

The Present Tense

by Rev. Joe Connolly

“Grace to you and peace from our loving God and from our Savior, Jesus, the Christ.” — 1 Corinthians 1:3.

In my comments today I want to address the educational background, the certification if you would, to hold the office of Pastor and Teacher in our denomination. Indeed, while most churches in America *do not* require any kind of academic certification, the vast majority of pastors in Main Line Churches have a Master of Divinity degree, a graduate degree, from a State accredited institution of higher learning. Hence, a prerequisite is a Bachelor’s Degree.

Generally at least, Master’s Degrees are two years of full time graduate work. They can range from a low of around 43 graduate level credits to a high of around 60 graduate level credits. But a Master of Divinity Degree is a 90 graduate credit level degree, about the same as a law degree, three years of full time work.

Given that context, I want to focus in on just one area of study, commonly a part of the Master of Divinity Degree. The specific piece I want to address— and these days no one is ordained in Main Line denominations without the this— is a piece called Clinical Pastoral Education.

Clinical Pastoral Education, commonly referred to as CPE, is over 400 hours of work. CPE is a three credit course but the 400 hours of work required is about three times the normal workload of a 3 credit course.

This course combines classroom and clinical work about evenly split between those two areas. Classroom work is always done in small groups of four or five students. And aside from tons of assigned reading, the main purpose of the classroom exercises is the small group examines what each individual student does in the clinical work.

The clinical section can be thought of as on the job training for chaplains. For practical reasons a CPE program often serves one setting— a nursing home, a hospital, a prison. The setting does not much matter since the learnings concern base line areas.

My CPE program was at Eastern Maine Medical Center in Bangor, Maine. I remember the day the assignments were handed out to my group. The professor turned to me and said, “Well, we’re giving you the hard one Joe: the pulmonary ward.”

So, what did I learn and experience in CPE, this on the job training as a chaplain, the real duties of a chaplain, the base line learnings? There are two things I think you learn in a chaplaincy program.

First, a chaplain listens. That alone is a hard thing to learn. Second, a chaplain tries to simply be present to the person or persons you serve. You walk with them.

The real issue with being present to another person is you need to interact but not be intrusive. This too is hard on a number of counts.

So, here is how or at least one way how that learning works. Before you visit someone, you try, as well as you are able, to clear your mind of your own baggage, your own clutter. The person being visited does not need to hear about your issues.

On top of that, once you have visited someone, you need, as much as humanly possible, to clear your thoughts,

your mind again. Therefore, after you logged the visit in the patients hospital record— all hospitals that have chaplains should have a section in the patient’s permanent medical record where visits can be logged, notes made— after you logged the visit you try to clear your thoughts, your mind yet again.

So, you go to the end of the hall, stare out a window, climb a staircase to go to another floor, go to the cafeteria— get some coffee, lots of it— do anything you need to do to refresh your self. The ‘Why?’ of that should be obvious.

If you’re a chaplain, after visiting someone the next thing you do is make another visit. So the worst thing you can do is to bring some mental residual from the last visit into the next visit.

Do note, the caveat I offered about this technique is I said when you do this clearing of your thoughts, clearing your mind, you complete that task as much as is humanly possible. Can this be done perfectly? No. It cannot. We are all human and by definition imperfect. But you do your best.

And, what you are striving to do in those visits as well as you can, is to simply walk with that person. What you are striving to do as well as you can is to simply to be present to that person.

All that brings me back to what Paul says. (Quote:) “Grace to you and peace from our loving God and from our Savior, Jesus, the Christ.” (Slight pause.)

Needless to say, these are among the opening words of 1 Corinthians. These words are, thereby, a greeting. And in this greeting Paul is simply using a standard practice of letter writing in ancient Rome.

Now, I have probably read these words dozens, hundreds of times and, when I read them in preparation for this service, I discovered something I never noticed before. It is something quite basic and amazingly simple about the Christian faith.

Let me offer the words again: “Grace to you and peace from our loving God and from our Savior, Jesus, the Christ.” Did you notice Paul here speaks of presence in the present tense?

Paul did *not* say, ‘Grace to you and peace from our loving God who sits in the clouds and from the one who died and is no longer here.’ In these words a simple reality is clear: God is here. God lives. Jesus, Who is the Christ, is here. Jesus lives. (Slight pause.)

So, how are we to take that? This is how I take it. It is often said the legacy of the Hebrews to humanity is an understanding that God is One and that there is One God.

No. The legacy of the Hebrews is not that simple. Certainly one gift of the Hebrews to humanity is the proclamation that God lives. God is with us.

God is present to us. God walks with us. God is in relationship with us. Not only that, but because God lives and is in relationship with us, God does not in any way control us or want to control us. God has no baggage.

Rather, by definition because God lives, God is in perfect relationship with us, with humanity. And this perfect relationship, this no baggage relationship is what theology labels as... covenant.

Also note the other thing Paul says by using the present tense. If Jesus is the Messiah, the One sent by God, the One Whose covenant relationship with God is perfect, the One Whose covenant relationship with God says

Jesus is resurrected, then, just as God lives, Jesus lives.

And so, what does Paul do here, nearly unnoticed, in following this standard form of letter writing? In line with the Hebrew understanding of God, Paul writes in the present tense of God's presence. Paul writes that God lives. Then Paul writes in the present tense of the presence of Jesus. Paul writes that Jesus lives.

What Paul does *not* do is let the predominant Roman culture which had no time for gods of relationship, so it worshiped practical gods— gods of fertility, of crops— Paul does *not* let gods of the predominant culture overwhelm the Hebrew understanding of God. And this understanding says God lives, is present to us, walks with us. And then Paul says Jesus lives, is present to us, walks with us. (Slight pause.)

We have just entered the Season of Advent. And Advent is, of course, followed by Christmas.

Many see Advent and Christmas as simply celebrating the birth of the Messiah. I say that is a cultural understanding of what God has done. You see, with Advent and Christmas we Christians celebrate *that Jesus lives*, is present to us, walks among us.

Why do I say that? Well, Paul says (quote:) “Grace to you and peace from our loving God and from our Savior, Jesus, the Christ”— the present tense. (Slight pause.)

Tell me, do you know how hard it is to be present to someone? For we imperfect beings it is hard.

And, as amazing as this might sound, Paul testifies that Jesus is present to us in a perfect way, now, here, today. And that, my friends, is certainly what we need to consider when it comes to this season we call Advent: God lives; Jesus lives. Amen.

ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: “As has been true for quite a while, there are arguments in the secular press about whether or not you should wish someone a ‘Merry Christmas.’ Perhaps I am just too conservative on this count. But to my way of thinking, if we want to offer a seasonal greeting what we should say is, ‘Have a blessed Advent.’ I tried that yesterday in J. C. Penny— totally flabbergasted someone. Why might we do that? Advent is the time when we are blessed because what we recognize and what we celebrate is that Jesus is present to us.”

BENEDICTION: God's time is infinite. Let us look around us for the presence of God's work. Let us participate in the work of God's dominion. Let us share our gifts, our memories, our pain, our joy and our hopes. Go in peace for God is with us. Go in joy for God knows every fiber of our being. Go in love, for we rest assured, by Christ, Jesus, that God is steadfast. Go in hope for God reveals to us, daily, that we are a part of God's new creation. Amen.