Sermon on 1 Corinthians 13

A place for everything and everything in its place; well, not in my study.

The saying was created sometime in the 17th or 18th century with some ascribing it to Benjamin Franklin.

It’s seen by many as a vision of what a modern nation should look like. I remember driving, once, through northern Denmark; as I did I was in awe of how every little house seemed to be something out of Hans Christian Anderson; every yard was postcard perfect, the planters didn’t seem to have a speck of dirt on them.

Was it really possible for *every* flower to reach full bloom at exactly the same moment!?

Some understand it as a vision for relationships, for what a great marriage should like like: 2.2 kids or 1.8, a great sex life and great fulfilling jobs; you can have it all!

When it comes to the spiritual life it can sound, well, so Anglican, a little pinch of Protestant, a dash of Catholic; we can use the body like charismatics and yet remain progressive while indebted to tradition! A place for everything and everything in its place.

Last week’s reading from 1 Corinthians about how God has appointed different kinds of ministers; how all of us have gifts and talents can start to sound like “how to be a community of faith in which everyone gets what they need!”

But ask the psychologists of Denmark; or the family counsellors of Canada, or the pastors of any large, well organized church and they’ll tell you: there’s the veneer and then there’s the reality!

Indeed, there’s a phenomenon that occurs when things seem too postcard perfect, everything just so; it’s not so much a phenomenon but a question really: “is that all?” “Is that all there is?” “Is this what the good life looks like?”

We often link anxiety and fear with what is not going well and that’s understandable; who wants to live in Syria now? Or experience loss or disappointment or be in a destructive relationship or find out that our spirituality isn’t up to the challenges that life brings?

But it’s interesting to note, as Paul does, not just in the chapter of his letter we just read, but throughout 1 Corinthians that it’s not necessarily the well-adjusted, the deeply knowledgeable, those wise and beautiful in their youthful vigour that are experiencing the good life.

It’s not even those who seem to have it all together spiritually. Paul’s point is not necessarily to diss any of those things; he’s not an anti-intellectual or anti-spiritual for instance.

Rather he wants to help orient us away from what humans do so well; judge by outward appearances; his concern is for what he calls “a still more excellent way.”

This “way” is of course the most famous piece of writing on the significance of love in our civilization. Ironically, it’s now a mere postcard, a surfacey, outward symbol that is rarely engaged with in any depth, embossed as it is on many a wedding card.

All the other things that are necessary for a well-run efficient life and society are important yes; the less clanking the better;Paul has just said so in chapter 12.

But here he wants to remind us that though important all those things are passing away.

And they are passing away because, at the end of the day, they do not image God, they are not what makes up God’s character and will for the church, for you and I and the world.

What you and I, our society and the church needs is not mere efficiency, mere skill, talent and treasure; yes we do, but we need those things to function from a base that will never pass away.

What is *not* passing away is God and who God is: God and God’s Christ will never end and they will not fail and that’s why we should ground our lives in Love. For God is Love and God so loved the world that he sent Jesus.

Love never ends and love never fails are like to two bookends that create a space for us to live in renewed freedom; they’re the gospel equivalent of “a place for everything and everything in its place.”

Because God’s Love never ends we can begin to rest into the fact that when we do something wrong or something bad happens it’s not the end of us!

Because God’s Love never fails we can begin to rest into the fact that failure is not our identity. God will make things right in our world, for our loved one that dies unexpectedly, for those suffering right now in our world; God will work with us to forgive us and renew us!

It’s like we’re in a building that we begin to believe (we never get all the way there this side of death!) will never fall, however powerful the earthquake! And that begins to give us confidence; confidence in Christ and his Spirit and confidence in each other

In between those two bookends there is a growing space for our dignity; a growing space for this congregation to explore and sacrifice and serve.

Paul employs a literary technique that actually gives space; by just using the word love it draws out from us an expansive set of questions: is it God’s love for us? Yes! Is it our love for God? Yes! For our Neighbour? Yes! For ourselves? *Yes!!*

We’re invited to explore what this kind of love looks like across the relationships that God has referenced in the Great Commandment.

For instance, as I’ve mentioned in several sermons this past year; because of some conflicts I’ve been exploring my own need to grow in self-compassion; instead of beating myself up for being human and therefore inadequate in many ways I’m learning that treating myself with genuine kindness and patience in my inner thoughts actually helps me love my neighbour and God in a more helpful way.

I could choose to run away from the challenge of love by drinking or taking drugs or immersing myself in distractions; the courageous way, please pray for me, is to learn genuine self-compassion.

I commend that exploration to each of you. I don’t usually give a blurbs for books in a homily but Christopher Germer’s book “A mindful path to self-compassion” subtitled, “Freeing yourself from destructive thoughts and emotions” has been very helpful.

I end with another example. Every year over 150,000 couples marry in our great country; most weddings resound with hope and promises of everlasting love but the experts tell us only 3 out of 10 end up in long-term happiness.

The reason, according to the world-renowned experts in marriage stability, psychologists John Gottman and Robert Levenson, is, no surprise here, that very few discover that it’s from a place of safety and trust that genuine intimacy develops.

They’ve discovered over many decades of connecting electrodes to couples who are having conversations that people in relationships where there’s a lot of criticism and fault-finding are literally in fight or flight mode all the time.

But people in relationships where there is trust and good will, relax allowing them to actually be more other focused, more open to emotional signs and language, more open to practicing acts of kindness and generosity; more able to forgive because a deep trust underlies even their faults and sins.

This discovery, written up at length in the Atlantic magazine is a powerful read for a pastor who has preached 1 Corinthians 13 at many weddings.

Many times I’ve said, you won’t have a great marriage by getting your way, but, if, in the middle of an argument, you have the courage to insert an act of kindness; if you’ll make a meal for your partner when you don’t feel like it and if you’ll learn to own your mistakes without turning them into criticism of your partner you will build a house that will not fall when the earthquake comes.

With the necessary adjustments you could apply that research to the church. It is actually wonderful to be a priest in a congregation that feels safe; where we can explore meaningful and important issues in our lives and spirituality without judgement.

Our bishop talks about harmony at the core of parish life as the sign that a congregation is ready to grow. Amen.

I’m not sure how to end this homily except to say that whether you are a person who resonates with a place for everything and everything in its place or you may not feel you have a place or are good enough to be placed but Jesus Christ is living this Love here at this table; his presence with us will never end and his resurrection life has begun a new creation that cannot and will not fail.

He will remain when all else collapses, why not remain in his love; why not live his love and find that you too can leave a legacy that will remain.