

QUINQUAGESIMA 2014
SERMON-CHRIST CHURCH PARISH
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I COR. 13.1



Here's a story I heard sometime back offered by long-time beloved parishioner, Lura Harlow, about two years before she died..."Dear St. Paul...about those Corinthians...did they ever write back?"

The Pre-Lenten Discussion Group broke into uproarious laughter...and still does...Lura's wonderful quip lives...it made its way into the homily at her Requiem Mass and several other sermons...it has become something of a parochial legend.

Paul founded the Church in Corinth early in his public ministry. He had a vested interest in its success, not in its failure. When he heard they were having problems, he sent his friend Timothy to Corinth to check things out. The news he got back was troubling.

The Corinth of Paul's time was a port city located on the narrow stretch of land that connects the Peloponnese to mainland Greece. The city was an important commercial center, with many competing religions. Some pagan religious practices started to influence the Church in Corinth.

Paul's famous letter about Faith, Hope, and Love that serves as today's Epistle was written to address the problems within the Church in Corinth that threatened to rip the parish apart. Leaders in the church openly challenged Paul's authority. Immoral activity within the parish was being ignored. The liturgy was anything but decent and orderly.

So what caused things to go so terribly wrong in the Church in Corinth? Simply put...self-righteous pride! Some parishioners wanted to be the center of attention. They wanted to have things their own way. They wanted to turn the parish into their own personal religious playground.

The Corinthian Church was rapidly devolving from a parish community into a collection of competing groups. Paul made plans to visit Corinth and told them he would deal with their quarrelsome and mean-spirited behavior in a definitive manner, because their actions were opposed to everything Jesus taught and to the Christian life on any and all levels. Did they get the message and make some changes? Paul himself tells us some got the message and changed their behavior...others didn't.

Let's fast-forward to about 30 years after the death of Paul. The Corinthian Problem had become a legend in its own time and the antics of those Corinthians were so well known they were becoming the Church's Problem. Around 95 AD, the Corinthians wrote a letter to Clement, Bishop of Rome, and asked him to help sort things out.

Another disagreement within the Corinthian Church threatened to blow things apart. Some parishioners had hijacked the parish and fired the priest because they didn't like something he said. Clement wrote back...he reminded the people that Paul had entrusted the care of the church to the priests, and they were out of line firing the priest. He urged them to reconcile out of love for each other, as Paul would have insisted.

Clement wrote, *"Let the one truly possessed by the love of Christ keep his commandments. Who can express the binding power of divine love? Who can find words for the splendor of its beauty? Beyond all description are the heights to which it lifts us. Love unites us to God; "it cancels innumerable sins," has no limits to its endurance, bears everything patiently. Love is neither servile nor arrogant. It does not provoke schisms or form cliques, but always acts in harmony with others. By it all God's chosen ones have been sanctified; without it, it is impossible to please him."*

It might be tempting for us to say to ourselves the Corinthian Problem was their problem, and not ours. But it is clear human beings tend to behave the same way today as they behaved during the time Paul and Clement lived. That's precisely the point. What happened at Corinth didn't stay in Corinth. Bad behavior in one parish, when left unchecked, can quickly infiltrate and ruin the entire Church.

None of us wants to admit that people within the Church at large much less our own parish can behave badly. Personal experience should tell us otherwise. None of us has the right to claim the parish as our own personal kingdom. Arrogant, self-righteous and self-aggrandizing behavior has no place in the parish, now or ever. We must always focus on growing together out of love...not on tearing apart out of self-righteous pride.

It's not just about "those Corinthians" and whether they got the message. It's about us too...and do we get the message? Let's make certain we do!

