

Sermon for Epiphany 4(C)  
Christ Church, Andover  
January 31, 2010 (Annual Meeting Sunday)  
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I Corinthians 13:1-13; (Luke 4:21-30)

Set between two chapters aimed to quell disputes in the church in Corinth over spiritual gifts, we see that beautiful 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of First Corinthians, Paul's famous hymn on love. We've just heard it read here a few minutes ago. In chapter 12 he had dealt with the varieties of spiritual gifts and the importance of the different parts of the body – which is Paul's compelling metaphor for the church. The 14<sup>th</sup> chapter is his attempt to bring order out of chaos, as some were using their own gifts to promote themselves, while creating confusion and misunderstanding among others. The final line in this chapter (and also, I might say, the defining imperative for worship in the Episcopal Church) is "let all things be done decently in order."

We may not always be known for our outward display of spiritual gifts, but we're nothing if not "decent and in order!"

But set between these two lectures, really, on the gifts of the spirit and the importance of all the parts of the body is that great hymn on love. And how appropriate it is! The church needs nothing more than love, and from time to time we need to be reminded of the importance of love in how we think about and in how we act toward one another.

Today is the 174<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of our parish. Founded in 1835, this is the 175<sup>th</sup> year anniversary of our Parish! Happy Anniversary, Christ Church! We'll be talking more in the near future about how we'll observe this anniversary this coming fall. But today is the day we set aside once a year to come together in a more-or-less formal way to take care of the business of the church, to elect new members of our vestry, to hear reports, review budgets and talk about the things that are important to us in our institutional life. Now I know that lots of us don't

want anything to do with the “business” of the church. We just want to come, say our prayers, be comforted, find the inner peace we seek, and go on about our lives assuming that the church will just be there for us when we need it. We’re happy to leave the institutional stuff to other people and feel that “they’ll all get along just fine without my participation.”

In the spirit of Paul’s letter to Corinth, let me make a case for the your participation.:

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. <sup>15</sup>If the foot were to say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body’, that would not make it any less a part of the body. <sup>16</sup>And if the ear were to say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body’, that would not make it any less a part of the body. <sup>17</sup>If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? <sup>18</sup>But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. <sup>19</sup>If all were a single member, where would the body be? <sup>20</sup>As it is, there are many members, yet one body. (I Cor. 12:14-20)

Just as we need every member who plays a role in the conduct of “the business of the parish” to be nourished and strengthened by our life of worship, so we need every person who cares about the spiritual life of this place to recognize and participate in how we conduct our institutional life. They must feed each other. They’re parts of a whole. We need one another and the diversity of interests and perspectives that are represented in the body, the church.

Having said that, I’d like to take these next few minutes to talk with you about the state of our parish. Some of what I’ll be saying, I think, will demonstrate just how important it is that we actually listen to and hear one another, and engage in these conversations together, because when we don’t we’re subject to all kinds of false or misleading information or impressions. It’s just the nature of life in a parish. And one of the characteristics of this particular parish is that we have a lot of very gifted, talented, smart, well-educated, take-charge people around here – and that means that everybody has an opinion about just about everything! Leadership around here can at times be a little like herding cats!

A recent conversation with a long-time parishioner revealed the impression that our parish year after year operates “in the red.” This person was concerned about the wisdom of doing a capital campaign “when we don’t even meet our budget.” And there is some evidence that this person’s impression may be even more widespread. But nothing could be further from the truth. For the past seven years, Christ Church has ended the year in the black, without reliance on capital reserves to fund our budget. We have a commitment to living within our means, keeping expenses under control, and working hard to raise the necessary income. We have ended yet one more year with a surplus, and our treasurers will be announcing the amount of that surplus and how it will be used at our meeting after the service. I think you’ll be very pleased!

I tell you this to let you know that because of the commitment of all of you, and the sacrifices you make, and your desire to give back to God a portion of what you have received for the work of this parish, we are fundamentally a very sound parish financially. Everything we do is dependent on voluntary contributions, and so, yes, we have our moments of anxiety at times, wondering if it will work out again this year, with costs rising as they inevitably do. But God is good! And we have a wonderful parish of faithful people who step up to the challenge year in and year out, who increase your giving from year to year as you are able and as you respond to God’s call.

Finances are one measure of a parish’s health and well-being, but certainly not the only one, and not even the most important one. I had a new young mom sit in my office this week and tell me how welcoming Christ Church had been to her and her family. And at least once a week, it seems, I have someone tell me that that’s why they’re here. Someone reached out to them. They heard the welcome to the table. They found fellowship among caring people at coffee hour or a parish supper or a gathering of young parents. Our desire to be “an open and welcoming Episcopal congregation, living the gospel of Jesus Christ” has an impact far greater than we sometimes appreciate.

It would take all day to describe the many signs of health and vitality in our parish. But take a look some Sunday morning in one of our youth rooms or Sunday School

classrooms. Sit in on a pastoral care team meeting or join in with the men's ministry on a Habitat for Humanity build day. Stop by the Thrift Shop, or volunteer at the Esperanza Academy, and see how lives are being touched, day in and day out, by the fundamental conviction that loving God by serving others is a way of life that truly gives us life.

Let me say a few words about our building campaign. Our parish is in a very important time of caring for this lovely, historic building that holds us and nurtures us week by week. Two years ago we did a feasibility study to assess our priorities for our facilities, and in that study an overwhelming 80% of the respondents said that of the many things we might want to do to improve our facilities, the worship space and the organ should be our first priority. On the strength of that information, our building committee has focused in like a laser beam to renew this space, with a beautiful plan to make it more flexible, accessible, welcoming, conducive to more participatory worship and to building community, with better lighting and sound, while preserving and even restoring some of its historic beauty. We'll have a new organ that will not only enhance our music and worship, which it certainly will, but will also make this space desirable for a whole variety of musical and artistic purposes. It's all part of a strategy to care for our building and make it a place that nurtures the lives of people for generations to come. This project is not only about our own individual needs and desires at this present moment, but a long-term plan for the vitality of this congregation and its mission here on the corner of Central and School Streets, in this town and region, and yes, to the mission we are part of in the world.

Already we have had quite a number of people step up and say, "This is just what Christ Church needs, and I want to help." Some have already made major financial commitments to this project, and we are deeply grateful to them. Their investment in this place is a witness to just how much this parish means to them, and how much they care about its future. In just a few weeks, the "Renew and Rejoice!" capital campaign will be rolled out, and we'll all have an opportunity to participate by making a commitment to our future. And I know it's one that we'll all be very proud of when it is finished.

Won't you be glad never again in our lifetimes to have to hear about all the problems with the organ?! Some of you have been hearing about them for forty years around here, and it is surely getting old by now! But it's a problem that with lots of hard work and a lot of prayer we're well on our way to solving, thanks be to God. And we'll be solving lots of other problems along with it!

So this is an historic time for our parish. It's one we will look back on and realize just how important it is that the love we heard about from Corinthians today is there, sandwiched right in between all the other competing voices, people's different gifts and talents, their preferences and opinions. Are there challenges and stresses and a little bit of anxiety getting to where we want to go? Of course there are! But love – our love for this place and our love for one another are what hold it all together.

Ultimately this community and the world around us will not know we are followers of Jesus because we have a beautiful building or a lovely new organ or great programs or a congregation full of talented people. Those are simply means to another end. They'll know we are Christians by our love – by the way we engage in our work together, respecting our differences, honoring one another even when we disagree, for (as Paul says) "love is patient, love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful." Love "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends."

That's the kind of place we want this to be, and with God's help, it is just the kind of place we will be!