

Corinth (for anyone who may be wondering) is located about forty miles south/southwest of Athens, on an isthmus. Since we learned this past week (along with Miss Teen South Carolina) that one in five Americans can't pick out the United States on a map that may not mean very much. But what is important for our time together today is that it means as we listen in on Paul's first letter to the Church in Corinth that we aren't in some out-of-the-way backwater, but in the middle of a major commercial hub, a strategic port city where diverse cultures converged.

Then, as now, diversity is both an opportunity and a challenge. St. Paul arrived in Corinth probably right in the middle of the first century, and planted a congregation there. St. Paul knows the leadership there; the "vestry" if you will. The congregation reflects the diverse make-up of the city: there were Jews like Aquila and Prisca and Apollos who believed messiah had come and his name was Jesus. But there were mostly Gentiles, *goyim*, which is to say all sorts of people from diverse religious backgrounds who were also coming to see the way of Jesus as the way of life. They come to the community, however, with different perspectives and values and spiritual autobiographies. And here is the thing: while they all agreed that Jesus was the Christ, their differences were becoming a source of disagreement and conflict for the community.

For that reason alone this first-century text is a resource for the twenty-first century church, a place where it isn't very hard to hear "a word of the Lord." The key theological question underlying both First and Second Corinthians is this: how do you hold together a community that includes people of such different perspectives and beliefs? For St. Paul, the key to Christian community is love. This from a guy who loves to argue about theology—a guy who is clear that we are saved by faith and not works. Faith, hope, and love are all important—the big three. But make no mistake, even this great theologian of the church is clear that if you have all the faith in the world—enough to move mountains even—but don't have love you have nothing. You gain nothing. Love is *numero uno*.

You remember the rest? I have a wedding this afternoon in the chapel at Christ Church, Fitchburg. The second reading will be that familiar one from the thirteenth chapter of I Corinthians, about how love is patient and kind and not arrogant or rude, how it bears all things and believes all things and hopes all things and endures all things. How everything comes to and end. *Except for love*.

Preachers need metaphors. The most famous metaphor that St. Paul offers to the church in Corinth is of the human body. The human body needs eyes and ears and a nose and fingers and toes and all the rest. For eyes to work they need good optic nerves—and an eye that wishes it could hear is of little use to the body since the ears pretty much have that covered. Paul wants the congregation to figure out how to embody the love of Christ, which means learning to cooperate rather than compete with each other. He wants them to learn to value and honor their own gifts rather than envying the gifts others possess. He wants them to celebrate their diversity rather than striving for uniformity.

In today's reading it is helpful to remember this larger context—that early Christian community on an isthmus 40 miles south/southwest of Athens—an incredibly talented and diverse community trying to embody love in a fragmented world. Paul turns to the world of architecture. He says that there are lots of builders but only one foundation—and that is Jesus Christ. We all have work to do but our work builds upon something more solid—upon a foundation that has already been laid down.

It's as good a reading as any for Labor Day weekend. We do well to remember that the Bible doesn't really use a lot of theological language—which is an interesting thing to ponder. Theologians love big words with Greek and Latin roots like *soteriology* and *eschatology* and *hermeneutics*. But the Bible is far more interested in the *real* world—in the lives of *real* people. So the language of the Bible tends to draw on the ordinary worlds of fishermen and carpenters and teachers and physicians and farmers and shepherds.

How appropriate is this building image for us as we move back into our worship space this weekend?! Some changes have been made and some others are running a bit behind but will be made soon enough. We've moved the furniture around. But we've not changed the foundation. We are still here, trying to love and serve the Lord. We gather with bread and wine, around these ancient texts. We are a lot like the church in Corinth—we disagree about lots of things. But we are a community trying to hold it all together in love, and trying to faithfully serve Christ in our own time and place. We agree that there is a solid foundation not made by human hands but by the Word-made-flesh. We know we won't get it right all the time, but we pray for grace to take us far enough.

Most of you have given of your treasure to make these changes possible. Some of you, for various reasons have waited. I encourage you to wait no longer. We have done this work that is so obvious but also put new roofs on the rectory and St. Clare House and this room. The rectory was long overdue on a paint job but it finally got done this summer and it looks terrific. There is more work to be done in our three-year plan, but this first (and most expensive) phase isn't yet paid for, and we want to get ourselves “even” with the bank before we continue. So please keep using those green envelopes and if you haven't yet made a pledge then please do so.

Many have given not only of their treasure but also of their time and talent as well. A *lot* of volunteer labor has gone into this work. It is always a danger to start naming names for a pastor because someone is bound to be missed and feel hurt. The truth is that we have truly accomplished this work together. But I am here to tell you also that nothing gets done without leadership and we couldn't have done this work without the leadership of Nancy Pope and Kathleen O'Connor; we owe them a debt of gratitude. The money for the new sound system was given by an anonymous donor but the labor was volunteered and saved this congregation an enormous amount of money: Mark Apholt and his family and MaryAnn Dipinto and Matt Dipinto and Howie Gelles spent many, many hours in this place. We are truly blessed.

I have been a rector for nearly a decade now so I am not naïve: I know that not everyone will be equally happy about every change. We do still live in Holden, after all, which has some things in common with Corinth. When you make decisions as a family—as a community—you go by consensus. So someone will inevitably say the pews are a shade darker than they wished they

would be or that the carpet or tiles aren't what they had hoped for. Such is life, my friends! I can tell you that the process was open and that it took us a long time to get this done because we wanted to tend that process and everyone who wanted to speak up was heard. The thing is, we can't always get what we want. (*But if you try sometimes, you just might find...you get what you need!*)

We all manage change differently. And that isn't finished for us yet. We are still waiting on some of the furniture and more importantly we still need to figure out how to live into this new space and use it liturgically. We won't get it all right in the first two weeks; it will take time. As we do that I commend Paul's letters to the Corinthians to you, especially the thirteenth chapter: be patient and kind and gentle with one another (and with me!) Let love rule your hearts—for without love we really do begin to sound like clanging cymbals.

*The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord/She is his new creation, by water and the word.* That foundation remains strong; hold onto that. The work we have done is to the glory of God but the truth is that it is interior decorating. Hang around here long enough and in fifty years someone may suggest we move the altar someplace else and lighten up the wood again. You can be the oldtimer then who says "we tried that once before." Each generation does its best, with God's help, to find the right ways to do what needs to be done; we don't ever get it *all* right. But we are, together, servants of Jesus Christ and that's enough to go on.

The only other thing I want to say about this epistle reading is to notice with you that St. Paul uses a very interesting word that the NRSV translated as *skilled*. Let's face it: Paul is not the most modest guy who ever lived. So he says boldly that in his ministry with that congregation, he was *a skilled master builder*. The root noun from which that adjective is derived is, in Greek, *Sophia*, wisdom.

I like that because we sometimes think of wisdom as something esoteric and abstract. We connect it to the world of philosophy, literally the "love of wisdom." But the Bible is more interested in practical things than abstract concepts. The Bible is interested in where the rubber meets the road. Wisdom, in both in Hebrew and Greek, is more about "street smarts"—about the skills required to mastering a trade or craft. Wisdom in this sense is about figuring out how to install a sound system or crafting a new altar or about the art of parenting or learning to play the flute or how to do Morris dancing.

*Wisdom is about mastering our trade*, which is about using the gifts God has given us well. It's about trying to be a better architect or priest or cop or school teacher or painter or nurse or roofer. *All work has value if it is done well.* It isn't the salary we make that defines what makes work valuable; some of the most important work we do may be to coach a soccer team or lead a Brownie troop or teaching a child to read. It isn't whether we went to college or not (or which college our degree comes from.) What makes work valuable is the work itself. *All of it can glorify God if it is done with integrity and offered to God.*

So I pray that our new worship space will help us for many decades to continue to praise the God who has claimed us in love. I give thanks that we are back home. But above all else, I pray that this parish will continue to be a place where true wisdom is pursued and love is embodied, for if we focus on those things God will be made known to us and to the world around us.