “*the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit*” that has been given to “*be with all of you.*”

- “The Trinity is the expression of our ultimate optimism in the face of our provisional pessimism. The Trinity allows us to imagine, experience, anticipate, and celebrate the wholeness and unity of God, and the only appropriate response to all of that is to worship him with those who fall down before him saying, ‘Thou art worthy, O Lord our God, to receive glory and honour and power, because thou didst create all things, by thy will they were created and have their being.’ Such is to experience the fullness, the wholeness, the unity of God: the one who was, and is, and is to be, and that is the big picture!” – Peter Gomes.

Next month, the people of Barnegat Light will gather on the shores of the inlet to offer prayers of blessing of the fleet that goes out to sea to bring back an abundant catch of fish that will be a blessing to their community. The prayers of blessing that they will offer are no guarantee that all who go out into the ocean waters will not face peril, nor does it promise that none will perish in those treacherous waters. What it promises is what all of our blessings promise: that in all circumstances we face, we are blessed by the strong name of the Trinity, the blessings of grace, love, and communion that are ours through the one who we worship and in whom we trust, our “*God in three persons, blessed Trinity.*”

Amen.