

“What Next?”

Corinth was a new city. The old Corinth (which was famous and powerful in the days of the Peloponnesian War) was burned in 146 B.C. by the Romans. Because it was a city devoted to the gods, a hundred years were required to pass before the city could be rebuilt. In 46 B.C., Julius Caesar rebuilt the city, populated it with a colony of veterans and redeemed slaves, and named it Julia Corinthus. The first settlers made their fortune by digging up the graves of the previous residents for the personal effects that were buried with them. Then by trading the city became very affluent.

With a population of 400,000 and being a prominent center of commerce in the Mediterranean world, it was a place that was described in a proverb “Not for everyone is the voyage to Corinth”. A youth going there would lose his virginity and all his money.

So in the middle of this place the apostle Paul sets up a church. And then almost immediately the congregation start arguing. Not just a few things, they had a whole list: they argued over who was the best minister (Paul, Cephus or Apollos), they were taking each other to court with lawsuits, they argued about what foods were permitted at pot luck suppers, women talking in church, how communion was to be celebrated, whose spiritual gifts were the greatest, resurrection.

So if you consider this list as going from the matters of least importance to the greatest importance —that is “who the clergy are” is the least important through conflict resolution, through potluck suppers, gender issues, communion practices, spiritual gifts, resurrection — you need to know that this is not the end of the list. The end of the list is what our scripture reading points to — caring for the poor.

This past week the sale of our church building was completed—two million dollars. It is a good thing we have already decided how the money will be used

because there is nothing like a sudden bequest to start a church fight. There is nothing like affluence to make one selfish. In Canada the poor give more generously than the rich on a percentage of income basis.

Hear Paul’s words again, “I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance.” (2 Corinthians 8:13-14 NRSVS)

Paul does not give a command on what to do and it is not till the end of the letter that he returns to this theme, after the discourse about resurrection, and he specifies the needs of the church in Jerusalem where the people were living in poverty.

Paul does not command, but simply says to them “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.” (2 Corinthians 8:9 NRSVS)

Well, that is what Paul would say to us as we move from one place to another. As for me, I would like us to keep in mind this passage from Paul. It is familiar, perhaps too familiar—but it is a word for us as we begin to let go of what has been and take on something new.

“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. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own

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way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” (1 Corinthians 13:1-13 NRSVS)

May God continue to bless us.