

On this Trinity Sunday, our reading is Paul’s famous formulation of the triune benediction: “*The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*” Paul closes his final letter to the church in Corinth with this blessing, urging them to “*agree with one another and live in peace.*”

You might remember that this was a lot to ask, as the Corinthian church was rancorous, boastful, sexually profligate, and spiritually pompous. This is why Paul closes with the specific language of the Trinitarian benediction: *grace, love, and fellowship.*

The language is not only inspired but intentional. Any real “fellowship” comes through “grace” and “love.” This is true in any situation – your situation, for instance. Where grace leads, love follows, and fellowship (living in peace) occurs. *The **grace** of our Lord Jesus Christ, the **love** of God, and the **fellowship** of the Holy Spirit be with you all.* When grace enters in, the result is reciprocating love. When grace and love are present, then fellowship – unity – peace is the happy by-product.

The opposite is usually true, as well. When demand or condemnation lead, resistance follows and bitterness occurs. It’s a good thing that Paul didn’t leave us with, “*the demand of Jesus Christ, the law of God, and the conviction of the Holy Spirit.*” I saw that a local politician urged preachers to preach about social issues “*full throated and with their ears pinned back.*” It is irrelevant what side of whatever issue you take – anybody that comes at you full throated and with pinned back ears is going to initiate the fight or flight reaction! That is no way to reach agreement and peace.

Just think for a minute about the last conflict you had with somebody. When you launch in on the attack, you immediately get counter-attack. Any time you lead with the language of your own rights – “I deserve better from you, I have right to demand this of you”, then, you are on the wrong track. You may be on the track that leads to justice for yourself, but you will not be on the track that leads to reciprocal love and true fellowship. But when you lead with grace, you usually get a response of love. When grace leads, love follows, and fellowship occurs.

What does it mean to lead with grace with a person? Here, I want to turn to the source of all true relationship wisdom – The Bachelorette. I watch it with my daughter, so I never miss an episode of The Bachelorette, the patently absurd reality show about a group of men vying for the hand of one young woman. (I sometimes wonder how we’ve sunk so low as a culture – how could so many people be watching a show so stupid – then I realize that I’m one of those people, so I go and get more popcorn.)

One of the eligible bachelors decided to wear a mask the first few times he met the Bachelorette, insisting that what makes a person really beautiful is what is on the inside. And in a dramatic moment a few weeks ago, he took off his mask in front of the bachelorette, revealing his outer beauty as well. Apparently, he didn’t reveal much that was worth looking at, either in an inner or an outer way, because the masked man didn’t make the cut.

The mask was clearly hokey. But I think he was onto something true and universal. Everybody wears a mask. Everybody wears different masks depending on the situation. Everyone presents a face to the world that is calculated and designed to impress, a mask that hides what is really there.

You have a job mask, of course, and your college reunion mask, but you probably also have a son mask, a Father’s Day mask, or a mother-in-law mask. Facebook is an obvious mask; that’s why it’s called Facebook and not “Heartbook”, or better yet, “Subliminal Impulse Book.” If all your subliminal impulses were displayed on your home page, I wonder how many friends you would have?!? Witness Protection Program here we come!

We hide what is really there and we grow accustomed to our masks. The philosopher Soren Kierkegaard says, *“I have seen men in life who so long have deceived others that at last their true nature could not reveal itself.”* There is, of course, a real cost in maintaining the mask. Kierkegaard concludes, *“But, he who cannot reveal himself cannot love, and he who cannot love is the most unhappy man of all.”*

Taking off the mask is the way toward love. Revealing what is really there allows for love. Sounds peachy, but in reality this is risky business. Jesus’ description of the human heart - what is really there - is not flattering. He says out of the human heart comes all kinds of murder, envy, lust, and worse. Just the kind of things you’d want to cover up with a mask. So, to lead with grace is to love a person below his or her mask.

To lead with grace is to really know a person, and yet to still love them. To really know a person is to know all that is scary and ugly and wrong in that person, and yet to come along side of what is really there. This is what it means to lead with grace. Then love will follow.

There was a book review in the *New York Times* last Sunday about a book called “Your Voice in My Head,” a memoir of a young woman who overcomes her self-destructive behavior. What was really there below the mask began to surface in terrible ways. When she was in her early 20’s she was bulimic and an obsessive self-cutter and began “to walk hand in hand with the thought of suicide.”

But then she meets a man who loves her as she is, someone who seems to lead with grace. At this point in the review, the *New York Times* reviewer reveals her bias against the power of love of another to heal. She worries that in the book “*we might be headed to the worst kind of treacly happy ending, in which a lunatic girl is redeemed by the love of a good man.*”

I beg your pardon? Since when is the love of a good man, or the love of a good woman deemed “treacly” – cloying, saccharine, overly sweet? The reviewer would rather have the young woman pull herself up by her bootstraps and assert her independence. But, in my experience, it takes the graceful love of another to begin to make whole the fractured and empty places below our masks.

It doesn’t have to be romantic love, of course. It can be the love of a father (Happy Father’s Day!) or a teacher or a friend. When one person comes to you with grace, then love and unity will follow. There is nothing treacly about grace.

Who can resist being loved in this way? Grace is irresistible. Sure, we don’t really believe that we could be loved in this way, and can’t accept it and certainly don’t deserve it. As Calvin says of irresistible grace, “*it is not violent, as to compel men by external force; but still it is a powerful impulse of the Holy Spirit, which makes men willing who were formerly unwilling or reluctant.*” Or as we frequently say around here, “Love wins.”

This kind of graceful love does not rise unaided from the human heart. As we’ve said, lust and bitterness and self-defense rise unaided from the

human heart. Love, the kind of grace that sees below the mask and still sticks around, the kind of love that knows, really knows, and yet loves must come from somewhere other than our own hearts.

Of course this love comes from God. As Calvin says “*it is a powerful impulse of the Holy Spirit.*” God knows you as you are and yet loves you as you are. He has seen what is really there and has sent his Son Jesus Christ to be the Friend of Sinners, the Friend of those who reveal what is really there.

So, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and always. Amen.