

Epiphany 4**Life Together****1 Corinthians 13:1-13**

A sermon preached by the Rev. Richard C. Israel at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Hts., OH on January 31, 2010.

It is difficult to hear 1 Corinthians 13 without thinking of white dresses, rented tuxedos, bouquets, rings, and all the other associations one makes with weddings. Yet this stunning word on the nature and practice of Christian love arose out of a pastoral crisis in the church at Corinth and is best understood if one sees it in the larger context of the Body of Christ imagery in chapter 12 that we heard last week. Against all popular opinion, this is not a passage about romantic love, but about a radical, communal love that enables us to imagine life in a community where unity and difference can co-exist.

When Paul wrote to the Corinthian church he didn't intend to pen words fit for a greeting card or a wall hanging. He wrote with great passion to a community of Christians engaged in tearing itself apart with disputes. Who was right? Whose gifts were truly crucial? Which members could they live without if things got too hard? The Corinthian Church was divided into four unequal parties—the Pauline, Apollos, Petrine, and Christ parties. Each of the parties had its own agenda for the church and was pushing that agenda with no compromise and with no inclusion of the other parties. The result was a “superiority” complex on the part of some and a sense of being marginalized and powerless on the part of others.

Both our Epistle and Gospel lessons for today are continuations of readings from last Sunday. In them we see that living in community is not easy. Instead of our romantic myths that community is always sweet and fulfilling we learn that it is more like a crucible or a refiner's fire. Parker Palmer wrote, “Community means the collision of egos, and while there is the pain of not getting our way, there is the promise of finding the Way.”

Community is a by-product of commitment and struggle. It flourishes, as you who have participated in “covenant” groups or worked in “apostleship” activities know, when we step forward to right some wrong, to heal some hurt, to give some service. It is no accident that the most impressive sense of community is found among people in the midst of such joyful travail; among minority groups seeking identity and justice; among same-gendered folks claiming a place in the Church and equal treatment and protection in society; among all who have said “No” to injustice by putting their wellbeing on the line.

Make no mistake about it, while we all long for community, living in community is not easy. Henri Nouwen wrote, “Community is the place where the one you can't stand always is.” Investing ourselves in any parish community reminds us that Christianity requires more than espousing lofty spiritual truths. Christian community is an invitation to practice loving our neighbor, especially the one who challenges us. It is a laboratory where we are called to practice addressing and resolving conflicts, or perhaps at times, learn to disagree agreeably. It is the place where we ask “Who am I in God's eyes?” and rather than sit in judgment on ourselves or others, seek to grow in God's discipline of forgiveness and reconciliation. Christian community involves a willingness to companion those who suffer as well as rejoicing with those

who rejoice. Martin Copenhaver, a UCC minister, wrote, “The church, like the family, is a place where we can learn to live with people we did not choose. When we love the ones we are stuck with, it is a powerful reminder of the love of God who is stuck with us all.”

Paul captures the tender balance of connectedness and self-differentiation that is at the heart of healthy community in his description of the Body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12. He compares the unity we have in Christ to a human body—an entity that is a whole, yet made up of many small parts. Those small parts in all their diversity are the key to making the whole body function well. As Paul describes it each has a very distinctive role to play that cannot be played by any other. The ear cannot drop out of the body because it wishes it were an eye. It is an ear and must play its part in the whole production or a vital function will be lost. Furthermore, there are no better or worse parts. All parts are needy of the others and all parts are needed.

We know that we are supposed to get along with one another and work harmoniously as one body, but time and again we fall short of the goal because we are wounded people. Some of us deny our gifts and live with a deep sense of unworthiness passed on no doubt by a dysfunctional parent or institution, maybe even the church, somewhere along the line. Some of us are legends in our own minds and look down on others because we have come to believe the lie that salvation lies on external achievements. Still others of us have so armored ourselves against life’s losses that we find it hard to reach out to others with ease or to receive from others with grace.

If we evaluate the worth of a community solely by the criteria of whether it provides me personal nurture, we can also spend our lives moving from one community to another, one church to another. Parker Palmer reminds us that God calls us to live in community not for ourselves but for others and this can be very threatening as we see in today’s gospel where Jesus taught that God’s love always leads us into ever widening circles of inclusion, as difficult and threatening as that can be.

However, it is through the process of recognizing that we belong to a community gathered by Christ’s Spirit, not our own choice, that we also find the gift of community to be one that leads us to new ways of living faithfully, of growing to maturity. “How can I participate in a fairer distribution of resources unless I live in a community which makes it possible to consume less? How can I learn accountability unless I live in a community in which my acts and their consequences are visible to others? How can I learn to share power unless I live in a community where everyone is interdependent? How can I take the risks which justice demands unless I belong to a community which gives support?” (Palmer, “A Place Called Community”)

For Paul, our capacity to flourish as human beings is realized to the extent that we can live in the love of God revealed in the cross of Jesus Christ. Practicing the self-sacrificial love of Jesus which seeks the good of others is the glue that holds together Christian community. This love is greater than any spiritual gift as Paul makes evident when he says that gifts of prophecy, speaking in tongues and knowledge will all pass away, but love never ends. Practicing love in this community is the means to maturity. Living centered in and boasting of our own gifts is like

living as a child. Living centered in love for God's people and the world is the stance of the mature Christian.

To grow in love, to value love above personal gifts and achievements to which we all aspire, to seek to be reconciled rather than right, is the gift of community in Christ. And that is the word for us today. We are improbable witnesses to God's love. We are riddled with fears, resentments, prejudices, and blind spots, yet are still called to love and serve others in God's name. The church is a sign of hope to the world not because we are perfect specimens, but precisely because we are imperfect people whom God in his grace still manages to use.

We love because God first loved us. God accepts us with our stunning achievements and terrible failings, and calls us to the task of accepting ourselves and others. Henri Nouwen captured this well when he wrote, "Forgiveness is the name of love practiced among people who love poorly. The hard truth is that all people love poorly. We need to forgive and be forgiven every day, every hour increasingly. That is the great work of love among the fellowship of the weak that is the human family."

When Jesus eluded the angry congregation in Nazareth he did not escape for good. When his practice of love finally threatened the powers of church and empire, the crowds that once shouted "Hosanna" eventually called for Jesus' blood. But even from the cross he cried out, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do."

Surrendering his will to God on behalf of the world, Jesus showed us God's love for humankind on the cross. That love never ends was made clear by the Risen Christ whose Spirit continues to gather us into his body where we learn that God has forgiven everything. In the community of forgiven sinners known as the church, we learn that God is patient and kind toward us, not irritable or resentful. God laughs not at our weaknesses, but rejoices over the truth that we are all God's children. For each and for all of us, God bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. And through our life together in the church with all its imperfections, its petty resentments, its anxious hungering for security, and the many lenses on the truth it contains, God teaches us the power of love that never ends.

And so we press on to be healed and to be healers. We press on for reconciliation in the world at large and in the relationships that define our everyday lives. We press on to bring relief to brothers and sisters in Haiti and Iraq and Masiphumelele and Miles Park School and Loaves and Fishes. We press on to honor the gifts God has given us by acknowledging and sharing them with one another. We press on to build up the Body of Christ here at St. Paul's Church, trusting the power of God's love to grow into the fullness of what it means to be human and to bring life through us to a world that longs for hope and peace.