

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, October 13, 2019**

A TRINITY OF GRACES

Colossians 1:1-14

After last Sunday's introduction, we continue with our series on Paul's Letter to the Colossians this morning by reading again from Colossians 1. May we give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word from Colossians 1:1-14,

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Think for a moment about some of the more famous trios in history or American culture. Some that come to mind include:

- The Three Little Pigs
- The Three Bears (whose home was visited by Goldilocks)
- The Three Stooges (curly, Moe, and Larry)
- The Three Amigos
- The Three Musketeers
- Huey, Dewey, and Louie (the three nephews of Donald Duck)
- Snap, Crackle, and Pop (the jingle for Rice Krispies cereal)
- Harry, Hermione, and Ron, the three friends in the *Harry Potter* series
- Peter, Paul, and Mary, the famous folk-singing trio
- The Three Tenors – Luciano Pavarotti, Placido Domingo, and Jose Carreras.

For baseball aficionados, there is the immortal double-play combination of Tinker to Evers to Chance, three infielders who played together for the Chicago Cubs in the early 1900s.

In the Bible we have such trios as:

- Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob
- Moses, Aaron, and Miriam
- Joseph, Mary, and Jesus
- The Three Wise Men or Magi (though the Bible does not explicitly say there were three of them)
- Gold, frankincense, and myrrh – the three gifts brought to Jesus by the Magi
- Peter, James, and John
- The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Today I want to talk about "A Trinity of Graces" – three distinctive marks of the Christian life: faith, hope, and love. As we saw last Sunday, they are most famously joined together in 1 Corinthians 13:13, where Paul says: "Now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love."

Paul also brings these three qualities together in 1 Thessalonians 1:3, where he affirms the Christians in Thessalonica for their "work produced by faith, (their) labor produced by love,

and (their) endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” Faith in Jesus leads to work for Jesus. Love for God leads to loving service to one another and to our neighbors in need. The hope of the gospel leads to endurance in the midst of the trials, temptations, and tests of life.

And, as we saw last Sunday, Paul highlights this same trinity of graces in Colossians 1:4-5, where he says: “(W)e have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love you have for all the saints – the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven, and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel ...”

Faith, hope, and love. Or, as it is here in Colossians 1 and 1 Thessalonians 1, faith, love, and hope. These are three indispensable hallmarks, three unmistakable evidences of the authentic work of God’s grace in your life and mine. Let’s talk about each of them.

FAITH

First, let’s think together about faith. If you’re not convinced of the importance of faith, listen to what the Bible says in Hebrews 11:6: “Without faith it is impossible to please God.” Apart from faith, it is impossible to please God. Not hard. Not difficult. Impossible. It can’t be done.

Perhaps we need to take a moment to define what we mean by faith. Mark Twain, who was raised Presbyterian but drifted from the Christian faith in his adult years, once defined faith as “believing what you know ain’t so.” Ambrose Bierce, in *The Devil’s Dictionary*, offered this satirical definition of faith: Faith, he said, is “belief without evidence in what is told by ones who speak without knowledge, of things without parallel.”

If Twain and Bierce are right, then faith is just plain silliness. But faith is *not* believing what you know ain’t so. It is *not* belief without evidence in things told by people without knowledge. On the contrary, biblical faith is rooted in reality. It is rooted in history, in events that really did happen. The Bible itself defines faith as “being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see” (Hebrews 11:1).

The kind of faith the Bible commends has the Lord Jesus Christ as its object. It is faith in Jesus that marks the lives of His followers. It is faith in Jesus and Him alone that unlocks the door to salvation and peace with God. Faith in Jesus is one indispensable sign of true spiritual life – faith in His person and work as the Son of God and Savior of sinners, in the power of His love to save undeserving sinners like us and to change us so that we increasingly take on His character in our lives.

Some of you have been part of Faith Church since its beginning in 1987. Some of you were present at the first service held at Key School on World Communion Sunday in October 1987. If you were there, you may remember that Dr. Graham Smith preached that day on “The Meaning of Faith.” You can actually find a transcript of his sermon on the Sermon page of our church website. I wasn’t there (☺), but I can tell you that he used the word “FAITH” as an acronym to describe the meaning of faith in three ways.

First, he said, FAITH means *Forsaking All I Take Him*. He spoke of Jesus' call to Peter, Andrew, James, and John to leave their lives as fishermen in order to follow Him. Which they did. "Faith," he said, "means utterly forsaking our old life of sin and failure, turning our back on everything that grieves our Lord, and starting out on the road that leads to holiness and victory. But faith," he said, "also means forsaking our own goodness." Too many people mistakenly believe that the road to heaven and a right relationship with God is paved with good deeds. The *bad news* of the gospel, though, is that a good life is not good enough to please God, because you can never be good enough to meet God's standards. Which is why we need the *good news* of the gospel so desperately. The good news is that the way to heaven is not dependent on our goodness. It depends entirely on God and His grace shown to us in the saving death of Jesus on the cross for us. We must forsake our own goodness and embrace Jesus as He is offered in the gospel by faith.

Forsaking All I Take Him.

Second, FAITH means *Feeling Afraid I Trust Him*. We all know what it is like to feel afraid. We may not all fear the same things. But we know what it is like to feel afraid. You may fear failure of some kind. You may fear illness or suffering. You may fear death itself. You may be afraid of the dark. You may fear being rejected. You may fear the loss of someone you love. You may fear losing your job. You may fear criticism or embarrassment. You may fear for America. You may fear all kinds of things that may or may not happen. Faith means trusting God when you feel afraid. Faith means trusting in Jesus and the promises of the gospel when Satan tries to plant seeds of doubt and fear in your heart. Faith means trusting in the sovereignty and sufficiency of God when the world seems to be spinning out of control.

David, the man after God's own heart, was in big trouble. Saul was out to get him. David ran for his life and feigned insanity in order to receive asylum from the Philistines, who were Israel's archenemies. It was a huge risk, and David was not immune to fear. In Psalm 56, which records his prayer while these things were happening, David cried out to the Lord:

Be merciful to me, O God, for men hotly pursue me;
All day long they press their attack.
My slanderers pursue me all day long;
Many are attacking me in their pride.

When I am afraid, I will trust in You.
In God, whose word I praise,
In God I trust;
I will not be afraid.
What can man do to me?
(Psalm 56:1-4)

The truth is that there are lots of things men can do to us. There are lots of evil things that evil people can do to us. Andrew Brunson found that out. David did not live in denial about the danger he was in. But he chose to exercise faith in God. He chose to respond to fear with trust in God.

“When I am afraid, I will trust in You.” Will you do the same? FAITH means *Feeling Afraid I trust Him*.

Third, Dr. Smith said, FAITH means *Finding Another I Tell Him/Her*. Genuine faith in Jesus must be communicated. Think of Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother and fishing partner, “who never ... achieve(d) the notoriety of his illustrious sibling.” True, but Andrew became a follower of Jesus before Peter did. The Bible says that the first thing Andrew did after meeting Jesus was to find his brother Peter and tell him, “We have found the Messiah!” And he (Andrew) brought his brother to Jesus (John 1:40-41).

That is what faith in Jesus does. It makes us want to tell others about Him.

Think of the woman Jesus met at the well in Samaria. That encounter changed the whole direction and trajectory of her life, and she went back into town and told everyone about Him. As a result, many of the Samaritans became followers of Jesus (John 4:1-420).

Faith means *Finding Another I Tell Him/Her*. We are surrounded here in Kingstowne and Northern Virginia with people who don’t know Jesus. In *this* neighborhood, in *your* neighborhood, in your school, or where you work, there are people who don’t know Jesus. Some may have never heard the gospel. Some may have been taught things about Jesus and the Christian faith that simply aren’t true. God has put us here as a church to worship Him in spirit and in truth (John 4:23-24), as He both deserves and desires, and to tell others about Him – to tell others about Jesus and His love – so that many, many more people may become His disciples who make a difference in the world by making more disciples.

A famous missionary named D. T. Niles defined evangelism as “one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.” That is what a living faith in Jesus does: It spurs us on to tell others about Him.

Faith, as Dr. Smith said, is not like gasoline that gets used up as you drive. It is more like a muscle that grows stronger as you use it.

How is your faith today? Is it in Jesus? Is He the object and focus of your faith? Is faith in Jesus one of the defining marks of your life? Does your faith in Jesus make a difference in your daily life? In your witness to others?

Forsaking All I Take Him.
Feeling Afraid I trust Him.
Finding Another I Tell Him/Her

LOVE

The second of these three Christian graces is love. The love Paul has specifically in mind here in Colossians 1 is love “for all the saints” (Colossians 1:4). It is rooted in God’s love for us. Loving one another is a response to God’s love for us and is an expression of our love for Him. Jesus could not have made it any clearer. He said: “A new command I give you: Love

one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples – when they see the love you have for each other) (John 13:34-35, NIV, MSG).

You are probably familiar with Gary Chapman’s great book on *The Five Love Languages*. Chapman says there are basically five ways that people express love:

1. Words of affirmation.
2. Physical touch.
3. Quality time.
4. Giving gifts.
5. Acts of service.

These are the five basic ways that love is expressed and received. Chapman goes on to say that not everyone “speaks” the same love language. Each of us has one or maybe two love languages that we speak or appreciate. The tricky thing, Chapman points out, is that the person to whom you desire to express your love may not speak the same love language(s) as you. So you have to learn to speak the love language(s) of the person(s) to whom you want to show your love.

Every love language finds its origin in God, since love itself comes from God. We can love and build up one another with our words. Some of us thrive on the blessing of words that build us up in our faith.

Physical touch – a warm embrace, a hand on the shoulder, a pat on the back, a firm handshake – can mean a lot to some of us. We have to be vigilant to make sure that there is no inappropriate physical touch in our church family. Physical touch can be – and is – often terribly abused. We must make sure it does not happen in our church family or in any of our relationships. But physical touch, within proper boundaries, can be a way to show love in a meaningful way.

So can spending time with others. Especially with those who are lonely and crave company.

Giving gifts can be a meaningful way to bless others and show them that they are valued.

As can acts of service. You could come to the conclusion that this is really God’s favorite love language. After all, Jesus did not come to earth “in order to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45). Including us.

The Bible urges us to “be imitators of God and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Ephesians 5:1-2).

It also urges us to “bear with one another in love” (Ephesians 4:2) and to “serve one another in love” (Galatians 5:13). In fact, it tells us to “do everything in love” (1 Corinthians 16:14). Later on in Colossians, we will see Paul’s instruction to “clothe (ourselves) with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.” We are to “bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances (we) may have against one another.” We are to “forgive as the Lord

forgave (us). And over all these virtues” we are to “put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity” (Colossians 3:12-14). Love is the all-purpose, all-weather, all-occasion piece of clothing you can’t do without.

Love for one another, along with an unswerving faith in Jesus, is to be our calling card as Christians.

Have you seen the Disney movie *Frozen*? It takes place in the Kingdom of Arendelle, where Princess Elsa has the power to freeze things and to create ice and snow. This “gift” is hard to control, especially around her sister Anna. So Elsa isolates herself in her room because she is afraid of hurting Anna. But she has a hard time with her power, and after she accidentally freezes the kingdom, she flees to the mountains.

Anna chases after her, but because Elsa is afraid of hurting her, she demands that Anna leave. Elsa loses control of her power again and accidentally hits Anna in the heart. Some trolls, who understand this kind of deep magic, tell Anna that only an act of true love can save her from death.

So Anna sacrifices herself for Elsa when Elsa comes under attack. “Anna,” says Elsa, “you sacrificed yourself for me?”

“I love you,” Anna replies.

Olaf, Anna’s snowman sidekick, remembering what the trolls said, says: “An act of love will thaw a frozen heart.”

“An act of love will thaw a frozen heart,” says Elsa. “Love will thaw ... love ... of course. Love!”

God’s love can thaw a frozen heart. God’s love can heal a broken heart. God’s love can change the direction and trajectory of a person’s life. God’s love, put in motion in your life and mine, can make a huge difference in the life of a person who needs to know – in a simple way, in a practical way – that he or she is loved.

Love, as you know, is not just an emotion. Sometimes love is emotional. Sometimes it is accompanied by strong emotions and great passion. But the kind of love for one another to which God calls us is much more than an emotion. It is an attitude. It is a decision of the will to act in a loving way in the best interests of others. It is the way Jesus loved – and loves – us. So it is the way we are to love one another.

Let’s make sure that love for one another and love for all the saints – for all of God’s people – is always and in all ways one of the hallmarks of our life and witness as a church.

HOPE

The third hallmark of the Christian life is hope. Like love, the word hope can either be a verb (something you do) or a noun (something you have or need). The hope Paul speaks about here in Colossians 1:5 is not the verb but the noun. It refers to what we hope for in heaven. It refers to heaven itself and the promise of an inheritance stored up for us there. Peter echoes Paul when he speaks of this hope in 1 Peter 1:3-4: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In His great mercy He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade – kept in heaven for you.”

Believers in Christ are supremely people of hope. Theologian Jurgen Moltmann speaks of the connection between faith and hope: “Faith,” he says, “binds (us) to Christ. Hope sets this faith open to the comprehensive future of Christ. Hope is therefore the inseparable companion of faith.... Without faith’s knowledge of Christ, hope becomes a utopia” [which literally means, ‘no place’] “and remains hanging in the air. But without hope, faith falls to pieces, becomes a faint-hearted and ultimately a dead faith. It is through faith that (we find) the path of true life, but it is only hope that keeps (us) on that path” (Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, quoted in “Christianity Today,” Vol. 32, No. 12).

Hope, we might say, has to do with the promises God has given us for the future. Faith, on the other hand, has to do with the promises and gifts we have been given by God here and now. We have been justified – made right – with God by grace through faith. And we have the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. God has promised it. Jesus has secured it. You can count on it.

A Brazilian theologian named Rubem Alves has said: “Hope is hearing the melody of the future. Faith is to dance to it.”

Do you hear the melody of the future? The melody of joyful songs of praise to the King of Kings and Lord of Lords that we – and all who belong to Him – will sing in His presence in heaven? If you do – and I pray you do – it is time to dance. Time to dance to the melody of hope. Time to dance before the Lord our God.

Faith, love, and hope. Let these be the defining graces that mark you out as a child of God, a member of God’s family, a follower of Jesus, and a citizen of the Kingdom of God, with an inheritance waiting for you in heaven. Let these be the defining graces of our life together as a church.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.