EHV **2 Corinthians 13:11-14** Finally, brothers, rejoice. Set things in order. Be encouraged. Agree with one another. Be at peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you. 12 Greet one another with a holy kiss. 13 All the saints greet you.  14 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

One of the studies that I have been involved in lately has been the reading, or rather the rereading of Luther’s “Bondage of the Will.” It is an excellent study on the issue of free will and just what the ability of man is when speaking of this free will. Here is what I can tell you in a nutshell. When it comes to our salvation, to our spiritual well-being and life, you and I are by nature dead in trespass and sin. We have no free will to choose or to accept God into our heart unless God himself, working through the means of grace, gives us spiritual life. Yep, we are dead in trespass and sin unless the Lord makes us alive! Anything we achieve or accomplish after that, is really the wonder and marvel of God working in our hearts and minds.

Now we could also speak about our very limited free will in earthly things. For instance, we get up in the morning and it is our choice what we wear or how we wear it. We can determine what car to buy or what laundry detergent to use. In that way we can speak of the free will that we have but we call it limited because it really is only about earthly things and has absolutely no bearing whatsoever on the spiritual things of life. With one very important exception…..we do have the power, yes, the will, as did Adam and Eve, to reject, turn away from and disparage the truth and wonder of God! I know, it sounds kind of silly, but we can choose to remain dead in trespass and sin, choose to reject God’s love and favor in Christ, and choose to determine that hell is far better than heaven! How sad! How terrible that such a power should be ours and yet it is.

It is because of the sin that Adam and Eve brought into the world. Yet I do not despair of God’s grace and love. I do not fret and worry that I am not saved or that I can’t get to heaven. Because I know, that in Christ, God has done absolutely everything in order to save my soul. God in love sent Jesus. Jesus in love revealed and displayed the wonder and salvation of God. Jesus went to the cross to pay for my sins and rose from the dead that we might have not a single doubt that what Jesus offers is there for us. Jesus and the Father send the Holy Spirit who calls us to faith. Whose entire job is to give me the wonderful gift of eternal salvation by grace through faith alone! God has worked it all out for me and you and every soul in this world. Such is the wonder and marvel of Jesus.

So what brought me to think of this work of Luther and our free-will in bondage for this day? It is because of the opposition writers to what Luther said. The Scholars of the Catholic Church argued that man does indeed have a free will, can make his own choices whether it be in our earthly life or in our spiritual life. Now mind you, they don’t have a single passage that shows that. What they have is passages like the one before us. Verses that use the imperative. The imperative is the voice of command, invitation or of encouragement. So as you look at our first verse you will find there are 5 imperative verbs used. The Catholic Scholars argued something like this: “God would never tell us to do something we can’t do, therefore, since the Holy Spirit used the imperative, we must be able to do it and therefore we have free-will.”

At first that might sound logical and practical, but it is not. It is not because such an argument ignores a few things. It ignores the full use of the imperative. It can be a command like “stop” or “listen.” It can be an invitation like when you are at someone’s door and they say, “Hi, come on in!” Notice here that such a use does not necessarily say anything about your abilities. The imperative can be simple encouragement: “peace” or “rejoice” are great examples of such a use. Now, when you are encouraged in something because you have been made something is it just speaking of you or is it actually addressing what God has done for and is doing for you?

Too deep? Okay! Then let’s jump in and look at these closing words of 2 Corinthians and see just what is being asked of us? Our theme: **Our God Encourages!**

Before we even get into any specifics of this text the first thing you have to acknowledge is that this text occurs in the context of the souls of a Christian church. Throughout the work, these Christians have been reminded of the wonder and joy they have been given through the redemption that Jesus Christ has won for them. In other words, God, our God, the Triune God has called these souls to faith, has given them the gift of salvation that Jesus has accomplished and now the Holy Spirit is at work to guard, keep, and strengthen these Christian souls in the way of faith.

Now I am sure that as you heard this text you know why on this weekend of worship this text was chosen. This text contains what is known as “The Apostolic Blessing.” That beautiful three-fold blessing reminding us that our God, our Triune God will be with us. As you hear these words of blessing you realize how the three persons of the Godhead are addressed and emphasized. Beautiful words!

It starts: **“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.”** There is the heart and core of our faith. It is in Jesus that we learn of, see in action and experience the grace of God. Free and sure forgiveness because Jesus suffered, died and rose from the dead for each of us. It is this grace of Jesus that sustains, maintains and is the foundation for all that we are. Because of Jesus and his grace, we can serve, love, and be secure in eternal life.

Then we hear, **“and the love of God.”** Here is a reference to the Father of the Godhead. God the Father is filled with love for us, an undeserved and eternal love that we certainly don’t deserve. It is this love of the Father that promised, sent and helped Jesus achieve the salvation of our souls. If you know and have God’s love in Jesus and by the Holy Spirit, there is nothing you lack.

Finally we hear, **“and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”** Here is that Third person of the Trinity of God, the Holy Spirit. Too often people don’t grasp what this phrase is saying of the Holy Spirit and his work. I will help you grasp that today. The Holy Spirit’s work is “fellowship.” This is a word that means: “a coming together, a partnership, a sharing with, and,” most important to me, “the word that designates a close personal relationship, an intimacy with God.” The Holy Spirit unites us to God. The Holy Spirit unites us to each other. The Holy Spirit’s job is to “fellowship” us with God and with each other through the bond of Christ Jesus our Savior. Everything you are and can be is the work of the Holy Spirit working in you that fellowship of God in Jesus. If you understand this work of the Holy Spirit, then you would understand all the more the reason we as a church and a church body think that “fellowship” is an important issue.

Clearly then, in this text of the Lord we find the reason and the power behind what is being encouraged of the saints of Corinth and yes, of the saints in Mayville and elsewhere. The reason we can be encouraged in what is found here is because God is working in us to bring forth the fruits of his salvation in our lives.

Now that we understand that, we can go back and enjoy the awesome encouragement found in these words. Let’s starts with the first imperative word: **“rejoice.”** It is true in other translations this word is rendered “good-bye.” That’s because this word can be used in greetings either saying hello or good-bye. But honestly, I like the first meaning of this word and the reason it became a greeting word in the Greek world: “rejoice.” We have much to rejoice over. We have the wonder and marvel of Jesus. We know the joy that is found in our sins forgiven and that gift of eternal life that is ours. And note that rejoice really isn’t a word of command. You can’t command anyone to be happy but you can and should encourage them. That’s the bent here, encouragement to find the joy and happiness in our Savior and simply have the “rejoicing” only our God can give.

Next word: **“Set things in order.”** I have to tell you I like that translation so much more than the NIV’s “aim for perfection.” To set things in order is the idea of getting your ducks in a row or putting your house in order. God is a God of order. He sets forth a plan and then sees to it that all is carried out. That’s our encouragement. To have a plan. To work at that plan and get the job done. I will tell you this, if you have ever been a part of a chaotic household, then you know the importance of setting things in order. I might even venture to say that many times our biggest struggles in life come from not setting things in order and thus we have to live from crisis to crisis. That will wear you out. Great advice and encouragement here: set things in order.

Then comes: **“be encouraged.”** The basic word means “to call one to yourself.” It has the idea of helping, comforting, consoling, encouraging. To be encouraged is to keep your head up, to keep going and not to let the troubles and difficulties of this world get to you. In truth, we all need encouragement. Even if you are not going through some trial or tribulation, life is tough as it is and to have those around us who help, build up, work with and give us someone to lean on is absolutely awesome. But most important, is the reminder that we want especially the Lord’s encouragement: his help and comfort, strength and wonder in holding up our sagging selves.

Then comes: **“agree with one another.”** Yep, we are encouraged to work together, to be of one mind, really to be united in faith and love in Jesus our Savior. Our mind is to be the mind of Jesus. Our lives are to be in imitation of Jesus. Our hearts are to have that love of Jesus. With Jesus as our heart and core, how could we not “agree with one another?”

Now comes, **“Be at peace.”** Yes, Bible class, here is “Irene.” To be at peace is such a wonderful gift of God. For instance, “I know I am not perfect. I know I make mistakes and mess things up. I know that without Jesus working and moving in my life, my work and my life would be a shambles. But I don’t despair in this. I know God is with me, working in me, granting me his forgiveness and love in Jesus. There are many storms out there in life and yet in me, in my heart because of Jesus, there is peace. His peace. A calm and sureness of His presence and love, His goodness and grace, His strength and guidance in everything. This is the peace of our Lord and Savior Jesus filling us.

Then the last few phrases: **“And the God of love and peace will be with you.”** I want you to think on that. Isn’t this something you always wanted? Then I think we have to let the other things work in our lives too. That we “rejoice, set things in order, be encouraged, agree and have peace.” These words are the promise of what the other things bring. And since all those other things are built on the wonder and awe of our God and His Savior Jesus, how could we not rejoice and strive after what we are being encouraged in here? Jesus our Savior has opened the gates of heaven and granted us eternal life and salvation. Jesus our Mediator has promised to be with us and always speak on our behalf. Jesus our Prophet, give His wisdom in his Word in which all God’s wonders are ours.

Well, that’s about it. Oh, it is true, we are encouraged to greet each other with “holy kisses.” I believe that is just a reference to the care and compassion we are to share and help each other with. And note that we are reminded that all the other “saints” send us greeting too! It is what we do as we function as Church! God has grouped us together to share his love, encourage and help each other, and to keep the message and wonder of Jesus going in this world. We are his servants and his spokesmen of His Word and wisdom.

I hope and pray that whatever is happening in your life this day you find comfort and encouragement in these words for you. Our Savior has come. Our Savior has won the victory for us. Our Savior sends his wonder and encouragement for your life. Amen.