Sermon on 1 Corinthians 13

What a strange omission! Last week’s second lesson from 1 Corinthians 12 ends halfway through verse 31. After asking a series of questions, a few of which are “are all prophets?” “Do all speak in tongues?” “Do all interpret?” all rhetorical questions which Paul expects us to answer with “no,” he says, “but strive for the greater gifts,” and there, as many of us used to say, endeth the lesson.

Then this week’s second lesson begins at 1 Cor 13:1, “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels but do not have love…” Unread, not proclaimed anywhere in our lectionary is one of the most important phrases in the New Testament, the last half of the last verse of chapter 12 immediately preceding what we read today, “but strive for the greater gifts. *And I will show you a still more excellent way.*

Talk about a missed segue! Wouldn’t it be important for us to know that what Paul talks about in this famous chapter isn’t just something that should show up on the back of wedding bulletins, as if he got tired about what he was writing about and just needed to write a love poem? Wouldn’t it be important for us to know that he’s talking about “a way,” a way of life, “a still more *excellent* way of life?”

Wouldn’t it be somewhat important to know that 1 Corinthians 13 is Paul’s attempt to get right at the heart of what it means to be the new humanity that God has envisioned; the very path that will need to be trod if Jew and Gentile, if Sikh and Christian, if men and women, queer and straight, conservative and liberal are to find a way of not merely tolerating each other as we stay in our silos muttering about “how our society is going to hell?”

All rhetorical questions that I think we’d say deserve to be answered with an unqualified “yes!”

Paul has sought to help the Corinthians (and us!) understand that each of us are an indispensable part of a spirituality so real, so interconnected, so vibrant and earthy that he uses that which is most emotionally and viscerally real for us, the human body, as the picture of what he’s talking about.

But need more than a powerful image, we need a way, an excellent way, to live, in our bodies, with each other, for the common good!

For modern believers and those of us struggling with doubt and belief, the proof is in the pudding, in a way of life that connects the image with the day to day realities.

Sadly without that phrase “And I will show you a more excellent way,” we wouldn’t know that Paul is trying to do just that; he wasn’t merely trying to make Hallmark rich!

So what is Paul talking about here? I was reading yesterday about Fatima Ali, a top chef in the United States who died yesterday of cancer at the young age of 29.

She said when she found out she only had a year to live, she found extreme clarity; the one thing that she would not have any space for was selfishness. The pressure of time helped her see the more excellent way, the only thing that lasts

That’s what Paul is talking about here; all of us have limited time; and yet under the illusion that we have limitless time we can get our priorities screwed up!

Without clarity we can imagine that if people are impressed with our personalities, with our accomplishments as individuals then we’ve arrived

Without clarity we can imagine as a parish that if we find ourselves wowing visitors with our music and sermons and extraordinarily moist coffee-hour cakes (cue all the wonderful bakers in this place!), then we’re something! This is how the Corinthians thought!

But Paul says if we don’t know how to truly greet and welcome others on *their* terms; that is, practice the kind of hospitality we would hope for ourselves, then it’s just a bunch of noise signifying precisely nothing.

It’s true, we need all those things, particularly the music and the cakes!—Paul is a wonderful speaker, he believes actually that his central ideal, his knowledge of Christ matters hugely!

But so what, really? So what without a viable, transformative way to live, a path to walk, a excellent way to aspire to?

This moment of clarity is love and love of a particular kind. Of course we use the word love in all sorts of ways and here, despite its almost universal use in church weddings, what Paul is talking about here is not love as attraction; nor of preference, “I love dark chocolate with a hint of sea salt.” That really is a love of mine!

Neither is this type of love particularly practical! This is a love that really is, on one level, quite weak, it’s a love that doesn’t fix problems.

When I look at the challenges of our parish we might not immediately think of Love as what we need; we need money! We need butts in seats! We need some long-term tenants who will rent our space!

What’s love got to do with it? How can love address the issues both small and large in us, in our community and in our world?

This kind of love is not a quick fix. Perhaps you noticed that there’s a common theme running through many of the descriptions Paul uses for this Love: it is patient, it bears all things, endures all things. It has an astounding persistence.

Everything else comes to an end, but Love, Paul says, never ends. Wait a second we say, the love in my marriage ended long ago, the patience I had for my job ran out years ago!

What does Paul mean Love never ends? It has been noted that Paul is using what is called a metonymy in which a person is replace with a quality they possess.

If I say to you, the crown has decided, I mean the Queen or the Queen’s representative. When Paul says, love is patient, love endures all things, Love never ends one could as easily say, “Christ is patient, Christ endures all things, Christ never ends.”

The persisting quality of this love is God’s very love for the world and for us! And when we begin to revel in that perhaps we are ready for the next step: believing that this type of Love is for us to learn!

We may begin to believe that this Love is actually quite practical, at least in the long term, we may begin to believe that it is really the one thing that will help the long arc of the universe bend towards justice.

Here’s the good news, there is not one of us in this room that is a “loving person” in terms of this kind of love. There is not one person in this room that naturally lives this way with others even, maybe especially with, those for whom we experience attractive love!

How on earth is that good news? Because none of us do so naturally, all of us might yet do so with God’s help! Love isn’t for “the naturally loving,” the stereotypical mothers or caregiver types;

This kind of love is the result of persisting in choices that you and I need to make every day; it wasn’t settled this morning that if someone cut me off on the highway I wouldn’t let my reptilian self out of the bag and gleefully give them my spleen!

But here’s where the good news of Paul’s message comes in: we really are members of Christ who persists in this type of love; who has through his going all the way to the cross for us in love, begun to draw us into his forgiving and saving love, even if we fail often, even as feel that often our anxiety and our fear and our anger still gets the better of us!

Christ is the more excellent way! That is, as his body, *we* are the more excellent way! Together, practicing, learning, this kind of love!

And it’s so interesting, when we do this, people are willing to listen. In the 1960’s a Presbyterian minister decided that he could best practice this “more excellent way” by starting a television show for children in which he would demonstrate Love as patient kindness. A show in which the goal wasn’t just the learning but the way the learning happened, as neighbours who are loved and are capable of loving.

In a month or so we’ll find out if the film “Won’t You Be My Neighbour?” which documents the influence the Rev. Fred Rogers had on millions of children (and adults) worldwide wins the Oscar for best movie.

He wouldn’t care one way or another because Oscars don’t last, Fred Rogers didn’t become a children’s television host to because of his desire to be famous but because of his deep commitment to the One who had shown him this love and who had convinced him that it’s what makes us most human.

To be held in this love and to learn to live in it: that’s what we receive in this sacrament: He gives his body in love so that we might be the Body that loves.