

GOD'S NEW MATH

2 CORINTHIANS 13:11-13
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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JUNE 11, 2017/TRINITY SUNDAY

I hate math. I don't use the word "hate" lightly, but when it comes to math, the word is entirely appropriate.

I *laboured* through high school math. I had to take grade 12 math twice. The first time I got a final mark of 39. The second time—which, incidentally, involved night classes at Lethbridge College so that I could actually graduate—I ascended to the lofty heights of 52. I think my teacher had pity on me. Or didn't want to see me again next semester.

To this day, I experience involuntary shudders of horror every time I walk past the counter and see one of my kids' math textbooks open. You think I'm exaggerating. I assure you I am not.

Many parents say that they stop being much use to their kids in helping with math homework once high school arrives. I think for me it was around grade 4.

My parents have this crazy theory that the main source of my mathematical trials was a lack of effort. I humbly beg to differ. I am simply constitutionally indisposed toward this subject. It doesn't agree with me and I return the favour by not agreeing with it.

Perhaps at this point you're wondering why I am subjecting you to all of this barely concealed bitterness, all of these unhealed wounds of my past.

Well, today is Trinity Sunday—a day that the church has historically set aside to recognize the three-in-oneness of our God.

And, in my personal opinion, a day to remember that God also hates math.

Well, perhaps that's a little strong. God did, presumably, *create* math. Why? Well, who can fathom the mind of God, but the physical universe is a marvelous thing that can apparently be described mathematically. Biology reduces to chemistry. Chemistry reduces to physics. Physics reduces to math.

I have even heard scientists and mathematicians speak about the beauty of the mathematical equations that can be used to describe the physical world.

Don't ask me *how* this is all possible, but smart people say that it is, and I am hardly in a position to disagree.

But no matter how crucial math is to what God has *made*, it doesn't seem to work when it comes to who God *is*.

The Trinity shows us that God has little regard for squeezing into our mathematical categories.

Trinitarian math simply doesn't work. Three is not one. One is not three. Even people like me, who barely passed math, can figure this out.

The church has always *confessed* that God is three in one and one in three. But *explaining it* is a different matter.

So, rather than explaining the mathematics of the Trinity, which I cannot do, I want to use our short little passage from the end of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, to try to enter into the strange math of God.

In these three short verses that wrap up the second letter to the Corinthians, there are five imperatives (commands, requirements, obligations) and two sets of three foundational realities upon which these imperatives are based.

Actually, it's four verses. Your bulletin says 2 Cor. 13:11-13. This is based on the NRSV, which is used in the lectionary each week. In most other translations, including the NIV, which was just read, the verses are numbered differently, so it ends with verse 14.

The math is already strange.

Anyway, let's start with the five imperatives.

The first is "rejoice." Paul closes his letter by telling the church to rejoice. At least, we think he does.

Some translators say that the Greek word actually means "farewell." The NRSV translates it this way.

"Rejoice" and "farewell" are obviously not the same thing. So why the confusion? Is this some strange feature of NT Greek?

Well, no. We have the same problem in English. Think of the word "address." Does it refer to a speech? Or the location of a house? Or "beam." She "beamed" with pride. He walked across the "beam." Same words. Very different meanings.

But for translators of 2 Corinthians, the ambiguity about how best to translate the Greek word comes out of the context of the letter. Those who favour "farewell" over rejoice" do so because Paul has spent the previous three chapters giving the young church what one commentator called a "verbal drubbing."

They had been questioning Paul's credentials and ignoring his instructions; they had been chasing after false teachings, they had been boasting; they had demonstrated all manner of confusion and pride and ignorance about what the way of Jesus involved. And Paul has been taking them to task.

So why, some argue, would Paul tell them to "rejoice" after tearing a strip off of them? This is why some, like the NRSV, conclude that the word should be translated "farewell."

And yet, the majority of translators go with "rejoice." Why?

Perhaps because of the central role of joy the Christian life. Hardship and struggle and failure are temporary. Joy is eternal. Joy is the hope to which we are called.

Joy is not the inevitable response to pleasant circumstances, it is not the logical outcome of moral performance. It's not like an algebra equation where $x+y=z$.

Joy is a decision. It is a decision based on who God is, what God has done, and what God has promised for those who love him.

And Paul knows that sometimes we have to be *told* to rejoice. Wendell Berry's poem, "The Mad Farmer Liberation Front" has been quoted several times over the years from this pulpit.

Be joyful, though you have considered all the facts.

I think Paul would approve. Rejoice! Even though you're making a mess of things, even though the church isn't always what it should be, even though you stumble and fall. God loves you and does not give up on you. God will keep you and sustain you. Rejoice!

There are few things that speak so powerfully to a life that has been touched by the faith, hope, and love of Christ as a stubborn joy that persists, despite having considered all the facts.

Second, he says "strive." Strive for full restoration—with God and with neighbour. The Greek word could also mean, "put things in order" or "pull yourselves together!"

The Christian life involves effort. It's important, of course, to accept that something has been done *for us*—that God in Christ accomplished for us what we could never do for ourselves.

And it's important to always remember that God's love for us is not contingent upon our measuring up to some precise metric of behaviour and belief.

God loves us when we are at our unloveliest. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. All of this is true.

But we don't just say, "Well thanks for all that, God" and carry on as usual. We press into the lives that God has called us to.

Strive, Paul says.

Strive to live a coherent life where there is congruence between your professed convictions and your actions. Strive to allow Christ to be at home in your hearts and

minds and communities. Strive for Christ's teachings to become your default setting in the world.

Third, Exhort. Or encourage. Or console. Again, there's a range of potential meanings here. But at the root of all three of these possible translations of the Greek word is a deep and determined concern for the welfare of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

We might summarize like this: Look out for each other.

Be eager to extend a kind word. This week I wrote my kids a letter for their sixteenth birthday and then, naturally, posted it on my blog (what else would I do?!). It was my attempt to give them some fatherly advice and maybe provide a bit of encouragement to other parents and teenagers out there.

At one point, I said, "Never underestimate how much good a simple kind word can do." I truly believe this.

I have a file full of encouraging emails or notes or texts that I've received over the years. I look at it when I'm lacking motivation or feeling less than enthusiastic about my abilities. It helps. And it makes me want to do it for others.

On Friday, a pastor friend of mine had a very difficult funeral to do. A young man had died, likely of an overdose. His family had little to no interest or investment in faith. It was going to be hard day, and my friend was feeling it.

I sent him a text saying something like, "You got this. Christ goes before you." It took twenty seconds of my day. But it meant a lot to him.

But go beyond encouragement and consolation.

Say the hard things that need to be said sometimes. Remind one another of who you are. Mind your neighbour's business.

Don't settle for a cheap and complacent peace that doesn't call each other to something higher and better.

Fourth, Agree! This one is tricky. It will not exactly come as news to most of you that the church does not always think and speak with one voice and mind on everything.

I can barely open my computer these days without encountering some article either bemoaning the church's lack of unity on this or that issue, or pleading to be more willing to tolerate diversity, or criticizing the wrongness of some branch of the church's theology or practice.

Most of us have Christians in our families or friendship circles that do not share our views about what a life spent following Jesus ought to look like. I certainly do. I regularly encounter people, whether in my writing or in my daily interactions who have very different ideas about the role of violence, about how to live with diversity, about church governance and all kinds of other things.

The Corinthians weren't any different. They were all over the place theologically, they squabbled about the Lord's Supper, they chased after all kinds of weird teachings.

So how can Paul just tell them to "agree."

Well yet again, it's worth paying attention to the range of meaning of the Greek word that is translated "agree." Some scholars think that a more accurate translation would be something like, "Set your mind on the same thing."

This makes more sense. Keep your eyes on Jesus, Paul says. Don't get distracted. Don't make central things peripheral and peripheral things central.

Unanimity is not required for unity. But setting our minds on Christ together and committing to figure it out together is.

Live in peace with one another.

Obviously, entire sermons could be preached on what means to live in peace.

But at the very least it means that as Christians have a settled conviction that we owe our sisters and brothers a debt of love and care.

It means that being right sometimes (most times, even) takes a back seat to being generous and kind. It means that we do not give up on one another.

It means that when we disagree, we do so Christianly, always keeping the question before us: How am I called to love my neighbour *as myself* in this situation.

Again, the church in Corinth was not a particularly peaceful one. Many churches throughout history have not exactly been shining lights to the watching world.

Disagreement and conflict are not un-Christian. But there should be something different about how our communities live with conflict and disagreement because we have encountered Jesus.

In a recent sermon, Brian Zahnd asked a rhetorical question in light of some of the anxiety and rhetoric in the American political context: “Do you think that most Americans look at the church these days and say, ‘Wow, those Christians, they just seem so un-anxious about things.’”

The obvious answer was, “no, not really.” But the point he was making was that they *should*.

The same is true with peace. I think the world should notice that our communities are saturated with a deep peace—a peace that doesn’t pant after the latest trends, that doesn’t exude anxiety about the future, that doesn’t require that everyone be like me, but that is willing to love and learn on the journey with Jesus together and to do so in the manner that Jesus modeled.

So, five imperatives.

Rejoice. Strive. Exhort (or encourage, or comfort). Agree (or set your minds on the same thing). Live in peace.

So, maybe a few more than five. The math is strange.

Perhaps this sounds like more than we are capable of.

There are times when all this rejoicing and striving, all this encouraging and comforting and exhorting, all this pulling in the same direction and living at peace will seem natural.

But life is hard. And there will also be times when all of these wonderful imperatives seem beyond us. Times when we just flat out don't want to make the effort.

It is particularly in these latter times that we must remember that our attempts to live the lives we've been called to is not just a bit of pragmatic advice that will make things go well for us.

These are more than just good suggestions or practical wisdom, although I think they are both of these.

All of this is a response to the very nature and character of the God in whose image we have been created.

These five(ish) imperatives are grounded in, made possible by, two very important threes.

And here we turn to the well-known benediction that the passage ends with:

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

A God who is one, but three.

Father, Son, Spirit.

Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer.

And each member of the Godhead playing a unique role in sustaining the church.

The *grace* of the Lord Jesus Christ. The one who says, "Where are you accusers? Has no one condemned you? The one who says, "forgive them, they don't know what they are doing." The one who says, "seventy times seven." The one about whom it was said, "where sin abounded, grace abounded all the more."

The *love* of God the Father. For God so *expected* of the world? For God so *demand*ed of the world? No, of course not. For God so *loved* the world, the cosmos, you, me, every tribe and tongue under the sun. Creation is an expression of love. This grand story that

you and I are a part of it at the end of it all due to the love of God that flows from God's Trinitarian nature and finds expression in the lives of you and I, God's image bearers.

The *fellowship* of the Holy Spirit. The one who is also described as the advocate, the comforter, the intercessor. The one who minds our business, who seeks always to turn us Christ-ward, and to bond us together with his love.

Our calling as a church is only because of who it is that called us into being.

Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Grace, love, fellowship.

Two sets of three that make possible a five coming at the end of 3 (or 4) verses at the end of the second of two letters to a church not so different from our own.

The math gets a bit tricky. But the hope to which the math points is not.

God is the source of grace, love, and community.

Everything about who we are, everything about what we are called to be, and all the resources that we have to live into our calling, proceed from this most beautiful of truths.

God's strange math exists only for the sake of love and life. This is good news.

Thanks be to God.

