

**Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church**  
**Knoxville, Tennessee**  
**Dr. Jay Howell**  
January 26, 2020

**“Real: Benedicting, Benedicts”**  
**2 Corinthians 13:11-13**

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**“Real: Benedicting, Benedicts”**  
**2 Corinthians 13:11-13**

Today, we wrap up our January sermon series “Real.” Because of the congregational meeting, today’s sermon is a bit on the shorter side, which I’m sure you are all lamenting. First a quick word on what we’ll be starting next week. I want to thank and embarrass one of our elders Elise Denny, who’s a member of our choir and Chair of the Worship Committee. Last Fall as we were talking in Worship Committee about what we might explore in worship this year, she raised the topic of just how difficult it can be to give an account for our faith in the face of some of the hardest challenges. We’ll start a new series next week called “Apologies,” to see what Scripture has to say about it. One more side note, y’all. No joke about this preaching poll that’s in your bulletins. You give us ideas; we’re liable to use them.

If you’ve been with us this month in this series, you’ll remember that our focus has been on how we hold ourselves back from true fellowship, things we put in the way of truly knowing and being known in the church. And the fact that we do these things is a really big deal, because it is in the core identity of the church to come together, to stay together, to exhibit love for each other in such a way that the only possible explanation is that there’s a power at work that is not of this world. For two weeks we were in the first letter of John and how sin and hatred can prevent us from truly knowing each other. Then last week Pastor Rachel preached on 2 Corinthians 12 and how our weaknesses shouldn’t lead us to hide from each other, but rather to know each other better and to glorify God in our weakness.

This week, we look at the close of this second letter to the Corinthians, a word of blessing, and ask, if all that sin, all that hatred, all that weakness are things that hold us back from true fellowship, what binds us together? Will you pray with me?

*Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.*

In the Revolutionary War, there was one man who had distinguished himself in battle, and so he rose up the ranks and eventually became a general in George Washington’s Continental Army. However, the general also had some sharp elbows and an ambitious streak, which on occasion put him at odds with other officers and even with the Continental Congress, leading him to hold grudges and perceive that he had been stepped over for various commands and places of prestige in the army.

Later in the war, he was stationed in Philadelphia and there met and married a young woman whose family had deeply Loyalist connections, that is, still loyal to the British. Those connections led to a secret and illegal correspondence with a British major. Seeing a chance for advancement if he switched sides and the British won, the general ultimately cooked up a plot to surrender, of all places, the fort at West Point to the British.

The plot, however, was discovered. The British major was hanged as a spy, but the general escaped to England after the war. He didn't get away scott free, as his reputation as a self-serving turncoat followed him, and he never had too much success after the war, but perhaps the most indicting thing about him is that today when we say his name, Benedict Arnold, as in, "that person's a Benedict Arnold," we mean a traitor.

Something bitterly ironic that one of the first things we think of when we hear "Benedict," beside brunch of course, is betrayal. Because the name in itself doesn't mean anything close to that. It comes from Latin, for you scholars out there, from a compound word meaning a "good word," and most often it means a blessing. It's why we have a Benediction at the end of our worship service, so that even when the preacher's doing fire and brimstone, by the end you have to at least say something nice, the final words we share together are good words, a word of blessing.

And one of the most familiar blessings, or benedictions, in all of Scripture is the final verse of 2 Corinthians: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you." A lot of preachers conclude worship with those very words. Another common one, and the one I usually use is what we read in the Book of Numbers a moment ago, but this blessing, this benediction in 2 Corinthians and the couple of verses before it convey so much about the fellowship of the church and what it could be.

Just in vv. 11 and 12, Paul offers a list of instructions and encouragements: "Finally brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, 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." Now each one of those could be a sermon in itself, but more broadly what Paul is doing here, especially when he says, "and the God of love and peace will be with you," is offering a list of qualities that mark true fellowship, fellowship within which the God of love and peace will dwell.

"Put things in order." Life together in the church shouldn't be chaotic. Sure, things will be messy sometimes, but that's not what we should strive for together.

"Listen to my appeal." Now that's honestly an odd translation there for what the word means. Some of your Bibles might have a footnote next to it, saying something like "encourage one another," and that's closer. Literally it's "Be called to one another's side." It's the same word that the Gospel of John uses to describe the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, the Advocate, the Comforter. So another way to say it might be "be each other's advocate" or "have each other's back." As we gather in fellowship, there's a call to be bound to each other, to link arms together, to be at each other's side in support and exhortation.

"Agree with one another," literally "be of one mind." And "live in peace." Well that's easy. The church over the centuries hasn't had any problems on that front agreeing with each other and living in peace.

So just do all those things, put things in order, have each other's backs, agree with each other, and live in peace, and the God of love and peace will dwell with you. Easy peasy, right? No

surprise that it sounds downright impossible. If those are the marks of true fellowship, why even offer them if they're so far out of reach?

But I find it encouraging that for Paul, these words aren't just idle pleasantries at the end of a letter. He's convicting himself as much as he's setting the bar high for the Corinthians.

In reading Paul's letters to the church in Corinth, what we know as 1 & 2 Corinthians, you piece together the stages of his relationship with this church, and it's not an easy one. Here's a crash course. He establishes the church in the Greek city of Corinth, but then after he leaves he learns that the congregation has been segregating itself according to who had money and who didn't, and wrote to correct that behavior, noting the importance of unity in the church and the value of all gifts brought to body of fellowship. That's 1 Corinthians. Then, other teachers came to the church criticizing Paul, so he goes back to visit them, and one individual in particular really went after Paul while he was there. Broke his heart, and he writes again to address that situation. That's 2 Corinthians.

The point is, this is a church that on more than one occasion has let Paul down, and still, Paul calls upon them as he calls upon himself to "Greet one another with a holy kiss." The patience of a saint if you ask me, because he is calling them and himself to fellowship, even though they have not always cared for each other's company all too much.

A few months ago I had breakfast with Dr. Barron. It was within the first couple of weeks I was here, and he was kind enough to share this story with me, and I asked him permission to share it with y'all, because I think it's just delightful. It was a story from when he had just started at the church, and he had sat down with the recently retired Dr. Spitzer. And they were talking about how the two of them would handle requests for Dr. Spitzer to participate in things like memorial services. And this is what Dr. Spitzer said to Dr. Barron. He said, "Bill, call me and check with me when someone asks if I'd take part in a loved one's funeral." And Bill goes, "Right, to see if you're available, of course." And kind of joking, he says, "No, because I might not like that family."

Now that's not knocking Dr. Spitzer. Because I'd be willing to bet that he's not the only person here who can think of some folks you've known in the church you'd rather not be around. I know I can. Not anyone here of course. But yeah, over the years, and I can picture them in my head right now, I can think of some folks, frankly, whose company I could do without. Call it oil and water, call it clash of personalities, whatever. But if I'm honest and would have my druthers, if I was never in the same room with these folks again, it wouldn't break my heart.

Now here's the thing. That might seem normal. We all have people we don't get along with, ranging from just personal preference all the way to a more intense distrust or hatred. That might seem normal, but what Paul is saying, just in offering this blessing to this church at the end of this letter, is that for the church to be what it is supposed to be, we can't just have fellowship with people we like to be around. That's not hard. That's what everybody does. We have fellowship with people we like and agree with? Congratulations on being just like everybody else.

No, for the church to be what it is supposed to be, for our fellowship to be what it is supposed to be, it means, as Paul does here, blessing those who have let you down, and being blessed by those whom you have let down. And that's really hard to do.

But fortunately, it's not solely up to us. One teacher pointed this out, and I think it's a beautiful point: that in the final words of Paul's letter, he hopes and calls for grace to be upon this church: the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, but if you flipped back to the opening of the letter, he does the same thing. He greets them with grace. All this to a church that had turned from him, thrown him under the bus, departed from the teachings of the gospel, and still he bookends his words to them by offering a blessing of the grace of our Lord.

Friends, if anything is going to build us up in fellowship, true fellowship, if anything is going to guide us to be the church as we are supposed to be, yes, there are things we can do and should do, being vulnerable with each other, offering up our sin, our hatred, our weakness to each other and to the Lord, putting things in order, having each other's back, being of one mind, living in peace. But if we go about it thinking that if we just follow that recipe we'll magically transform into this church of mystical, Kumbayah power, not only are we going to let each other down but we're going to be completely discouraged in the whole process. But if, on the other hand, we let the grace of the Lord, that forgiveness, that charity, that unmerited gift, be before us, be within us, be among us, be behind us, then just you watch what amazing things could happen.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.