

1 Corinthians 13
By the Rev'd Dr. Keith Fleming
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I hear that St. James Westminster is looking for a new rector. In case any of you are thinking of applying, and need to dust off your sermon writing skills, I'll tell you how to get started. The first thing to do is look in the book called *The Lectionary* to see which scripture readings have been selected for the particular Sunday you have in mind. Then you find the passages in the Bible, give them a quick read, and hope desperately that they twig in your mind something worth talking about. Within minutes you will know if the scripture passage you've been assigned for the week is a winner, or a dog. This week, I drew a winner.

1st Corinthians 13; everybody knows this Bible lesson. Even people who never attend church, other than to show up at weddings, have heard 1st Corinthians 13, because it's trotted out at just about every Christian wedding ceremony on the planet I think. And rightly so; it's a powerful, inspirational bit of writing.

It's a fabulous piece of scripture, and even though we're not having a wedding here today, it's perfect for Vestry Sunday, because it is a passage that originally was written not with a bride and a groom in mind, but a church congregation. The congregation that St. Paul was writing to at Corinth was badly divided: it was a confused, conflicted, quarrelling congregation. We, happily, are none of those things. But Paul's instructions to that congregation nevertheless need to be taken to heart by all Christian congregations, including us, especially on Vestry Sunday.

Just listen again to a few of the verses:

"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.

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

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."

This is great stuff, but there's more. Listen, and remember these words were written as an instruction to congregations like us.

"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.

It does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends.

And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love."

This scripture passage is an instruction on living together as a church. This passage about love provides the guideline for measuring how well we are doing living together as a congregation. This is, after all, the whole point of Vestry Sunday. It's a day when we look backwards in order to look ahead, and thereby assess the quality of our life together as a congregation. This is a difficult thing to measure accurately. How do you measure the success of a church congregation? Of this congregation?

Normally what we do, because it's the easiest way to quantify the success of a church, is to count heads, and to count money. And by those measures, St. James Westminster is a very successful congregation. Our attendance is impressive, and our finances are strong, and you must take satisfaction from that.

Consistent attendance at worship, and in the Sunday School, and in the many other diverse activities that occur year round in this parish, plus enjoying healthy finances, is a major accomplishment in the Anglican Church of Canada these days. All across this country Anglican parishes are dying. It is not an exaggeration to say that hundreds of parishes today are on life support. Fifteen years from now, I predict, the Anglican Church of Canada will be barely recognizable to us, so many parishes will have ceased to exist.

That being said, I have good reason to believe that some truly magnificent improvements will arise in our Anglican communion as a result of the wholesale reorganization that must take place soon. The end result will be a much better focused and more faithful Anglican communion in Canada. But that is then, and this is now, and right now we, you and me, we are part of one of the most thriving, fortunate, blessed parishes in all of Canada as measured by numbers – counting heads and dollars.

Yet in fairness to the large number of parishes with only a handful of people in them and an empty bank account to boot, and that are therefore deemed a failure by those measures, in fairness it needs to be said that some of them may in fact be among God's greatest success stories if the people holding them together love each other. Therein lies the challenge for the people of this congregation, all of us, all the time. Are we living up to another measure of success, that has nothing to do with numbers, that St. Paul set before us in the letter to the Corinthians that we read today? When he said that the first, last, and only requirement for a congregation, is that it demonstrate love.

St. James Westminster is a church. It is not a business; it is not a school or a university; it's not a government office; it is not a service club or a social club; it is unlike any other organization with which we will ever associate. It is a church, and we, the people who make up St. James Westminster, are called to a higher standard of attitude and values and behaviour. We are called to be what Paul said a congregation must be: a place of love.

Try to imagine if each and every time we enter this building, for whatever purpose, in the year to come, we were intentional about being a voice for love. Imagine if at every entrance to the church there were signs posted with words reminding us of our Christian obligation: the sign would read, “as you enter this place, are you ready to love?” It is by practicing love in this place that we become not only a successful congregation within these walls, but we are made capable of demonstrating love out there too, beyond this sacred ground.

You might be thinking this all sounds a bit silly, too quaint, the delusional babbling of a naïve preacher who is out of touch with the way the real world works. Possibly so. But we are church: and as members of a church we are called by Paul to attain a far higher standard – God’s standard – which is a different measurement of success. The measurement of success God cares about is our ability to love, individually, and as a congregation. For if we do not love in here of all places, then we are just a noisy gong, a clanging cymbal.

Today I’m stepping down as interim priest. It has been a long, entirely enjoyable, but long seven months. I would have preferred to continue in the role until a new rector is appointed, but that day is still some months distant, and the demands of my job at the university are such that I need to return to my regular place in the pews. I’ve already been pulling back from my duties here over the past couple of months as Valerie’s responsibilities have increased, and there should be another interim priest appointed soon.

To any who are getting a little impatient because we have not yet found a new rector, sit tight. We must be absolutely certain that the person who is appointed is the best fit possible for this place. I’ll tell you why. Select someone who is unsuited to lead this parish, and within six to twelve months the decline will be well underway. And within eighteen months this congregation will be a slim remnant of its former self. I’m not trying to be dramatic. That’s just the way it is these days in churches when leadership fails. Any of us who have experienced similar situations elsewhere do not want it to happen here. So to the members of our highly dedicated selection committee I say, “Keep faithful, shake off whatever frustration you’re feeling over the absurd search process that the diocese has imposed upon you, and steady ahead she goes.”

When I took over as interim priest at Ken’s retirement last June, I preached a sermon the first Sunday in which I made the following request of everyone at St. James Westminster, “young and old alike.” I asked you to spend this “in between time” while we await a new rector, “by continuing to do what you have been doing all along in the life of this congregation.” “Whatever your involvement has been,” I said, “continue it; don’t change a thing.

Your worship practices and routines; your committee work; your volunteer work; your teaching of youth; your singing in the choir; your attending Sunday School and youth groups; your help in the kitchen or preparing God’s altar; your prayer groups. Whatever applies to you, keep doing what you have been doing.”

Well I think that we can conclude on this Vestry Sunday that we have, more or less, done that. And God bless you for it. From this point on, in the months ahead, as we continue to move together through the in-between time, please, continue doing what you have been doing all along in the life of this congregation. And do it with love for one another. No noisy gongs. No clanging cymbals.

In St. Paul's instruction to the congregation at Corinth that we read, he says one thing that I must ignore today. He wrote that "love is not boastful or arrogant or rude." That poses a bit of a problem for me because I'm proud of this parish, and I like to boast about its people every now and again, without being "arrogant or rude." So at the risk of engaging in too much self-congratulatory back-slapping, let me boast about just some of our parishioners. I will inevitably overlook more people than I mention.

Today I boast of the men and women of our church council and the St. James Westminster Foundation, who demonstrate time and again that it is possible to combine administrative and financial expertise with Christian convictions.

I boast of our wardens John Sizeland, Anna Woodson, Guilia Marcheson, and the soon-to-be-retired senior warden Wendy Thorpe. Had I not occupied the position of interim priest I would never have known the enormous debt of gratitude that every parishioner owes to these wardens. Most parishes would be fortunate to have even one warden of their caliber. We have four.

To Wendy in particular, who inspired me with her intelligence and good humour, her keen perception and kindness, and most importantly her love for this parish, I offer a heartfelt thanks as she prepares to relinquish her warden's duties.

I was delighted to learn that Robin Shearer has agreed to step up as our newest warden. He will be excellent in the role; please give him your support.

I also boast of our treasurer Janice Mayne, who I know agonizes over the details of the church's finances as if they were her personal accounts. I boast of our administrative assistant, Carole Alce, our envelope secretary Christine Thorpe, and the offering counters: "to balance is to triumph indeed."

I boast of our ministry team. People like our lay reader, Mike DeKay, who seemingly knows everyone in the parish and is the very model of Christian warmth and concern for others. And Bill Danaher, who generously augments our worship through preaching and celebrating at the Eucharist. Of course I boast of our Assistant Curate Val Kenyon, who less than a year ago was a theological student and is today for all intents and purposes running this parish, with intelligence, enthusiasm, and a deep faith in God. Later today at our Vestry meeting you will be asked to support the establishment of a full-time assistant curacy to remain in place after a new rector is appointed. The ministerial, pastoral and administrative needs of this parish have expanded well beyond what is reasonable for a

single clergyperson to fulfill. I would go so far as to say that I think it would be irresponsible of us as a congregation if we do not support this new initiative.

When I am away from St. James Westminster I frequently tell people that in our parish there is this amazing musician named Stephen Holowitz, who leads a tremendous choir, and is continually introducing guest musicians to our worship services including Jazz Vespers, with the result that the music in our church is always beautiful, varied, and most importantly, worshipful.

I boast of how our servers, and the altar guild, the greeters and oblation bearers, the lay administrators at communion, the readers and intercessors, all of them put their hearts into what they do to ensure that our shared worship is appropriate and pleasing to God.

I boast of Ann De Bono, who with her assistants Jenn Cripps and Laura Manias, and a host of Sunday School teachers, and youth group leaders, and nursery attendants, have been entrusted with our single most important ministry – to the young – and have built up the most vibrant family ministry in the diocese.

I boast of our sexton Harold Ford, his assistant Pete Cunningham, and our property manager Marcus Hahn, along with all the handy volunteers who work with them to maintain every nook and cranny of this massive structure. You are the ones who demonstrate grace and good humour whenever someone is inclined to be a noisy gong and complain that it's either too hot or too cold in the church. You are better Christians than I am to suffer the complaint in silence.

I boast today of those who faithfully and with next to no fanfare perform lay ministries to the seniors who can no longer join us here on Sunday mornings;
those who feed the hungry at our community breakfasts;
those in the Nurture Committee that Esther Robinson coordinates who provide hospitality;
those in the Fun and Fellowship Committee, who create opportunities for us to laugh;
the Executive of the Anglican Church Women, who are vigilant in their good works for others;
the members of the Anglican Fellowship of Prayer, who remind us of our number one priority as Christians;
those who care for the Memorial Garden;
the Rake family's mission to the underprivileged of Peru;
the heartwarming work of the Refugee Committee under Joyce Mitchell's tireless leadership;
and the South Africa Twinning Committee, which continues to plug away despite the inevitable slowness in completing projects designed to share our good fortune with fellow Anglicans half a world away.

Finally, I boast of you, who call St. James Westminster your church home, and come to this place week by week, month by month, and year by year to worship God, to be

present with and I trust love one another, and to give your time and talent and treasure in whatever measure you can spare to this congregation.

You get the point: many exceptional people make St. James Westminster an extraordinary church.

So with apologies to St. Paul, today I boast of them all.

One final thing. According to Christian tradition, after Jesus had been crucified, and then raised from the dead, he met Peter and the other disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, where they cooked some breakfast over a charcoal fire and had one of their final conversations. Jesus asked Peter, the one who not many days before had betrayed him, "Do you love me?" Jesus did not ask Peter, "Do you know how to run a church?" He did not ask, "How good are you at fundraising?" He did not ask him, "Are you a member of Vestry in good standing?"

No, Jesus asked him, "Do you love me?"

If Peter's answer to that question, and your answer, and my answer to that question is "yes," then we will be a truly successful church, by God's measure.

Amen.