

## “Benediction”

*2 Corinthians 13:13*

Pastor Jeff Fox-Kline | Sermon for Sunday, February 20, 2022

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A reading from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians chapter 13:13 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of<sup>le</sup> the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

Patterns and rhythms live at the core of who we are as a church. Our year is defined by the twin pillars of Christmas and Easter, our months are defined by the sharing of communion, our weeks are defined by the respite of worship. These are traditions and practices that move like the tides, surely and inexorably. Breathe in, breathe out.

These patterns ground us, center us, and guide us. These are the rhythms that guide lives and echo in our worship. While the content of worship varies wildly from week to week, our tradition clings to a structure of worship that has persisted for centuries. Gathering, receiving and responding to the Word, celebrating the sacraments, and sending. Breathe in, breathe out. God brings us into the worshipping body and sends us out into the world. As we gather, we are welcomed to the worshipping space, which as we now know can truly be anywhere. In our gathering we sing, we confess our sins, we pass the peace of Christ, and we open ourselves to what is to come. The word is proclaimed. Scripture is read and then the preacher shares how God may be speaking to them through the scripture. We offer of ourselves in response to the life-giving word, and then, bound together by the love of God that was revealed to us through Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, we pray with and for one another. The sacraments, whether they are enacted or not are present in the font and table, giving us a visible reminder of God’s

transcendent grace and love. In our sending we are charged to bear this sacred experience into the world, we are given a blessing to empower us to do all this fearlessly.

For those who have internalized the pattern, it becomes a sustaining rhythm, a weekly thrum that resonates through our week until we return again. Every part of this pattern is precious to me. The welcome into worship, the awareness of our sinfulness that moves to our recognition of God's forgiveness, the peace of Christ that we share together in community, the word of God coming to life in our midst, the radical act of offering ourselves in service to something beyond us, the intimate care that comes with praying for one another. I love all of those things, and at various times I may describe each of those parts as my favorite part of worship. But today I have a different favorite part of worship. This is the charge and blessing. The benediction. The sending.

Our Presbyterian Book of Order, the church's constitution, says "We are blessed in order to be a blessing to others. The charge calls the church to go forth as agents of God's mission in the world". I find the benediction to be intimidating and exciting. I view it as a chance to reaffirm what we heard through scripture, affirm that our call is not just in the walls of the church or the hour of worship, and a chance to share words of blessing to sustain us in this work. I don't write anything down for it, and that's where it gets scary. I know for a fact that many of you worshipping with us today have had this happen on a Sunday that I've preached: the last hymn ends and everyone standing remains so as I get up to give the benediction. I get up and start talking before realizing that I've led us down a maze of words with no discernible exit. People start looking at one another thinking "should we sit down again?". Just as this thought takes hold, I manage to wrestle the sentence to the ground and push on as if nothing happened. But I always close it in the same way: "May the love of God, the Grace of Jesus Christ, and the Communion and fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us today and always. And all God's people say... Amen"

This is the last Sunday that I will preach a sermon in this pulpit at Covenant Presbyterian Church in Madison Wisconsin and so I leave you with a benediction. 2 Corinthians 13:13, scripture that I've quoted dozens of times over the years. This is a blessing to us all and serves as a recognition of those things that the Triune God does for us. The love of God, the grace of Jesus Christ, the communion of the Holy Spirit. A blessing in triplicate to sustain us as we leave worship.

The love of God is present with us at all times, wherever we are. This love holds us in compassion and hope. This love reminds us that those things that hurt us are not borne alone, and that those things that we celebrate are shared by one who finds deep joy in our own. This love is a blanket that covers all things, giving us the strength and hope to persevere in all things. To be sent out with this love is to say that while nothing will ever be perfect, we always have a reservoir of love to support us, and that we are now called to share that love.

The grace of Jesus Christ reminds us of who we should be when we greet one another. We go into an imperfect world as imperfect people. We confess our sins because we need the grace of Jesus Christ, and we pray "as we forgive our debtors" because we need to show the grace of Jesus Christ. If we do this in our worship, we must do the same in the world. To experience the grace of Jesus Christ is to be willing and able to ask forgiveness, to admit fault, and to be vulnerable. It's so often that as Christians we are told to forgive, but we also need to remain aware that we are all in need of forgiveness. We open ourselves up to the reality of our own sin, and in doing so we are freed to recognize the humanity in our neighbor. It is in this way that the grace of Jesus Christ is with us.

And finally, the communion and fellowship of the Holy Spirit. The enormity of this gift cannot be understated. This communion and fellowship transcend every barrier that will ever be erected. This communion is shared with those who came before us in the great cloud of witnesses. This communion is shared with strangers the world

around who no longer are stranger, but rather sibling. This communion and fellowship sustain us even as we depart from one another. While I am no longer to be pastor here at Covenant, the gift of the Holy Spirit means that we will never truly be out of community with one another. When I take communion elsewhere, I take communion here with you. When I pray for my siblings, I pray for you. As I depart I recognize that while my time here is done, my time with you all will never end. This is the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Rev. Kimberly Bracken Long says that the benediction “is an expression of relationships that are forged simultaneously: love and care of pastor for people; trust and covenant between the people and God; love between members of the body; and the ‘worshipful work’ that is the expression of love of Christ’s church for the whole world”.

I leave here with the certainty that the people in this place, you people, deeply know these truths. I have seen it constantly over the past five years. I have seen people grow in their love of God, deepen their understanding of who God is and how God inspires us. I have been pushed and challenged by people here to expand my definition of God. In these ways we have all continued to forge the trust and covenant between us and God. I have seen relationships blossom, friendships cement, love shared, people comforted and celebrated. The love between the members of the body is a reality that comes out of our shared identity as children of God. And I have certainly witnessed the worshipful work in the ways the people here express the love of Christ for the whole world.

The examples of this happening are too many to enumerate. I’ve been honored to serve especially among the encouraging and supportive members of the 2:42 community, the joyful and welcoming young adult group, the curious and engaged members of the Adult Education committee, the fearless and compassionate members of the Mission Committee, the giving and passionate members of the

Deacons, the deliberative and wise members of the Session, the dedicated and loving members of this staff, and many, many, others who touched my life and ministry in less formalized but no less important ways.

At my installation service in November of 2016, I had the honor of being joined by the late Reverend Ken Hindman, a personal friend and colleague, and a friend of Covenant Presbyterian Church. Ken gave the charge to the congregation on the commencement of my time here, and his words challenged us to live as an authentic Christian community. He said, “The church’s program here is a laboratory in which we learn to love each other, and we test the skills of community building in order to go out into the community of Madison to be agents of reconciliation and peacemaking”. This charge was true then and true now. A benediction carries a charge and a blessing. This charge gives us purpose and the blessing gives us strength to live this purpose. We build community, foster reconciliation, and promote peacemaking because we are given the gift of love, grace and fellowship. As our paths diverge and the patterns shift, I will continue to serve God alongside you all, because when we leave this place, regardless of whether it’s just some Sunday morning, or if it’s for the last time, we leave knowing that we are accompanied by the love of God, the grace of Jesus Christ, and the communion and fellowship of the Holy Spirit. And all God’s people say... Amen

To my siblings in Christ,

One of my first experiences as the Associate Pastor at Covenant was a baby shower given for my wife and I as we started the journey of parenthood. As far as first impressions go, it was an incredible demonstration of generosity. Nothing over the past five years has shown me anything other than a generous body of faithful individuals dedicated to caring for one another and their neighbors. As I depart from this service, I am going with a heavy heart but also a joyful hope knowing that the world will continue to be a better place because the people of Covenant are present and active in discerning God’s will.

I will hold you all in my prayers and will always be grateful to you all.

Peace,

Jeff Fox-Kline