

Scripture: I Corinthians 12-13 selected vv.

12.<sup>4</sup> Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; <sup>5</sup>and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; <sup>6</sup>and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. <sup>7</sup>To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. <sup>8</sup>To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, <sup>9</sup>to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, <sup>10</sup>to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. <sup>11</sup>All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

<sup>12</sup> For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ....

<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many.... <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>20</sup> [And] there are many members, yet one body. <sup>21</sup> The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’, nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you....’ <sup>26</sup> If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.

<sup>27</sup> Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it....

<sup>31</sup> Strive, [then], for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way. <sup>13</sup>. <sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant <sup>5</sup> or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup> it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. <sup>7</sup> It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

<sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; <sup>10</sup> but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

### Sermon Text:

What factors do you consider when figuring out the best place to live? Is it natural beauty, or quality of services (whether it's schools for the children, or health care for the seniors), is it a low rate of taxes, is it good job opportunities? Is it a feeling of safety? Depending on our priorities and our stage in life, different communities can have different attractions, but in the light of our Canada Day celebration this past week, most Canadians agree that from Victoria to Gander, from Quebec City to Calgary, from Windsor to Yellowknife, Canadians enjoy much of what makes life good. The United Nations every year publishes a list of the world's best countries to live in, based on something called the human development index. (See <http://www.english-vancouver.com/canada-human-development/>). This scale of measurement takes into account three main factors: life-expectancy, education, and economic standard of living. Until 2001 Canada held first place pretty consistently for almost a decade. Norway now holds the honour, probably because Canada's environmental record, published this past week as second worst in the world, (see <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/LAC.20080703.CARBON03//TPStory/Environment>) is holding us back, whereas the environmental record of the Scandinavian countries is stellar. Still Vancouver, tied with Vienna, ranks as the second best city to live in in the world, after Geneva, tied with Zurich, which is in first place; and 4 other Canadian cities: Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa and Calgary, ranked in the top 25.

Scales like the Human Development Index try to give us an overall picture of what makes life good by measuring a number of

factors taken together. Did you know there are similar diagnostic tools you can apply to churches? The Presbytery of Waterloo Wellington is promoting one of these tools at the moment called Natural Church Development <http://www.ncd-international.org/public/?jsessionid=6E83D9FB8C43196E3F2136110AC2B6DE> which measures the health of congregations along 8 axes: leadership, ministry, spirituality, structures, worship, small groups and evangelism. This is a scientific attempt to pin down a spiritual reality: something most of us feel instinctively about our church, which is either that it's working or it's not. That it's a good place to be, or not. That it's God-glorifying, or it's Spirit-grieving.

One of the strange things that you discover, whether you are talking about families, or companies, or classes at University or churches, is that when people group together, the group develops a personality or an ethos, which is distinct from, and which is more, than the sum of all the individual personalities that make it up. There are the individual personalities, and then there is something we might call the corporate personality or the spirit of the group. It's what people who are church shopping have their antennae turned in for -- not only did they like the individual components of their experience: the music, the sermon, the conversation they had with the person in the pew beside them... but did they sense a good spirit overall, a community ethos that attracted them, that they could easily feel included them, which conducted and did not inhibit a sense of the Holy. The corporate spirit is also what enables some congregations to work well together, to move forward, to really get off the ground as they glorify God, while other congregations seem perpetually grounded, perpetually stalled, mired in conflict and dysfunction.

Fortunately none of these phenomena, either the church which is moving ahead in the power of the Spirit, or the church which is lagging behind, full of aches and pains like a dysfunctional body, are new. Most of the New Testament letters broach this subject of Congregational Life. And in the

spectacularly dysfunctional congregation at Corinth, or the remarkably blessed but immature attempts at Christian community that we read about in Acts, we see reflected some of our own problems, and also have on record the wholesome apostolic advice on how to address them.

Today I had want to look at three problems which hold churches back from being all that they can be, and the sovereign remedy that Paul applies to those problems, which can be summed up in the thirteenth verse of the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians: “<sup>13</sup> And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” The three problems, then, and I’ll admit that they’re a rather selective assortment are: **negativity**, **injustice**, and **intolerance**. See if you think any of these apply to our life together here at Westminster-St. Paul’s....

First: **negativity**. The world divides pretty much evenly into those who are born pessimists and those who are born optimists. Winston Churchill put it like this, that “the pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity, and the optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.” Put up your hands, those of you here who think you are pessimists, and those who think you are optimists.... Well I’m not going to say that half of you is right and half of you is wrong, because our faith affirms two things at one and the same time: it affirms that we must be absolutely pessimistic about human nature, and it affirms that we can also be outrageously optimistic about divine grace. The problem with the people of God in every age, from the Old Testament to the present day, is that we tend to get that the wrong way round. We place a lot of faith in people – in charismatic leaders, in surplus bank balances, in programmes that promise the key to success, and really, we are not all that good when it comes to placing our faith in God.

The prophets’ job in the Old Testament was not only to speak words of warning which would awaken the people to the fact that their situation was almost certainly worse than they had supposed, but also, when they were in the depths of despair, to lift them with

words of divinely grounded optimism: “My plans for you are for your welfare and not disaster” says Jeremiah, “to give you a future with hope” (Jer. 29.11) And in Haggai as the people are comparing their shabbily rebuilt temple to the splendor of Solomon’s first temple: “The glory of this latter house, will be greater than the former” (Hag. 2.9).

When they’re thrown together in the body of Christ, positive people and negative people are not naturally appreciative of one another. Normally optimists just wish the pessimists would get out of the way, and pessimists see the optimists as the ones who are constantly imperiling the church by their madcap schemes, but Paul’s image of the body of Christ teaches us that rather than wishing each other gone, we have need of one another. “If the whole body were an eye, Paul says, where would the hearing be? The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’. For God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose” (I Cor. 12.17-18). God arranges it so that there are pessimists in the church to curb the more extravagant follies of the optimists, and optimists in the church because with them comes the vision, the creative energy and the call to *believe* that with God, all things are possible.

Optimism certainly carries its dangers, but let me direct these words toward the negative people, because as a Presbyterian church, we tend to have more of them than the other sort. Negativity is a church destroyer because it douses the fire of the Holy Spirit. When people come into the church full of initiative, full of ideas, full of spiritual gifts that are just looking for an outlet, negativity sucks all that energy away. It lives by the motto: “we tried that before and it didn’t work.” When any opportunity is suggested, it immediately sees 5 or 6 objections. It has its eyes focused on the glories of the distant past and refuses to believe that God may be willing to do even greater things among us in the present. “The glory of this latter house will be greater than the former” says the Lord. Negativity is fundamentally carnal. It considers as real only what can be touched and seen. But Paul

says: “These present trials are not worth comparing to the future glory that far outweighs them, provided our eyes are fixed on what is unseen, for what is seen is transient, what is unseen is eternal” (II Cor. 4: 17-18). Negativity in the church springs not only from a lack of faith, a lack of hope, but also from a lack of love, for as Paul says, love is inherently faithful and inherently hopeful: “love believes all things, and hopes all things” (I Cor. 13.7). The best way out of a negative mindset, therefore, might be to love a positive person. Try it. Pick somebody in the church you know to be an incurable optimist and instead of assailing all their ideas with your negativity, try supporting them in every which way you can. Try letting them know that they’re valued and needed. That the church belongs as much to them and their sort as to you and your sort.

Secondly **injustice** breaks down community in the church. Injustice is such a grand word. We associate it with severe cases of human rights abuse, but I’m thinking right now of injustice on a much more domestic scale. It’s the kind of thing that was happening in Acts chapter 5 and Acts chapter 6. In those early days of the church it was customary for the Christians to place all their assets at the disposal of the apostles so they could distribute them fairly. Ananias and Sapphira, the couple we read about in Acts chapter 5, wanted to hold back a little for themselves from the sale of a piece of property. That, of course, would have created resentment among the other Christians who were giving their all, except that God didn’t let it get that far. Instead he punished Ananias and Sapphira swiftly and severely. In Acts chapter 6, however, we read of another injustice, another grievance which has grown up within the early fellowship of believers. The fellowship is made up of Jews and of Greeks and the Greeks noticed that the Jewish widows always fared better in the daily distribution of bread. An injustice. Whether this was a reality or a perception, the apostles took swift action to address it. They appointed seven deacons to devote themselves just to this: to overseeing that the



distribution of bread was fair beyond reproach. And so the resentment which was beginning to grow, was nipped in the bud.

In every church, ancient and modern, the basic call of justice has to be respected or resentment will grow. In every congregation there is work to be done; sacrifice of both time and money is necessary and is expected. And in every congregation you have people who are able to approach their work not as onerous duty, but as ministry, as service, as something in which they find satisfaction and joy. You also have people who are incredibly generous with their time and with their money. For them, giving, while it may be sacrificial, is also joyful. That is how we are supposed to think as Christians, and how those who have taken the call to stewardship and to service seriously, find they do come to think. BUT if, when we look at *who* works and *who* gives, we find that a small percentage of the congregation is carrying the rest of the congregation, that is not being the body of Christ. We are not then each bearing our part, and each contributing to the working of the whole. And we are also then tempting the hearts of our most giving members to begin to feel resentful, when they see the injustice of giving so much, while others give so little.

Often in congregations with an age profile similar to ours the older folk feel like retiring. They want to hand off the *work* of ministry to a younger generation. The younger generation on the other hand often find that the work which is being handed on to them is not the work they would have chosen, so they feel like labourers in a church that still does not fully belong to them. I think rather than working with a model of retirement from active Christian service we should work with the model of the Body of Christ. I don't think the Bible ever gives us the warrant to retire from being actively a Christian; it's just we have to find new ways of serving in the body, and as members in the body, ways of supporting one another, so that no one member is unjustly overburdened.

Yesterday I spent some time at the church with 11 other people doing some preparations for our barbecue on July 12<sup>th</sup>.

And it felt good! It was encouraging that 11 people besides myself had shown up. 11 people was enough to give us a remarkable array of different gifts, and it was satisfying to see the amount of work we could get through. Encouragement is increased and resentment decreased in such wonderful ways when younger people and older people work together, and when good and widespread support is shown for something as opposed to dutiful support from the same predictable few. This also is love, for “love is not irritable or resentful” (I Cor 13.5), and love which respects justice will safeguard against the sources of resentment.

Finally I want to talk about **intolerance**. In a way I’m not that happy with the word because there are things of which the Church must never be tolerant. And it is a false view of love which excludes speaking the truth to people, even when that truth is somewhat confrontational: “Love,” says Paul, “does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth” (I Cor. 13.6). Ideally the church should be able to strike that balance between loving sinners and hating sin. The whole burden of Paul’s argument which builds through the twelfth chapter of Ist Corinthians, perhaps even throughout the whole letter of first Corinthians and finally arrives at what he says about love in chapter 13, is that love is the quintessential mark of a Christian. It is the church’s most God-like characteristic. Other things are important but the presence or absence of love makes or breaks us. It proves whether or not salvation has really taken hold in us. Therefore if we’re looking for things that will destroy a church, nothing will betray its purpose, belie its witness to Christ, and erode its community more quickly and more thoroughly than a lack of love. On the other hand, nothing is so attractive, so compelling, so radically different than the world around us, than the genuine exercise of love. If our church were really able to practice love-in-action, I would defy anyone to come here to worship only once. Love is so magnetic, that once people truly experience it, they cannot keep away.

Love is seen when Christians speak graciously to one another, when, in practical ways we anticipate one another’s needs



and really put ourselves out to serve the needs of one another. Love is seen when we are sensitive to one another’s differences, and instead of criticizing what is lacking in one another, compensate for that weakness from our own strength. Love unites. Love seeks the common ground. Love is able to put the self in the other’s shoes and treats the other as one would like to be treated. Love is patient and forgiving even to the point of 70 times 7. As I consider this congregation I am aware of so many expressions of love toward me, and of the way your love wraps around one another. Sadly I also know of things that have been said – insensitive things – that have caused people to leave our church. I know of times when people have looked to us for help and we have not been able to provide it. How I wish we could have provided it. I think at times by not being willing to go the second mile, we have missed opportunities of great joy in the Lord. But we are growing in this direction. Love is named as both a gift and as a fruit of the Holy Spirit. That means some people come into our community as the leaders in love. They show us how it is done. That’s their gift from the Holy Spirit, but love is something we can all expect to grow in. It is the mark of a Christian character and so is available to every person who is grafted into the body of Christ. Pray for love. Because “<sup>4</sup>Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant <sup>5</sup>or rude.” And of all the gifts of God, the “greatest of them is love” (I Cor. 13: 4-5,13).