“What happens in Corinth stays in Corinth” might have been the motto under the city crest. It was a Roman colony and the most prosperous city in all of Greece at the time Paul was writing to the fledgling church there that he had founded. It was a huge, busy port, making it a nexus of diversity of all kinds—religious, moral, political, sexual, cultural, intellectual—you name it. As we might imagine, that made it both lively and dangerous in certain ways—full of temptation and conflict. And it would seem that the church there reflected at least some of this diversity.

Last Sunday’s reading from First Corinthians ended with these words from Paul, “Strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.”

His next words are the ones Rachel read for us today: “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.”

He was writing in response to a couple of letters he had received from members of the Corinthian church since he left there. They were concerned that people in the church were in conflict with each other over such things as speaking in tongues or prophesying or teaching sound doctrine. That last bit is particularly significant because there was some confusion about what points of belief and practice were most important. Some members were willing to stake everything on one fine point or another. Single-issue voters, we might call them today. They lacked both understanding and compassion for those who held opposing, or even different, ideas. Some of the Corinthian Christians, no doubt, embraced the free exchange of opinions and varying approaches to Christian values while others felt threatened by them.

Does this sound at all familiar to us? It does to me.

Paul, writing from Ephesus in modern-day Turkey, waded right into this hornet’s nest of power struggles, self-righteousness, and claims to legitimacy. Almost a decade earlier he had written to the Galatians that in Christ there is “neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female.” So the Corinthians probably had some hint of the approach he would take with them.

Today’s passage, still, might have surprised them. He told them in essence that all the concerns they’d raised, all the ins and outs of doctrine and practice they’d asked him to prioritize did not amount to a hill of beans if they were constantly sniping at each other and condemning the community that surrounded their church.

You can do all the right things, he told them, but if that is based on self-promotion and claims to exclusive righteousness, then those actions and words are as hollow as windchimes.

Here’s a more contemporary take on this passage. Dr. Haddon Robinson was a former president of Denver Seminary and a renowned evangelical preacher. He once said in a sermon, “Love is that thing which, if a church has it, it doesn’t really need much else, and if it doesn’t have it, whatever else it does have doesn’t matter much.”

Nice paraphrase and summation. Even though I wrote an exegesis of this chapter for a class in seminary, I’ve pretty much always taken it to be a direct appeal to each individual Christian, especially since Paul uses the intimate first-person singular from the outset. He seems to be saying, “Now you (singular) listen to me. This my counsel to you.”

That’s the way it has seemed to me, even though I pretty studiously avoid any notion of the “individual Christian” as almost an oxymoron. We are Christians always in community, even if we’re together only virtually, as on Zoom. It is clear that Paul intends us to see ourselves as a body, the body of Christ from last week’s reading. And today’s reading is no exception.

Paul writes that everything will pass away—glossolalia, prophecy, teaching, even faith—as long as those are motivated by egocentric needs such as approval, praise, and pride—in other words, one individual person’s being right by proving others wrong. If those same, and any other, actions are motivated instead by selfless love, a desire to raise up the whole community, looking to the common welfare of the church and the church’s desire to help those beyond its walls, all the rest will find its true value.

It is significant that this treatise on love—agapé, selfless love—follows the chapter on the church as the body of Christ. His readers then (as we should now) understood that the image had to do not only the with internal functioning of an organism, but also with a body meant to live, breath, walk around, and act in the world.

We are meant to be an active body, fueled by the love of God.

Of course Paul knew that understanding this idea was not the same as incorporating (that is, embodying) it into constant and persistent practice. New conflicts arise as soon as old ones have been quelled. New pronouncements are made about what is the most loving path to follow in the midst of upheaval: tough love, justice over mercy, inclusiveness over orthodoxy, and on and on.

By the way, I believe that’s the reason we come together on a weekly basis to reflect on the gospel and to be fed by the sacraments (even when we have to be patient with the latter). That is different from treating the Bible as a rule book which needs only to be read and applied with no need for further contemplation; that just doesn’t seem to work. It didn’t for the Corinthians, and it doesn’t for us. We need to be connected with God, with each other, with the world around us.

Paul formed a trinity of faith, hope, and love, giving a place of honor to those first two as well. But even faith and hope, he tells us, are subordinate to love, for divine love is the completion and perfection of all else.

It’s not surprising that First Corinthians 13 is put before us in this season of Epiphany, this light of Christ shining on us and in us and through us. The light of Christ’s perfect, selfless love.

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