

QUINQUAGESIMA 2016
SERMON-SAINT JOSEPH PARISH
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1 COR. 13.1



It's time for us to visit "those Corinthians" again. Let's make this visit different...instead of focusing on the Corinthian problem...let's focus on the Corinthian solution. Problems remain just that...problems...unless we look for solutions.

Saint Paul was well aware of the antics going on in the Corinthian Church. The coffee hour had become a venue for gossip, spreading of vicious and unfounded rumors, back stabbing and priest hating. The Corinthian Church was a large and important parish in a major commercial center much like the Bay Area. What was happening in the Corinthian Church did not stay there...it was spreading to other parts of the Church...even Rome.

Paul addresses the matter head-on. He does not say, "Corinthians...you have problem...deal with it." He offers a solution...Faith, Hope and Love...the three actions that define who we are...and how we should behave. Faith, Hope and Love are the core of Paul's teaching...they help keep us focused...they help build up the Church...they are part of the solution that helps change unacceptable behavior into good and positive behavior.

We often read Paul's Letter about Faith, Hope and Love at a Nuptial Mass. The Exhortation read at the beginning of Holy Matrimony in the *Book of Common Prayer* reminds us the joining together of the Man and Woman points to the mystical union between Christ and his Church. Husband and wife are supposed to love each other and want what is best for each other...just as Jesus loves us and wants what is best for us. That means we should always act for the good of others.

Paul did not found the Corinthian Church but he had a particular interest in its welfare as he did with all the churches within his pastoral oversight. That includes us. Paul wanted to be part of the solution to the Corinthian problem. We get the most out of Paul's letter when we understand he is writing to us and not just to the Church of 2000 years ago. The Corinthian story is our story...we should see something of ourselves in the story.

Scripture does not record Paul's death but we believe from reliable sources he was martyred in Rome in about 67 AD. He left capable priests and bishops in charge of the Corinthian Church. But about 30 years after Paul's death, Saint Clement of Rome heard "those Corinthians" were at it again. He wrote them to remind them of what Paul had written...words of encouragement...his behavior-modification program...do everything out of Faith, Hope and Love!

Saint Clement was a man of profound wisdom and compassion and may have met Saint Paul. Like Paul, he saw little value in criticizing bad behavior without offering a solution. Church is not a place where angry people come to divide and conquer and throw out the people they don't like. Church is about being *Ekklesia...the Church...those who have been called to be a community built on Faith, Hope and Love.*

Clement tried to get the Corinthian Church back on track. He told them to remember what Paul had written to them in the spirit of love. He told them to stop acting like spoiled children and to grow up. He told them to focus all of their attention on Faith, Hope and Love...always remembering everything we do must be motivated by the same kind of unconditional love Jesus shows. Jesus is the ultimate problem-solver.

Change is possible and bad behavior can be corrected when we focus on the solution...LOVE! Practicing unconditional love means exactly that...we love others unconditionally because that's the way God loves us...unconditionally. His love is truthful...our love must be truthful and not fraudulent. He does not hold grudges...we should not hold grudges. His love does not give up on us...our love must not give up on each other.

The sad part of the Corinthian story is they did not listen to Saint Paul...they did not listen to Saint Clement...they preferred anger over peace...they preferred division over unity...they liked being the problem child...they did not look for a solution...they forgot about love! But we miss the point if we say to ourselves "those poor Corinthians...glad we're not like them".

In the early days of the Church Saint Clement's Letter to the Corinthians held equal weight with Paul's letters and would have been read in churches. He reinforces what Paul wrote and offers some sound advice should we find ourselves focusing on problems in the Church rather than looking for solutions. He writes...

... "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."...

The operative word is LOVE! It can help all of us look for and be part of the solution. And that pleases God.

