

The Church in Corinth was a mess.

The wealthy members who were able to leave work would arrive early and eat all the food, leaving nothing at the agape table for the laborers who didn't have the privilege of early arrival. If that weren't bad enough, there was nothing left to take to the elderly who weren't able to come at all.

In addition, there were those who felt that their particular spiritual gift was in some way better than the gifts of their peers. They would take this superiority and leverage it in order to puff themselves up. This was especially true of those who were speaking in tongues. Apparently this gift was held in high regard in the Gentile/pagan religions and the converts wanted it to be known. In doing so, they created dissension in the ranks.

Paul had to do something.

This passage was not intended for weddings, even though that's where we hear it the most. Paul wasn't talking romantic love. He was talking tough love. Paul needed to tell truth to power – whether that power was from money or prestige or self-perception.

The problem with telling truth to power is that it always, ALWAYS, ticks people off. Not only does it upset the powerful, but it also upsets the powerless because they wonder what took you so long! And, the people in the middle are upset because all of this is just getting in the way of them doing their jobs.

So, Paul writes a letter. He writes a letter to a community he loves. In it, he reminds them that unlike other communities in which they found themselves, a Christian community is different.

In a Christian community, it is the weak who are honored and cared for. This was completely at odds with that society's norms. Those who could not be productive were left to fend for themselves or die. In a Christian community, individuality must give way to the common good. That doesn't mean that individual's aren't respected and appreciated for themselves. However, in Christian community, members are expected to be woven together so that they can rejoice with others in their honors without being jealous and be compassionate with others in their sufferings without feeling required to fix it.

The underpinning of Paul's letter is that the Corinthians had to stop thinking of their house church as just another organization in which they could choose to belong. Christian community was (and is) not a guild or a social club. Christian community is life-force where everyone is to be made welcome and all gifts are to be nurtured.

Christian community doesn't exist for itself. It exists for those who are on the outside looking in. It exists to be the visible and outward sign of the grace and love of God. Most people in Corinth became curious about those 'Christians' because of the way they saw them behaving outside their weekly gatherings. They were different. Their lives had been transformed by an experience that was tangible and extraordinary. They could no longer be the same, think the same, live the same. Love, not fear, became their anchor. Being a reflection of the Love of God, which had changed their perspectives was what drew new members to the community. And, now, their behavior was threatening to undo that. Paul's sent his letter to remind them that servant leadership, care for the least among them, and stewardship were their true concerns. Speaking in tongues, eating according to social status, and other traditions of the time were to be put away in favor of the beloved community.

I wonder if Paul's letter to the Episcopal Church would be much different than the one he wrote to the Corinthians. Or the Galatians. Or the Thessalonians. Or the Romans. You get the picture. Humanity has become more humane over the centuries, but you know, we really haven't changed that much either.

One of the reasons I like Diocesan Convention and General Convention so much is that it provides the larger perspective of what "Church" really is. It's too easy to be trapped in thinking that the entire institutions looks, thinks, and acts, just like we do on Sunday morning. Only Convention helps you understand that we are people of varied and diverse cultures, opinions, and gifts. We don't always agree, but we all gather at the table.

Convention Eucharists have been extraordinary experiences for me. I have to put aside my agenda – not abandon it, mind you – but put it aside. For I cannot go to communion if I am not at peace with my fellow pilgrims in faith. To do so, would be to – as St. Paul exhort's us – place in danger the sanctity of the sacrament. We are an Episcopal church, which means we have bishops. "Episcopos" is the Greek word for that, and it means "Oversight". Therefore, we are all under the supervision of those persons in their purple shirts.

I have to acknowledge that I am in a governance structure that requires that I support and care and pray for my bishop and my presiding bishop even if and when they do things that annoy me mightily. That is part of being in “Orders” – lay or clerical.

Subsequently, looking upon all of the people who make up the diocese, I am humbled by the people who appear smarter than I am, more spiritual than I am, more talented than I am. And then I remember, I have a place in this body too. I need to rejoice at those more intelligent or spiritual or talented AND rejoice at my own place on those spectrums. Because I need to be in relationship with them and they need me as well.

It’s too easy to get comfortable in our parish settings. It’s too easy to forget that the church is the people, imperfect and wacky as we can be, and not the building or the choir or coffee hour. Christian community has to be a balance between comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable. Most of all, Christian community must be responsive. We must be flexible enough to respond to crises in individual member’s lives and to be able to adapt to changes in the culture around us.

Most of all, you and I must remember that it is not by our own efforts that we create or maintain community, but it is only the Holy Spirit that makes this all possible. We may not always understand how we will get to the Kingdom, but eventually all will be made clear. For now, let faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.