



Grace, Love, and Fellowship

By

The Reverend Rebecca Kirkpatrick

From the Pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

May 31, 2026

First Lesson | 2 Corinthians 13:11-13

Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Be restored; listen to my appeal; 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, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

Second Lesson | Matthew 28:16-20

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him, but they doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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 and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Sermon

When our son Owen was in preschool and then elementary school, he loved talking to us about the things he was discovering about the world as he made friends and had new experiences, as many children do. I especially loved it when he would learn something new and be surprised that it was something Josh and I already knew ourselves.

My favorite was the day on a drive to school when he asked if I knew that not everyone has a church. I am sure it was surprising to him because everyone he knew had a church - me, his dad, both sets of grandparents, all of our clergy friends. This was also absolutely not Owen discovering other religious practices outside of Christianity. This was him learning that there are people in the world who don't practice any organized religion at all.

I asked him what he thought about that. He thought people were missing out by not going to church. He had no concerns about anyone's eternal salvation or their relationship to Jesus Christ. He would

want you to know that at 21, he still isn't particularly concerned about that for anyone in the world—a perspective shared by many young people today.

He told me that he thought that the thing they were missing the most was the people. The community. I agreed.

Fast forward to just a few years ago, and this time I was in the car with one of Owen's friends. I had run down to Narberth to pick her up for an afternoon hang at our house. I was asking her about her post-high-school plans and interests, and she mentioned she was considering going into Early Childhood Education. I asked her if Owen had explained that I work at the church right next to our house; of course, he hadn't. I told her that our church has a preschool and that if she was interested in talking to someone about Early Childhood education, I could help arrange it for her.

She said, with the unfiltered honesty of a seventeen-year-old, "Yeah, my family tries to avoid churches." The conversation that followed made it pretty clear that the part of the church that she had been raised to be wary of was the same thing that Owen had come to love - the people.

Just a few weeks ago, I was at a dinner with two former BMPC administrative staff, both in their early thirties, and the three of us talked together about what it was like for them to work at a church. They both talked about how much they valued the work and this congregation and the sense of purpose that they felt when they were here. But then they shared that a mutual friend of theirs was alarmed, or maybe it would be better to say, put off by their decision to work at a church, bordering on criticizing them for associating with a church. Their friend shared that, in her experience, churches were judgmental and unwelcoming. And beyond that, the rise of Christian nationalism in the media and politics had led her to see all Christian churches as increasingly disconnected from contemporary values of inclusion and care.

For three weeks this spring, a large group of folks here at BMPC actually came together around this exact concern, reading a newly published book entitled "Being Presbyterian in a Dysvangelical America, a Guide to Reclaiming the Good News of God's Grace." In their introduction, the authors write that they created this book for:

“Presbyterians struggling with questions, struggling to make sense of their own theology in the face of multiple faith assertions throughout religious, social, and political cultures generally. What do I believe about God, whom some say is vindictive and angry toward some people who are considered other? Is God coming to punish the bad guys and reward the good guys? Which am I? Good or bad? What do I, as a Presbyterian, believe about democracy and authority? What am I called to do as a disciple? Wave a flag? Protest this harmful movement? Or simply say I believe in Jesus and do nothing else?”¹

You might imagine it was a lively class.

But it was also a helpful reset about what we believe as Presbyterians when it comes to salvation, God, and the church in a world where more and more messages of Christian faith are mixed with disenfranchisement, violence, exclusion, and fear.

Our Gospel text for this morning comes from the closing verses of Matthew, appointed this year for Trinity Sunday.

The passage is assigned because it contains a particularly trinitarian description of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Referred to as the Great Commission, it is actually the only place in all of Scripture where that exact phrase appears.

This is Jesus’ final teaching to his disciples in a Gospel largely composed of his teachings. Standing at this transition between his earthly ministry and the birth of the church, he commissions his followers for the next phase of the movement, entrusting them with the responsibility of teaching others all that he has taught them.

This passage rose in significance during the sixteenth century and became especially influential in the nineteenth century, when many Christians believed they were living in a pivotal moment in history and that the gospel should be carried “to the ends of the earth.” Advances in travel, printing, and global trade suddenly made worldwide mission work possible on an unprecedented scale. For many Christians, Matthew’s great commission became a mandate for

¹ Being Presbyterian in a Dysvangelical America. Ted V. Foote and P.Alex Thornburg. 2026

global expansion.

But many biblical scholars today point out that for the first century and a half of Christian history, this passage was probably not understood as a command to go out and convert the world. It is unlikely that the first disciples, or the communities that first heard Matthew's Gospel, would have understood it that way.

The command is not to preach repentance for the forgiveness of sins and be baptized. It is not to create a global church. The command is to teach. And, perhaps even more surprisingly, the emphasis is not on teaching people so that they can be baptized, but on weaving teaching and learning into the ongoing life of discipleship itself.

New Testament scholar Mark Allen Powell imagines what a curriculum based on beloved teachings from the Gospel of Matthew would have been for these first disciples as they went out to teach not so much the world but their neighbors, friends, and one another.

He writes: "The missional goal is not just for there to be more disciples (more Christians) in the world, but for God's presence to be manifested in ways that affect God's gracious will for all humanity. Making disciples by teaching the baptized to practice what Jesus taught is the means for accomplishing this goal." He goes on to describe what this community of teachers and students would be like...

"Such people will be pure of heart, merciful peacemakers, who stand in solidarity with the poor in spirit and all who mourn. They will be conspicuous in their good works, bringing flavor and light to a world that, for some, is dull and dark. They will be slow to anger and reluctant to judge. They will aspire to be faithful in marriage and respectful of boundaries in relationships. They will forgive their friends and love their enemies. They will be active in prayer and generous and giving to all in need while remaining discreet and avoiding outward displays of piety. They will not be anxious or greedy, but will be people who actively seek the good of others, striving always to treat others as they wish to be treated."²

² Mark Allen Powell, *Matthew: Interpretation Bible Commentary*, 2023.

This will be a community whose very life together bears witness to another way of being. A group of relatively powerless persons seeking to enact love, justice, mercy, and faithfulness in a world contaminated by purveyors of the opposite tendencies.

The Apostle Paul spent years teaching this same message of community and love to the church in Corinth. The Corinthian Church was vibrant, gifted, and growing, but deeply divided. Members quarreled over leadership, social status, worship practices, spiritual gifts, and ethical behavior. Paul's letters, including 2 Corinthians, which we also heard this morning, reveal a community struggling to embody Christian unity while navigating cultural pressures, internal factions, theological confusion, and competing visions of faithful discipleship.

Paul ends this second letter to the Corinthian Church with a similar kind of commissioning as we have in Matthew, as they continue to shape what Christian discipleship should be: "Finally, brothers and sisters, be restored; listen to my appeal; 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, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you."

Here again, we have a beloved and familiar expression of the triune God, one that we hear regularly as we are sent out into the world each week. And just like the trinitarian blessing in Matthew, Paul's version is also the only occurrence of this specific trinitarian formula as well - not just in Paul's letters but anywhere in scripture.

What isn't unique in Paul's farewell to the church in Corinth is his instruction to greet one another with a Holy Kiss. He actually includes that instruction in the majority of his letters. While we have all experienced cultures where a kiss, even between strangers, is the norm, the kiss as a greeting was not typical in the ancient world. Paul, in fact, was the first ethical teacher known to instruct members of a mixed social group to greet each other with a kiss.

It was an act to express among the community a spirit of agape, a kind of self-giving love, or what the Hebrew bible would have described as loving kindness, an expression of commitment in relationships and community.

Long before churches passed the peace by shaking hands, waving, or exchanging a hug, early Christians shared this ritual as a sign of reconciliation and unity. It was not primarily a greeting. It was a declaration. In a world divided by class, ethnicity, status, and political allegiance, believers publicly affirmed that they belonged to one another in Christ.

Anabaptist biblical scholar Bill Klassen has written extensively about this early practice as an expression of Christian discipleship. He writes:

“The Holy Kiss is to be seen in a living context of people who are building a new social reality. The admonition from Paul serves to stress their freedom to express without inhibition to all people of whatever background, rank or gender, the ardor of agape in the word.”³

Something important is lost if we reduce this act of worship to a moment of friendliness. The peace is an act of discipleship. It is a visible reminder that the church is more than a collection of individuals. Strangers recognizing one another as siblings, enemies acknowledging a shared humanity, the church embodying a different kind of community than the surrounding world. We are bound together by Christ, called to embody a different way of living together in a fractured culture, and challenged to practice the reconciliation we proclaim.

As Paul ends this letter, he creates this blessing that we have come to value as a description of the triune God, to reinforce for the Corinthians the three most important things he needs them to remember in the end - that Grace through Jesus Christ means that our salvation is not something that we can earn or accomplish on our own.

That this redemption offered to us begins and ends with God’s love for all of creation, including us. And that neither

³ William Klassen “Kiss” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992)

of these things was ever meant to be experienced alone but in the fellowship and communion of one another. Grace, Love, and Fellowship.

If it had been Paul riding in the car with me that day on the way to school, I think he would have given the exact same answer that Owen did when I asked what folks were missing by not being a part of the church - the people.

Perhaps that is why this matters so much right now.

If people - especially younger people - are wary of Christianity, it is not because they have encountered too much of Jesus, but because they have encountered versions of faith that seem disconnected from his teachings of mercy, humility, justice, and love. We cannot control every message spoken in the name of Christ. We cannot silence every voice that distorts the gospel. But we can decide how we will live. Inside and outside of the church.

The church's most convincing witness has never been its arguments. It has been its people.

People whose lives are marked by grace. People who refuse to give up on love. People who practice fellowship in a world of isolation and division. People who make visible the presence of Christ through ordinary acts of compassion, courage, generosity, and welcome.

If we want the world to know what we believe and, just as importantly, who we are, then we must be willing to embody it. Openly. Actively. Faithfully. With our neighbors, our friends, and one another.

This is what the world is still longing to hear: what the church has to offer is not simply a set of beliefs. It is a people learning together how to live in the grace of Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit and one another. Amen.