

June 11, Trinity Sunday

2 Corinthians 13:11-13; Genesis 1:1-2:4a; Matthew 28:16-20

by [D. Brent Laytham](#) in the [May 24, 2017](#) issue

The lectionary isn't exactly subtle this week. It's Trinity Sunday, so we read two of the most obvious articulations of triune identity in all of scripture—the Great Commission and the Pauline benediction. At churches that also dramatically proliferate the word *trinity* in song, prayer, and sermon, Trinity Sunday begins to feel like it is trying too hard. (Remember: simply repeating a word a lot doesn't make it matter more or mean more.) Far better to arrive at Trinity Sunday having sung, prayed, and preached during Christmas-Epiphany and Easter-Pentecost in ways that articulate triune identity, inescapable and profound.

Moreover, these readings should remind us that we've already been consistently naming the triune God in our worship. Most church traditions make disciples according to Matthew's dominical rubric, baptizing "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." And many churches make at least occasional use of Paul's benediction, whether as a greeting at the beginning of worship or as a blessing at the end.

These practices raise the question of whether trinity is presupposition or conclusion, beginning or ending, greeting or benediction, gathering or sending. In this week's readings, ending and sending are more overt. Paul ends his epistle with a trinitarian farewell; Jesus sends the nascent church on a trinitarian mission. Even the creation story is about God finishing the work and inviting humans to complete the task of filling the earth.

Yet each lesson also begins with gatherings and greetings. In Matthew, the risen Lord brings disciples together, drawing them *to* the mountain but *into* his authority. Paul's aim is to gather fractious Corinthians into order, agreement, and peace, and he commands greeting by kissing—a sharing of the same holy breath who eastered God's son. And Genesis begins by gathering inchoate void into ordered goodness;

creation *ex nihilo* is God greeting nothingness with the invitation to be, to become, and to be blessed.

Taken together, the readings show how God's love evokes a pattern of going forth and coming together (classically designated *exitus* and *reditus*), of commission and communion. Trinity names that story of the effulgent One from whom we come and the holy mystery to whom we go. Trinity tells who truly authors our story—and the world's.

In other words, we need trinity as a conceptual grammar to tell adequately and faithfully the story of God creating and redeeming the world. This means, homiletically, that Genesis 1 and Matthew 28 are storied moments crying out for trinitarian retellings. Because Paul's benediction is less overtly a trinitarian narrative, because it appears static rather than storied, let's look more closely at this reading.

First of all, the three persons are connected here with coordinating conjunctions (Christ and God and Spirit) rather than prepositions (from the Father, through the Son, by or in the Spirit). So this trinitarian sighting might look more like a posed portrait than an action shot, more ontological than narrative. The traditional trinitarian prepositions orient us to divine agency, parsing the story's indivisible divine as the working of three nonconfusable divine persons. Coordinating conjunctions, on the other hand, emphasize equality of status, as Basil of Caesarea famously argued.

Yet the "ands" in the epistle reading also point to action: they explicate the full identity of who it is that enacts Paul's gospel story. Whenever Paul narrates the activity of Christ *or* God *or* the Holy Spirit, he presupposes that divine agency is most fully Christ *and* God *and* the Spirit.

Another reason Paul's benediction seems more static than storied: in the Greek, there's no verb. There are, however, three strong theological nouns—grace, love, and *koinōnia*—each of which gestures to what God has done, is doing, and will continue to do. The Lord Jesus Christ is *gracing*, God is *loving*, and the Holy Spirit is . . . what exactly? *Koinōnia* is harder to turn into a verb. The noun itself is variously translated as fellowship, communion, participation, even close relationship. Trying to determine what divine activity this noun implies, however, surfaces the reality that it takes two—or three—to *koinōnia*. Love and grace each require just one acting subject, but fellowshiping or communing is the work of a plural subject. I could

never fellowship alone and neither could you (singular), but we can do so as we share together with the divine subject who actualizes our communion.

Paul's benediction, therefore, articulates the one narrative grammar of two divine stories. First is the story of how from all eternity the Father's outpoured love elicits the Son's gracious return in the communion of the Holy Spirit. The Holy One's own eternal life is ceaseless loving, gracing, and communing. Second, that same grammar holds in time: the scriptural story stretching from Eden to eschaton is one story of God's love and Christ's grace and the Spirit's *koinōnia*, these three who are one. The Holy One's temporal way with Israel and the church, indeed with all creation, is faithful loving, gracing, communing.

We can believe this, finally, because we are right there in the benediction, in the final phrase "with you all." Although no Greek verb connects Paul's triune blessing with us, most translations supply the word "be." In fact, the nouns have already narrated the connection. The triune One who ceaselessly loves, graces, and communes from all eternity has elected to faithfully love, grace, and commune with us all—not just at the beginning or end of our story, but now and forever, world without end.