

The background of the entire page is a photograph of a stone archway in a church. The arches are made of light-colored stone and recede into the distance. In the far distance, through a window, a wooden cross is visible, illuminated by light from the window. The floor is made of gravel or dirt.

March 2022

Real Faith/Real Life

1 Corinthians, Part 3

Readings, Reflections, Prayers

**Dr. Bruce Martin
First Baptist Church
1614 – 5th Avenue S
Lethbridge, AB T1J 0W3
403-327-2082
bruce@firstb.net
www.firstb.net**

Monday, March 7: Proverbs 3:1-12

As we think about living as “free” people in Jesus, it’s good to remember that freedom does not mean “*I can or should do whatever I want.*” Last Thursday, I mentioned a psychiatric patient who had destroyed his life exercising his “freedom.” He chose to use drugs, abuse alcohol, get into relationships that were destructive both to him and to other people. His big breakthrough came when he said to his counsellor, “*You mean I don’t have to do what I want to do?*” “*What I want to do*” is not always best for myself, or for others.

in Proverbs 3:1-8, Solomon reminds us to, “*Trust in the **LORD** with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding; and seek **His** will in all you do.*” When we do that, we believe, “**He** will show you which path to take.” When we follow God’s wisdom (not our own), in general life goes better for us (and others).

Part of us bitterly resists – even resents – the idea of trusting anyone other than ourselves. We don’t like to listen to things other (wiser?) people can teach us. We don’t want to obey God’s commands. Accepting any authority other than ourselves seems so limiting, non-postmodern, and just ... well ... not fun.

Actually, we only discover true freedom to be who God created us to be when we do obey God: when we love God with all our hearts, minds, souls, and strength, and when we love our neighbour as ourselves. When we live lives of love and faithfulness, loyalty and kindness, mercy and truth (all translations of v.3), life is more satisfying, we find favour with both God and people, we earn a good reputation, and life goes well.

Eugene Peterson translates 3:5-7 like this: “*Trust God from the bottom of your heart; don’t try to figure out everything on your own. Listen for God’s voice in everything you do, everywhere you go; he’s the one who will keep you on track. Don’t assume that you know it all. Run to God! Run from evil!*” That’s wisdom.

Years ago, the Coke slogan was, “*Things go better with Coke.*” Guess what? Coke really isn’t the answer to life’s problems (neither is Pepsi). God is. Things go better with Jesus. Life simply goes better when, in our freedom, we choose His way. Life with God – “it’s the real thing.”

*God is with me, but more, God is within me, giving me existence.
Let me dwell for a moment on God's life-giving presence
in my body, my mind, my heart and in the whole of my life.
What most often trips me up is my tendency to be caught up
in fears and expectations about what I 'ought' or 'should' be.
My usual automatic responses tie me down and inhibit me from exploring new areas of growth.
I ask and pray for a greater sense of inner freedom
and that I might reach the fresh and challenging possibilities
that God wishes me to realize.
I thank you, God that I have been able to spend a few moments alone with you.
And I thank you for the insights you have been given me from your word.
Amen.*

Tuesday, March 8: 1 Corinthians 9:1-12

A theme in the Corinthians’ letter to Paul was suspicion of his credentials. Why should they listen to **him** anyway? While some people in the church in Corinth knew Paul personally, many of the newer people probably didn’t. These people were asking, “*Who is this Paul that we should care what **he** says?*” Apparently, some of their giving was helping support Paul, too: “*Why should we support **him**?*”

Paul goes on a bit of a “rant” to defend his credibility (16+ rhetorical questions). Most of us may not question Paul’s authority, so this may seem irrelevant to us. The cornerstone of Paul’s defence is he has actually seen Jesus. Even the Corinthians, in all of their self-righteousness, can’t claim that honour.

It may seem self-serving for a pastor to point this out, but Paul’s comments on financial support are interesting. He believes those who are fulltime servants of God are worthy of support. He cites three

examples that people in Corinth could relate to: a soldier, a vineyard worker, and a farmer. All expect to make a living from the services they provide. He supports his argument with reference to the laws of Moses (Deuteronomy 25:4). Do you agree? Why? Why not? (He also refers to Ecclesiasticus, also known as Sirach. This is one of the books of the Apocrypha. The Apocrypha contains books not recognized as "official" Scripture by most Protestants. They are Jewish wisdom books written between the most recent Old Testament book (Malachi) and the time of Jesus. They are good, inspirational books, just not considered by most Protestants to have the same level of authority as Old/New Testament writings).

You at First B treat your staff well (thank you!). But in many parts of the world that's not the case. Many pastors and evangelists survive on starvation wages (if they're paid at all). Even in Canada there has been the assumption if pastors/missionaries are really godly, they can make do on next to nothing. Somehow being dirt poor makes them more spiritual. Nowhere in Scripture is poverty linked to deeper spirituality.

Pray for pastors/workers in countries where we as Canadian Baptists work who do really, really struggle financially: Bolivia, Cuba, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, India, Lebanon, Rwanda.

In Proverbs 3:9 we read, "*Honor the Lord with your wealth and with the best part of everything you produce.*" How can we give generously to help build the Kingdom of God? May the Lord give us thankful hearts ... and generous hearts ...

*Lord Jesus, think on me.
Never let me go astray.
You point the heavenly way though darkness and perplexity.
Lord Jesus, think on me.
When the flood is past, may I see Your eternal brightness, and share Your joy at last.
Let me therefore not cling to fleeting things, which slip away and depart,
but to those which are enduring and immovable.
May I cling to You, my Saviour, my Creator, my Comforter.
May my life be centered on You, and You alone.
Take from me all that separates me from You.
For the world and my people, I pray, Lord, forgive us all our sins.
May I hold to these through the grace and loving-kindness of my Lord, Jesus Christ,
Through whom and with whom be glory
to the Father and the Holy Spirit, forever and ever.
Amen*

Synesius of Cyrene (370-414)/Chrysostom (344-407)

Wednesday, March 9: 1 Corinthians 9:12-18

I have a friend whose church supports overseas missions – **REALLY** supports overseas missions (close to 50% of their budget). Isn't that great? But their pastor gets paid virtually nothing. He struggles to survive at a standard of living well below what most of his congregation would dream of living on. It's great to REALLY support overseas mission, but not by putting your pastor in financial stress you wouldn't accept.

Remember when the fires went through Fort McMurray? People gave generously – REALLY generously – to the Red Cross. Wasn't that great? At the time, I was at a meeting of other charities who said that giving to everything else – from the Food Bank, to the Soup Kitchen, to the Hospital Foundation – went WAY down. Many people simply redirected their giving away from other charities to relief efforts in Fort McMurray. It's wonderful to give generously to support a great cause, but if we simply withdraw support from other much-needed charities to do so, we end up hurting other people.

"*Robbing Peter to pay Paul,*" is a maxim sometimes thrown around church finance circles. We pick a new cause, begin a new campaign, launch a new ministry – people pledge their support. But some people simply redirect their giving from the general fund to the specific project. We can't pay the power bill any more.

Paul is encouraging us all to be generous givers. Not just redirecting-my-present-giving givers. In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, he talks about a special collection being made for the desperately poor believers in Jerusalem (Corinth was a relatively wealthy church by 1st century standards). *"Remember this: a farmer who plants only a few seeds will get a small crop. But the one who plants generously will get a generous crop. You must each decide in your heart how much to give. And don't give reluctantly or in response to pressure: 'For God loves a person who gives cheerfully.' And God will generously provide all you need ... For God is the one who provides seed for the farmer and then bread to eat. In the same way, he will provide and increase your resources and then produce a great harvest of generosity in you.*

"Yes, you will be enriched in every way so that you can always be generous. And when we take your gifts to those who need them, they will thank God. So two good things will result from this ministry of giving – the needs of the believers in Jerusalem will be met, and they will joyfully express their thanks to God. As a result of your ministry, they will give glory to God" (2 Corinthians 9:6-13). Your generosity can change the world. Please, give generously.

What is God saying to you?

*Lord, our God, great, eternal, wonderful in glory,
you keep covenant with those who love you with their whole heart.
You are the life of all,
the help of those who flee to you,
the hope of those who cry to you.
Please cleanse us from our sins, secret and open,
and from every thought displeasing to your goodness.
Cleanse our bodies and souls, our hearts and consciences.
May we venture confidently and fearlessly to live for you,
with a pure heart and a clear soul, and with perfect love and hope.
May the power of God preserve us.
May the wisdom of God instruct us and the way of God direct us.
May the hand of God protect us,
and the host of God guard us against the snares of evil and the temptations of the world.
Amen*

Basil (330-379) and Patrick (389-461)

Thursday, March 10: 1 Corinthians 9:19-23

What is the first thing you do when you get up in the morning? What is your routine? What do you think about? (Is the coffee on? ☺)

Paul was the kind of person who got up every day and asked himself, *"How can I live for God today?"* *"What can I do to build the Kingdom of God, today?"* *"How can I make a difference today?"*

Paul's flexibility fascinates me. He writes, *"Even though I am free of the demands and expectations of everyone, I have voluntarily become a servant to any and all in order to reach a wide range of people: religious, nonreligious, meticulous moralists, loose-living immoralists, the defeated, the demoralized — whoever. I didn't take on their way of life. I kept my bearings in Christ — but I entered their world and tried to experience things from their point of view. I've become just about every sort of servant there is in my attempts to lead those I meet into a God-saved life. I did all this because of the Message. I didn't just want to talk about it; I wanted to be **in** on it!"* (The Message translation)

Some of us, as followers of Jesus, can become rigid and inflexible ... in what ways?

Some of us can withdraw from society ... in what ways?

Some of us really struggle to relate to people who are not Christian ... in what ways?

Of course, Paul has the gift of evangelism. But it is interesting to begin each day simply asking God, "*How can I live for God today?*" "*What can I do to build the Kingdom of God, today?*" Chances are He will not send you on a wild goose chase around the world planting churches. But he may bring some interesting people across your path. He may introduce you to someone who needs a word of encouragement. He may give you the opportunity to be a blessing to one person. You may be inspired to pray for someone. Follow up on those God-given opportunities ...

*"Be still and know that I am God."
Lord, Your words lead me to the calmness and greatness of Your Presence.
Everything has the potential to draw forth from me a fuller love and life.
Yet my desires are often fixed, caught, on illusions of fulfillment.
I ask that God, through my freedom,
may orchestrate my desires in a vibrant loving melody rich in harmony.
I exist in a web of relationships – links to nature, people, God.
I trace out these links, giving thanks for the life that flows through them.
Some links are twisted or broken: I may feel regret, anger, disappointment.
I pray for the gift of acceptance and forgiveness.
I struggle with sin in my life. I can be honest about that.
I can name specific things with which I wrestle.
I pray for the gift of wisdom – to know right from wrong.
I pray for the gift of strength to resist temptation.
I celebrate the gift of forgiveness through faith in Jesus.
Amen.*

Friday, March 11: 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Way back in university, I briefly rowed with the UBC Thunderbirds Freshmen Rowing Team. We had five disciplines we were required to practice. We lifted weights. We ran long distances. We ran stairs at the football stadium (and we piggy-backed guys up the stairs – ouch). We "rowed" on strength machines in the gym. We "practice-rowed" a stubborn, water-logged old barge in False Creek. After weeks of doing those dull-as-dishwater training exercises they finally let us in a shell (a normal boat for rowing races).

Some of those action steps were very difficult (especially piggy-backing teammates up stairs), but they were all essential for a balanced programme. And we knew that if we were to have any success on race day, we had to do them. There were no short-cuts. It was 5 a.m. mornings. It was discipline. It was hard work. To be free – to row well and win the race – you have to work at it. You do what it takes.

Paul uses this kind of an athletic metaphor to point out the importance of working on spiritual disciplines in our lives. In 1 Timothy 4:7-8, Paul uses a similar analogy: "*Train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.*" What do we need to work on?

We train ourselves:

- In holiness - doing right things, in right ways (not doing wrong things or things in wrong ways).
- In spiritual disciplines – spending time with God in meaningful ways.
- In spiritual virtues – like those spiritual fruit of "*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control*" (Galatians 5:22-23).
- In seeing opportunities to live our faith in care and compassion.
- In recognizing opportunities to share our faith in Word

Maybe Jesus is challenging us develop a relationship with someone outside our normal circle of friends. "*The holiest moment of the church service,*" Charles Colson writes, "*is the moment when God's people, strengthened by preaching and sacrament, go out of the church door into the world. We don't go to church;*

we are the church."

One Brazilian pastor has said, *"The church building should not be a cave where believers hide from the world. It should be a place of service to the community."* Lord, give us wisdom.

*I need to close out the noise, to rise above the noise;
the noise that interrupts, that separates, the noise that isolates.
I need to listen to God again.
I remind myself that, as I sit here now, God is gazing on me
with love and holding me in being.
I pause for a moment and think of this.
I ask how I am within myself today?
Am I particularly tired, stressed, or off-form?
If any of these characteristics apply,
can I try to let go of the concerns that disturb me?
In this expectant state of mind,
help me listen to what God is saying to me.
I believe that the Holy Spirit is present
and may reveal whatever the passage has to say to me.
Lord, speak to my heart.
Amen.*

Saturday, March 12: 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 (Time Change tonight – spring forward)

Someone once said, *"The church is like Noah's Ark: The stench inside would be unbearable if it weren't for the storm on the outside."* Hmmm.

Jesus looked into the hearts of respectable religious folk in His day and tells them they smell a little bit off, too: *"You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness"*(Matthew 23:27-28). Paul is reminding us that we may have issues we need to deal with, too – in our lives, and, perhaps, in our church.

We can examine our lives by looking into the mirror of our conscience, the Word of God: *"All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work"*(2 Timothy 3:16-17). As we read God's Word, if something speaks to our heart, pricks our conscience, challenges our values – we need to pay attention. God is speaking to us.

It is hard to *"stand strong"*(10:12). There is so much temptation around us. Running the race of faith Paul talked about is very difficult (9:24-27). But just as the rowing team keeps practicing, Paul challenges us to keep at it. There are times in sports when you "hit the wall" – you don't think you can run another step, pull another stroke, do another chin up ... but you can. You keep pushing and get your second wind.

Keep working at it, spiritually, too. Keep the faith. Even when it seems so difficult. God reminds you: *"The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience."* Then He gives us this wonderful promise, *"And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure"*(10:13). Note this verse is specifically about **temptations**. Some people paraphrase this verse to refer to any kind of suffering – physical illness, family problems, financial stress. So, they say, "God never gives us more pain than we can bear." Or "God never gives us more heartache than we can bear." Or "God never gives us more hard times than we can bear." In fact, God MAY allow us to face more of some things than WE can bear, **IN OUR OWN STRENGTH**. Then we are forced to depend on God and His strength (see 2 Corinthians 1:3-10). When we do turn to God, He does get us through (see Romans 8).

In this verse Paul is specifically talking about **temptation**. When times are hard, the temptations are real, you don't think you can hold out – you can, not in your strength, but in God's strength. The devil cannot make you do anything. Keep going till you find your "second wind," the Holy Spirit (who should ideally be our "first wind"). God can help you overcome temptations in your life.

*Lord, we would grow with you,
New shoots reaching out, hands stretched upward,
Like leaves newly formed, Soaking up your light and warmth.
Lord, we would grow with you*

*Lord, we would grow with you,
In sunshine and rain, in darkness and light,
In cold days and summer days, from Springtime to Winter.
Lord, we would grow with you*

*Lord, we would grow with you,
And bring forth fruit that is pleasing to you,
Fed by your living water, giving sustenance to others.
Lord, we would grow with you. Amen*

faithandworship.com

Sunday, March 13: 1 Corinthians 10:14-22 (Time change last night)

"If you play with fire, you will get burned." Have you ever learned that lesson the hard way, whether it literally be with burning flames or metaphorically in some other way?

When it comes to the spiritual "dark side," some Christians get obsessed with the devil, demons, demon-possession, the occult, and all of that "stuff." They do lots of "research." They spend time on it. Yes, the whole "dark side" of the spiritual world (Satan, his minions, temptation, evil) is very real. They do have real power. But their power is NOTHING compared with the power of God (the devil and his followers are created beings – fallen and twisted created beings, but only created beings nonetheless). If we get too drawn into the world of evil, we can find ourselves drifting away from God. Paul's advice is to run from – not get obsessed with – evil. Don't go there. Flee from it (10:14). Because you can get sucked in ...

Paul draws a sharp contrast between being the **people-of-God** and being **people-who-are-not-of-God**.

As **people-of-God**, we have undivided loyalty to God, our Saviour, and the Spirit. One of the ways we celebrate this is through the Lord's Supper/Communion. When we share in the bread and the cup, on the one hand, it is simply a ritual. On the other hand, Paul really does think that something profoundly spiritual takes place in that act. When we think about the MEANING of communion, we are worshipping in a very personal and community-building, physical and yet spiritual, symbolic and profoundly real way our Redeemer God. As we eat the bread and drink from the cup we are physically testifying to a spiritual reality: Jesus is in us through His Spirit. His reality flows through us. He is inseparably part of our whole being – physical and spiritual. Just as we can never separate out from ourselves that bread and wine/grape-juice ever again after we take them, as the people of Jesus His Spirit can never be separated out from us again, either.

None of us is likely tempted to literally eat food that has been offered to idols. However, there are all sorts of idols in our society. If we define "idols" as "other gods" – other things we worship, other things that are the top priorities in our lives, other things that come first in our spending, other things that motivate our decisions – what idols might there be? Money? Sex? Vacations? "Fun"? A political party? An ideology? What motivates us to go in ways that we might ordinarily never dream of going?

Paul challenges us to recognize those other powers that subtly (or not-so-subtly) lead us away from God ... And he invites us to recognize that God is in us, through His Spirit. We are His people.

Pray that the Spirit would help us to stay focused on God and God alone ...

*O Lord, holy and true, who opens doors which none can shut;
 you have set before your church an open door into the world.
 Strengthen us, your servants, boldly to enter into the world,
 to declare your Name,
 and to be your servants of mercy and love.
 May those who oppose you come to worship you
 and know that you love your church and the world.
 Grant us, your people, patience with those who stumble.
 Give us strength to keep your Word with diligence and integrity.
 Keep us from the hour of trial which is coming upon the whole world and to all who dwell on the earth.
 Encourage all Christians in every land to hold fast to the faith which you have given them.
 May we stand before you as pillars in the temple of God and bear your name, O Christ our God.*

*Father, we give into your care all that we have.
 Make us generous people.
 We give you all who are joined to us by natural ties and bonds of love:
 the children dear to our hearts, our parents and friends,
 our church family, and all who for our sakes daily deny themselves.
 May all whom we love, having the Holy Spirit as their helper,
 be at peace and have unity and love amongst themselves.
 Grant us, O Lord, sufficient for the needs of this present life.
 Give us the assurance of eternal life for ourselves and those who love you.
 Amen*

Columba (521-597)

Monday, March 14: 1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1

Paul is returning to the issue of food offered to idols (back in 1 Corinthians 8). Remember the issues?

- Part of the everyday social life in Corinth was going to meals in the various pagan temples – they were the Rotary Clubs, Kinsmen, community associations of the day. Could Christians go or not?
- Pagan priests sold some of the meat that had been offered to their idols in the marketplace. What if a Christian were to buy that meat in the market? Could they eat it? Or was it now “evil”?

Paul’s conclusion was that idols were nothing, therefore food offered to idols is just fine. But out of consideration for others, we may not want to eat it.

Paul is reiterating the same principle again, a principle we could apply to a variety of situations (10:23-24):

- *You (the Corinthians) say, “I am allowed to do anything”– but (Paul is saying) not everything is good for you.*
- *You (the Corinthians) say, “I am allowed to do anything”– but (Paul is saying) not everything is beneficial.*
- Paul concludes: *“Don’t be concerned for your own good, but for the good of others.”*

At one level the Corinthians are right. They are free of Jewish legalisms, taboos, and superstitions. But they are falling into the trap of, *“If I want to do it, I can do it – perhaps I even SHOULD do it – whether it’s good for me or not.”* True freedom actually recognizes **God** knows best and chooses to obey His wisdom and will. We freely choose the best way, **God’s** way. True freedom includes the power to say “no” to our wants.

It’s good to recall the attitudes that Paul encourages us to cultivate:

- **Stronger believers:** it’s great we know we are “free” from rules (we are saved by faith not legalism), BUT don’t look down on those who still struggle with things we’ve gotten over. Others are not there yet. We act in love – looking out for what is best for others. Think of others first.

- **Weaker believers:** keep working through what it means to be “free” in Christ. We need to take our time and pray. Be cautious not to judge others or expect others to meet our criteria; they may come to different conclusions on some issues. We need to act in love, thinking of others, too.
- **Leaders/teachers** (including pastors): We need to continue to help all believers search the Scriptures to work through what is right, help people cultivate a “Christian mind” that can thoughtfully and prayerfully deal with new challenges, and help people love and respect one another. There may be diversity – but we can still have unity respecting our different conclusions.

Paul invites us to follow his example as he follows the example of Christ (11:1). How comfortable am I inviting others to follow my example: “*As I follow the example of Christ*”? I find that daunting.

Paul is very human, too. Paul is not saying that he is perfect (elsewhere he bluntly says he is far from it). He is inviting others to follow his example of keeping at it – fighting the good fight – trying, failing, confessing, repenting, and trying again – not giving up. The challenge he passes on to us is to look at his character – who he is becoming and how he handles life – and imitate that. He keeps pressing on ...

An anonymous philosopher said: “*Plant a word in the mind, and you will reap an act. Plant the act and you will reap a habit. Plant a habit and you will reap a character. Plant a character and you will reap a nature. Plant a nature and you will reap a destiny.*” Our challenge is to begin with the Word of God. Do something – act on it. Make doing the Word a habit. Our character will change. Our nature will change. We will become more and more like Jesus. Our destiny will change.

It has to begin somewhere, sometime. Why not right here, right now? Be a do-er of the Word ...

*God, my almighty God, I humbly worship you.
 You are the King of kings, and Lord of lords.
 You are the judge of every age.
 You are the Redeemer of our souls.
 You are the Liberator of those who believe.
 You are the Hope of those who labor.
 You are the Comforter of the sad.
 You are the Way for the straying.
 You are the Teacher of the nations.
 You are the Creator of all creatures.
 You are the Lover of all that is good.
 You are the Prince of all virtue.
 You are the Joy of your saints.
 You are Life everlasting.
 You are Joy in truth.
 You are the joy of our eternal homeland.
 You are Light from light.
 You are the Fount of holiness.
 You are the glory of God the Father in the highest.
 You are the Savior of the world.
 You are the Fullness of the Holy Spirit.
 You are seated at the right hand of the Father, ruling on your throne forever.
 Amen*

Book of Cerne (9th Century)

Tuesday, March 15: Luke 19:1-10

In South Delta Senior Secondary School, Tsawwassen, BC, my brother was in Grade 12 when I was in Grade 10. He ignored me. Of course, I couldn't blame him. It was understandable – why would he want his little brother hanging around him and his friends? He had his own life. Part of it was also practical. He is 6'3". I'm 5'10". During class changes when the halls were jammed with people; he would never have seen or

heard me. He couldn't. I was invisible.

Jesus was very sensitive to invisible people, even in a large crowd. He **hears** the cry of blind man named Bartimaeus (Mark 10:48). He **feels** the touch of a woman suffering with a haemorrhage (Luke 8:45-48). He **sees** a short tax-collector, Zacchaeus, peeking out from the branches of a tree (Luke 19:1-5).

As Paul reminds us to not cause others to stumble, He is also reminding us to hear others, to feel the needs of others, to see others. No one should be invisible to us.

George Barna, who did a study of growing churches, wrote that sensitivity is very important: *"A major reason for success of the churches I studied was their determination to remain sensitive to the people they were seeking to reach and serve. This meant understanding how people in their community live and what needs they have which a church might address."*

Because we have a natural human tendency to focus on our own needs instead of the needs of others, we need God's help to notice others. In Galatians 6:2, Paul wrote, *"Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."* Do you want to do the Lord's will? Be sensitive. Care for one another. Bear one another's burdens. Encourage one another. Love one another. You are doing the will of God.

*O Lord, we draw near to you, acknowledging our unworthiness.
We ask that all the decisions and defects of our past
may be freely pardoned and entirely done away,
through the precious blood of your dear Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.
Rouse us, O Lord, from the sleep of apathy and from tossing to and fro in our thoughts,
that we may no longer live as in a troubled dream.
Help us to be people awake and resolved to finish the work you have given us to do.
Root out of our hearts all pride and haughtiness.
May humble ways may content us, so we may serve the humble.
Teach us to be concerned one for another and to bear one another's burdens.
Give us compassion for those who labor and are heavy laden.
By your holy and most bitter anguish on the cross,
help us to worship you, and love you, and follow you, O Christ.
Amen*

Brigid (460-528)

Wednesday, March 16: 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

Most churches today would never require women to wear hats to church (the kinds of head-covering to which Paul was referring were nothing like the western-style hats some women might wear today anyway). But some people are still adamant that a man must NEVER wear a hat in church. How come we get so passionate about one part of this passage, but not the other? Perhaps that's a clue that we're into cultural issues here that were really important in Corinth at the time, but we need to tread carefully when applying these principles in Canada, in 2022 ...

One challenge related to women and men in the church. This passage is not easy to understand. Craig Blomberg, professor at Denver Seminary, writes, *"This passage is probably the most complex, controversial, and opaque of any text of comparable length in the New Testament."* Oxford New Testament scholar, Tom (N.T.) Wright, talking about a question from a student on this passage, says, *"I have to admit that I didn't understand this passage then, and I'm not sure I've understood it yet."* Oh dear.

Certainly, many of the issues in this passage are cultural. In that day married and respectable women either wore their hair up or covered their heads. Women who wore their hair down were of "dubious" virtue. Women with short hair were prostitutes. Men with short hair were respectable upright citizens. Men with long hair were uncivilized barbarians. Paul is referring to their cultural values – what is "proper" and "normal practice" in **their time** (11 13-16). How does knowing even these bits of cultural trivia help us understand

this passage? Paul is not necessarily setting Christian “policy” for all places and all times, here.

Remember this is also the same Paul who wrote, *“For you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have put on Christ, like putting on new clothes. There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus”* (Galatians 3:26-28). Tom Wright comments: *“Perhaps (Galatians 3) had actually created the situation Paul is addressing here; perhaps some of the Corinthian women had taken this literally, so that when they prayed or prophesied aloud in church meetings (NOTE: which Paul assumes they will do regularly) they had decided to remove their normal head covering, perhaps also unbraiding their hair, to show that in the Messiah they were free from the normal social conventions by which men and women were distinguished.”*

Our challenge is to sort out those subtle cultural norms of that time – and not major on minors (like head coverings – or not – for women and men). Overall, Paul is remarkably mutualistic, egalitarian, and counter-cultural in the strong patriarchal/male-centric Roman/Jewish culture, where women had no rights at all.

Trying to apply this to today:

- How we dress, act, live, etc. can be neutral. Or it can hurt our witness as people of Jesus. Paul is concerned people saw some Christian women as amoral by the way they dressed. Their appearance may have been a distraction during worship. The specifics are cultural. But in our era, we need to be aware that dressing in ways that emphasize our sexuality can be a distraction to others ... and perhaps cause people to wonder about our morals. *“Both men and women should avoid any clothing that would prove seductive, particularly in settings where God is to be worshiped and participants should be free from such distractions”* (Blomberg). Dressing to get attention – either by over-dressing-up or over-dressing-down – is not helpful. Putting it positively: we should look and behave in ways that are honorable and respectable in our culture, recognizing that people see us as ambassadors of Jesus. It’s about Jesus and His honour, not us and our appearances.
- Some people have used these verses to justify a husband-centered authoritarianism in marriage. Husbands can even abuse their wives. Paul is not saying anything close to this. As in Ephesians 5, Paul is talking about how much Christ loves us. As “head,” He gave Himself for us. In the same way a husband, as “head,” ought to give himself completely for his wife. We tend to interpret “headship” in terms of power, while God consistently and repeatedly defines it in terms of self-sacrificing love and service. Paul uses the metaphor of the tri-unity of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – as a model for human relationships. While God, the Father, is the “head,” there is a wonderful mutuality and team reality in the Trinity – mutual selfless love – that serves as a wonderful model for all relationships. Father-Son-Spirit are all co-equal in a co-giving, co-serving, co-loving relationship. This passage is all about love and servanthood, not power and control.

The underlying point of this passage is that in worship we ALL come before GOD – to praise and adore **HIM**. Worship is about **Him**. Not us.

We also come together as a community of people. And as a community, everything from our dress to how we treat one another, should be honouring and glorifying to our King. We are all called to serve one another. We are all called to love one another as Jesus loves us. How does this challenge me?

*God the Sender, send me.
God the Sent, come with me.
God the Strengthener of those who go, empower me,
May I go with you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
May I live with you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
May I serve with you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
May all I am be for you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.*

Welsh Prayer

Thursday, March 17: 1 Corinthians 11:17-22

In Corinth, it was common for the church to meet in the homes of wealthier members and have a meal (what they called a "love feast"), **before** communion/the Lord's Supper. Since the dining area could only hold a few people, the host would select a few guests, typically other rich men, to dine with him on the best food before the Lord's Supper. Other people – the poor, women, slaves – would huddle in the open court or atrium of the house with rumbling bellies, waiting for the worship service/communion. When they all came together for the Lord's Supper in a worship time, some believers would have just eaten a feast and even drunk a little (or a lot) too much wine, while others would be ravenously hungry, having eaten nothing.

Not surprisingly this was causing tension. Paul writes rather ominously: "*But in the following instructions, I cannot praise you. For it sounds as if more harm than good is done when you meet together ...*"

One of the things I love about being in the church – about being the church – is that when we gather, it doesn't matter how much money anyone has, how much education anyone has, what problems we have, how big anyone's home is, what issues we have in our past, what our politics are ... We united by our faith in Jesus. We are all equal before Jesus. We are united in our need for His mercy and grace. We are united in our calling to be a community of God's people ...

When we come together, we do so as equals:

- Equals in terms of our creation, as God's beloved children
- Equals in terms of all needing God's grace, mercy, and forgiveness
- Equal in terms of being loved by God, redeemed by God, and saved by God
- Equal in terms of being blessed and filled with His Spirit
- Equal in terms of being called to love one another
- (You could probably add a few more "equal-in-terms-of" too: _____)

How can we live as God's people today? Who can you encourage today?

*I arise today, through a mighty strength, the power of the Trinity,
Through the belief in the three-ness,
through confession of the one-ness of the Creator of Creation.
I arise today through the strength of Christ's birth and his baptism,
Through the strength of his crucifixion with his burial,
Through the strength of his resurrection and his ascension.*

*I arise today through the strength of heaven:
Light of sun, radiance of moon,
splendor of fire, speed of lightning,
swiftness of wind, depth of sea,
stability of earth, firmness of rock.*

*I arise today through God's strength to pilot me:
God's might to uphold me,
God's wisdom to guide me,
God's eye to look before me, God's ear to hear me,
God's word to speak for me,
God's hand to guard me,
God's way to lie before me,
God's shield to protect me,
God's host to save me from snares of devils, from temptations of vices,
from everyone who shall wish me ill,
afar and anear, alone and in multitude.*

*Christ to shield me today.
Christ with me, Christ before me,
Christ behind me, Christ in me,*

*Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down,
Christ when I arise,
Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
Christ in every eye that sees me,
Christ in every ear that hears me.*

*I arise today, through a mighty strength, the power of the Trinity,
Through belief in the threeness,
through confession of the oneness,
of the Creator of Creation.
Amen*

attributed to Patrick (390-460)

Friday, March 18: 1 Corinthians 11:23-34

Paul goes on to remind the Corinthians of what the Lord's Supper is all about. Think about a typical communion service. While we do not believe there is anything magical about the Lord's Supper, it is a deeply symbolic, deeply meaningful time of worship and fellowship.

- *The Lord's Supper is a time to **look to the past*** – it's a time to tell the story again and again of God's amazing love and grace. We remember Jesus' suffering. We recall His death on the cross. We don't take God's love for granted or lose a sense of awe and wonder as we reflect on the cross. We never want to forget the love of God for us and the lengths to which He went to save us. The Lord's Supper should stir in us a profound sense of thanksgiving, joy, and worship.
- *The Lord's Supper is a time to **look at the present*** – how can I love others as Jesus loves me? What relationships do I need to deal with? Who do I need to forgive? Who have I hurt? With whom do I need to share? Who do I need to care for? Who do I need to confess my sins to, and ask for forgiveness from? Relationships are important to our spiritual, emotional, and even physical health. Knowing the Lord could return any time, how do I live wisely and well – today?
- *The Lord's Supper is a time to **look forward*** – we do this, **until He comes again**. He will come again. It is a time for us to look forward with hope to a time when the last vestiges of sin and evil will be destroyed as Jesus returns and creation is re-created. This is a time to look forward to Him coming and setting all things right. It's a time to anticipate being with Him, in His glory, forever.

The invitation to all of us is that "*This is the Lord's Table, it is not ours ...*" This is God's table. We are all invited into His presence. We are His guests. Spend some time reflecting on the mystery of the Lord's last meal with His disciples. How can even reflecting on the Lord's Supper be a richer time of worship for you? How can it help you grow in your faith?

*O God, whose ways are all mercy and truth,
carry on your gracious work in us.
Lord, by your grace, help us become what we, in our own human frailty, cannot attain.
Lord, give us the faith, that in our own strength we cannot manage to find.
Lord, shine forth conspicuously through our lives
despite our all too obvious weaknesses.
We ask, O Lord, in your compassion,
that you increase our faith in you and your faith in us.
We believe you are with us each step of each day.
Give us your help and strength, O Lord.
Give us your peace, O Lord.
Amen*

Leonine Sacramentary (7th century)

Saturday, March 19: Matthew 26:17-30

Paul's version of the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11 is a summary of longer passages recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Today we are reading Matthew's version.

As you read it, reflect on the drama of the event:

- How is Jesus feeling?
- How are the disciples feeling?
- How are you feeling?

This is the introduction I occasionally give to the Lord's Supper Sunday mornings. Reflect on these words:

"You who truly and earnestly repent of your sins, who have love and concern for your neighbours, who intend to lead a new life, following the commandment of God by walking in holy ways: draw near with reverence, faith and thanksgiving and take the Supper of the Lord to your comfort.

"Come to this sacred table, not because you must but because you may. Come, not to testify that you are righteous, but that you sincerely love our Lord Jesus Christ and desire to be His true disciple. Come, not because you deserve God's favour, but because you trust in His grace, His mercy, His forgiveness, and His gift of salvation. Come, not to make some theological statement, but to worship our Lord in spirit and in truth. Come, because this is God's gift of grace.

"As we gather today, may your heart, mind, soul, and strength be lifted above the cares of the moment, the worries of the past, and fears for the future. Let this bread and cup be, to you, signs of the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ here with us. May they speak to you of His promise that He is with you always, even to the end of the age. May they assure you that, as you confess your sins, He freely forgives them all.

"As we worship our Lord this morning, let us confess our sins ...

"Let us pray for the wisdom and the strength to know – and to do – His will."

Take time to spend time in worship, prayer, and confession today ...

*O Lord, you are merciful to all people.
Take away from me my sins.
By your grace, kindle in me the fire of your Holy Spirit.
Take away from me the heart of stone,
and give me a heart of flesh,
a heart to love and adore you,
a heart to delight in you,
a heart to follow and enjoy you,
a heart to serve you,
a heart to bless your children near and afar.
For Christ's sake, I pray,
Amen*

Ambrose of Milan (339-397)

Sunday, March 20: Psalm 149

Come today, to worship the Lord. We worship the Lord who created us. We worship the Saviour who died and rose again. We worship the Spirit who dwells within us.

This is the day the Lord has made. Let us be glad and rejoice in it.

*We walk in the light of this bountiful day
in the great strength of the most high God of gods,
in the favor of Christ,
in the light of the Holy Spirit,
in faith of the patriarchs,
in the footsteps of the prophets,
in the peace of the apostles,
in the joy of angels,
in the work of the faithful,
in the strength of the righteous,
in the witness of the martyrs,
in the wisdom of God,
in the patience of many,
in the control of the tongue,
in the abundance of peace,
in the endurance of those who suffer,
in the praise of the Trinity,
in continuing good works,
in step with the Spirit,
in the words of God,
in many blessings.*

*In this is the way of all who labor for Christ,
that we might one day listen to the voices of the angels,
praising God and saying: "Holy, holy, holy."
Amen*

Book of Cerne (9th Century)

Monday, March 21: 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Another issue the Corinthians are struggling with is the topic of "spiritual gifts." When we begin talking about spiritual gifts, some people get squeamish or avoid the conversation altogether. Perhaps they have been in churches where spiritual gifts have been so emphasized, they found it uncomfortable (an over emphasis on speaking in tongues, prophecy, or other public behaviours?). Or they have been in churches where talk of spiritual gifts was taboo. Or someone has told them they should have a gift, but they have never "discovered" their gift. They feel guilty or unworthy. Are they even a genuine Christian?

Spiritual gifts simply refer to the fact that God's Spirit is at work in all of us.

1. Some spiritual gifts are blessings He has given us – gifts of love, forgiveness, hope, joy, and peace that come from knowing Jesus. We **all** have been blessed with these gifts.
2. Other gifts describe the way the Spirit is working in our lives: He may have given us skills, abilities, talents, experiences, or resources that we can use in His service. We all have some of these gifts we can use for His glory – be it praying, teaching a class, helping meet the budget, pulling weeds, calling a shut-in, encouraging a neighbour, serving on a committee, helping an immigrant family ...
3. Sometimes God does give us special abilities to do things we could not do on our own. Some people do seem to be specially equipped with an ability we would not expect, that is not "natural" (either for a one-off or for a long period of time). A shy person can powerfully share their story. A person seems to be exceptionally wise. A person is able to pray in powerful ways. One person is a gifted evangelist. If God blesses you in such a way, great – use that gift. If not, that's just fine, too.

The Corinthians' particular issue appears to have been around speaking in tongues (it's the gift Paul mentions repeatedly in chapters 12-14). These were not "known languages" (like Latin, Greek, Hebrew),

but spiritual languages, inspired by the Spirit. Apparently, some people were blessed by God with the ability to praise Him in unknown languages. Paul broadens the discussion to help them appreciate that God gives a great diversity of gifts to His people – there are many, many gifts but they all came from **one** Lord and are used to build **unity** among His people. Speaking in tongues is only one gift. The Corinthians were obsessing about this one gift, and their lop-sided focus was causing problems.

12:1-3 emphasize the key purpose of spiritual gifts (including speaking gifts) is to exalt Jesus as Lord and serve Him. If people are glorifying God – great! – that is as it should be. But if we use gifts to seek glory for ourselves, be admired, cause dis-unity, or disconnect from the world, we're not in step with the Spirit.

Paul goes on to emphasize that diversity – not uniformity – is essential in a healthy church. If everyone in the church is speaking in tongues – and only speaking in tongues – the church would have no mission in the world. It would be dreadfully impoverished. The work of the Holy Spirit is so much bigger than just one gift or blessing. We all can use whatever blessings God has given us to serve Him.

People have come up with lists of spiritual gifts – from 1 Corinthians 12 & 14, Romans 12 and other passages. Paul's point is that we cannot put God into a box. He is giving examples of **some** of the many gifts God may choose to give His people, but this is not exhaustive (neither are the other passages in Scripture). We dare not say, "*These are all the spiritual gifts there are.*" Our God is a very creative God who will always surprise us. Paul's point is that we are all different. The unique talents, gifts, abilities, interests, skills, education, and experiences God has given each of us are all good; they are all gifts from Him; and He can use them all for His glory, to build His church.

What are you good at? What do you enjoy? What interests you? What experiences and education do you have? These are God's gifts to you. Use them for His glory. Yes, God can also give extra special spiritual gifts – perhaps just in a particular situation, perhaps as part of who we are – great. Use them for His glory.

If you're not sure what your "spiritual gift" is, don't stress about it. Take the opportunities God gives you to serve – right now, where you are. Pray for the ability to do them well. Do challenges seem overwhelming? You may discover God gives you everything you need to serve Him, here and now. Simply take the opportunities God sets before you, today and every day.

*Lord you became human to communicate with me.
You walked and worked on this earth.
You endured the heat and struggled with the cold.
All your time on this earth was spent in caring for humanity.
You healed the sick, you raised the dead.
Most important of all, you saved me from death.
Lord Jesus, Your death on the cross has set me free.
I can live joyously and freely without fear of death.
Your mercy knows no bounds.
Knowing that God loves me unconditionally,
I can afford to be honest about how I am.
How has the last day been, and how do I feel now?
I share my feelings openly with the Lord.
Lord, grant me the grace to have freedom of the spirit.
Cleanse my heart and soul so I may live joyously in Your love.
Amen*

Tuesday, March 22: 1 Corinthians 12:12-20

My Mom, a nurse, once said that she was amazed that any of us is ever healthy because our bodies and natural health systems are so complicated and delicately balanced. Given how some of us treat our bodies (thinking about our diet and exercise [or lack thereof]) it is even more amazing we're as healthy as we are.

Our church, Paul says, is like a human body. When we think of all the different people involved and all the interconnected relationships/ministries/activities, etc., it is amazing that our church is relatively healthy, too. Paul reminds us that each of us is critical to health of the church.

- That ornery person who drives you crazy? They are actually an important part of the church ... how do you feel about that? Perhaps we need to look a bit harder to see their redeeming qualities?
- **You** are a vitally important part of the church. Even though you may not feel like you have much to contribute, you are essential to the overall health of the body. Perhaps your gift can be as small as just coming to worship on a Sunday morning: your presence may be the bit of cheer someone else needs. Perhaps you can call/email/Facebook someone you haven't see in a while: that contact may make their day. Perhaps you can volunteer in the nursery, weed the garden (in the summer), help at the soup kitchen, pray for someone, encourage a neighbour ...

There are no unimportant people in the church. No person (or gift) is "better" or "less important" than another. There is tremendous variety and diversity in the church. But all this variety is designed to work together as a body. In this analogy, is it really possible to be a solitary Christian, apart from a church community? I guess an ear could "exist" apart from a body, but it wouldn't have much of a "life" would it? And somewhere a body would be missing an ear. Whether we like it or not, God expects us to be part of a church community. The church is important to our health – and we're critical to the church's health. We need a church. And a church needs us. Bruce Barton writes, *"Believers are in the world together – there is no such thing as private Christianity. When we follow Christ, we find ourselves in mixed company. Christ makes us one, even when we wish otherwise."*

The Holy Spirit is the One who builds the church. Our challenge is to take the opportunities He sets before us and be faithful in serving Him. He will supply the gifts and resources we need.

*Lord, grant us simplicity of faith,
and a generosity of service
that gives without counting cost.
A life overflowing with Grace,
poured out from the One
who gave everything,
that we might show
the power of love
to a broken world,
and share the truth
from a living Word.
Lord, grant us simplicity of faith,
and a yearning to share it.
Amen*

faithandworship.com

Wednesday, March 23: 1 Corinthians 12:20-31

"Yes, there are many parts, but only one body ..." I googled the question, "How many body parts do human beings have?" The quick answer: 206 bones and more than 600 muscles. However, there are over 7500 named parts of your body, including cells and other things. The total number of cells in your body is estimated to be 37.2 trillion. These trillions of cells are made up of a total of almost 7×10^{27} , or seven billion billion billion atoms in a 70 kg (155 pound) human body. If you weigh 155 pounds, you are made up of 7,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 atoms (if you weigh more, add a few more zeroes). How does that make you feel? I think I'm going to do some more exercise to lose a few atoms ...

The wonder of the human body is that these 7500 named parts, made up of 7×10^{27} atoms, actually work together to make you you. It is a miracle how, without even consciously thinking about it, my brain

manages all those parts and cells so I functional well (more or less) most of the time.

Paul didn't have the knowledge of human anatomy we do today. But by simple observation and personal experience he knew that human bodies only work because many, very different parts, are attached to one another, and are controlled by one part – the head. If there was no diversity of body parts, the body couldn't function. And if they were not coordinated by – and obedient to – the head, it couldn't function.

"All of you together are Christ's body, and each of you is a part of it," Paul emphasizes. We are a diverse collection of body parts ... which is good. We wouldn't want everyone to be the same. However, in order for the body to function well, all of the parts have to be coordinated – and obedient to – the head. Who is the head of the church? The Church Council? No. The pastor? Definitely not. ***Christ is the head of his body, the church***" Paul states unequivocally (Ephesians 4:15, Colossians 1:18).

Our challenge is to continually pray, seeking Jesus' wisdom for our church – HIS church. After all (to use a different metaphor), Jesus is the only solid foundation on which we can build (1 Corinthians 3:10-11). We need His guidance, His strength, and His blessing to move forward as a church. Without Jesus leading, empowering, and coordinating, we cannot possibly function well (imagine a human body where all the parts are not coordinated by the brain ... it isn't going to work well).

The good news:

- We are Jesus' church: if we do pray and seek His wisdom, He will build His church.
- You are an important part of the body: through your prayers and by doing your part (be it service, giving, helping, encouraging, sharing, leading, cleaning ... whatever), He will build His church.

*When I am invited into the presence of a friend,
I look forward to the event and feel honoured.
When God invites me to spend time in His presence,
He desires me to know and feel His love.
With faith and hope I turn my heart and mind to God,
and ask Him to help me become more aware of His loving presence.
"A thick and shapeless tree-trunk would never believe that it could become a statue,
admired as a miracle of sculpture,
and would never submit itself to the chisel of the sculptor,
who sees by her genius what she can make of it" (Ignatius).
I ask for the grace to let myself be shaped by my loving Creator.
I thank God for these few moments spent alone with him
and for any insights I may have been given from His Word.
Amen.*

Thursday, March 24: Ephesians 4:1-16

This is one of those passages we have read before, focusing on its theme of unity. But it is also one of Paul's teachings on spiritual gifts. As we think about what these sentences have to say about spiritual gifts, notice the framework for the discussion. When it comes to spiritual gifts:

- Be completely humble and gentle.
- Be patient, bearing with one another in love.
- Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

God has given each one of us His grace – undeserved blessing and favour – to serve Him. That will look different in each one of us. Diversity is good. If a body were all ears, it couldn't function. All feet? All elbows? It wouldn't work. Again, Paul's list is far from exhaustive. He is just giving us examples of some of the blessings God can give people. The key is that if God places us in a particular situation at a particular time, He will provide the spiritual resources we need to do what He calls us to do.

The purpose of each and every blessing from God is the same:

- To equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.
- To encourage unity in the faith.
- To help people grow in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature.

Paul uses the “church-as-a-body” metaphor to describe the interconnectedness we have with one another (4:4 and 4:14-16). Is this a helpful picture of the church? How does it help you appreciate your role within the church? What is the church like without you? What are you like without the church?

What can I learn from this passage? How can I put it into practice?

*If God were trying to tell me something, would I know?
If God were reassuring me or challenging me, would I notice?
I ask for the grace to be free of my own preoccupations
and open to what God may be saying to me.
For a few moments, I think of God's veiled presence in all things:
in the entire universe and my local world, giving it existence;
and finally, in me, giving me all this and more,
making me a temple, a dwelling-place of the Spirit.
Lord, grant me the grace to be free from the excesses of this life.
Let me not get caught up with the desire for wealth.
Keep my heart and mind free to love and serve you.
Amen*

Friday, March 25: Romans 12:1-8

This is another passage in which Paul deals with various spiritual gifts, giving some examples of ways in which God can empower us to serve Him. Paul is less concerned with defining or listing specific gifts than he is with the **attitude** with which we use them – humility (“Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought”). We use them to serve Jesus. Most importantly, **DO** actually use them. Don’t sit on them. If God has blessed you in some way – any way – you **do** something about it. For example ...

- If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith.
- If it is serving, then serve.
- If it is teaching, then teach.
- If it is to encourage, then give encouragement.
- If it is giving, then give generously.
- If it is to lead, serve diligently.
- If it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

Once again, Paul uses the body metaphor: “Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (4-5).

More profoundly, Paul challenges us to be radically countercultural: to serve God and to serve one another. We live in a self-oriented society, where we are encouraged to focus on our rights, and what it’s in it for us (including what’s can the church do for us). The idea of personal self-sacrifice – of time, energy, skill, or money – is not popular. Yet we discover our true humanity when we bless others.

Paul challenges us, “I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice – the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him.¹ Don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God’s will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect” (1-2). That is a different way of thinking. A different way of ordering our priorities. A different way of

living. It's not all about me ... it's about using God's gifts for God's glory. What is God saying to me?

*Help us, O Lord, to know you,
and love you,
and rejoice in you.
Even though we know we cannot do these perfectly in this life,
let us, at least, grow closer to you every day,
till we come to know,
love,
and rejoice in you in perfection, in heaven.
May our knowledge of you increase in us, day by day.
May our love for you grow every day, more and more.
May our joy become greater and fuller as we live in your presence each day.
May the gifts of grace you give us fill us so that our joy may be full.
To you, O Lord, be the honor and glory,
who with the Father and Holy Spirit lives and reigns,
one God, world without end.
Amen*

Augustine (354-430)

Saturday, March 26: 1 Peter 4:1-11

Paul isn't the only one who teaches about spiritual gifts. Peter, writing to persecuted Christians enduring tough times, talks about God's blessings to us, too.

Peter draws a contrast between how people who don't know Jesus live and how those who seek to follow Him live. Those of us who love Jesus choose to live by different moral values and live up to different ethical standards than people outside the church. And those of us who aim to follow Jesus recognize whatever God has blessed us with – whether those gifts are abilities, talents, education, experiences, money, wisdom, opportunity, etc. – are gracious gifts from God. We choose to offer them back to serve Him, His Kingdom, and His people. We give of our time, talents, and treasures to Him. We pray. We volunteer. We give. We help. We care. We call. We choose to find meaning and purpose in blessing God and others.

There is a challenging paradox here. While our culture tells us that we should hold on to whatever we have with all our might, Jesus challenges us that the one who holds on to his own life will actually lose it. And whoever loses His life, for the sake of the Kingdom, finds real life. A.W Tozer put it this way, *"Let no one imagine that he will lose anything of human dignity by this voluntary sell-out of his all to his God. He does not by this degrade himself as a person; rather he finds his right place of high honor as one made in the image of his Creator. His deep disgrace lay in his moral derangement, his unnatural usurpation of the place of God. His honor will be proved by restoring again that stolen throne. In exalting God over all, he finds his own highest honor upheld."* It truly is more blessed to give than to receive.

"Do it with all the strength and energy that God supplies," Peter encourages us. *"Then everything you do will bring glory to God through Jesus Christ. All glory and power to him forever and ever. Amen."*

*At this instant, as I come to prayer, God is present waiting for me.
God always arrives before me,
desiring to connect with me even more than my most intimate friend.
I take a moment and greet my loving God.
I ask for the grace to let go of my own concerns
and be open to what God is asking of me,
to let myself be guided and formed by my loving Creator.
How do I find myself today?
Where am I with God?
With others?*

*Do I have something to be grateful for? Then I give thanks.
 Is there something I am sorry for? Then I ask forgiveness.
 Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
 As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end.
 Amen.*

Sunday, March 27: 1 Corinthians 13

This is probably one of the best-known passages in the Bible. We often read it at weddings and other celebrations of “romantic love.” But notice the context – it is right in the middle of Paul’s letter about problems in a church. People are backstabbing their leaders, having ethical problems around sexuality and what they can/can’t eat, their worship services are a mess (some people are feasting, others are starving), they are obsessing about the gift of tongues. They are not a “healthy” body at all.

It’s to this messed up, dysfunctional church, that Paul talks about Christian love. There is nothing romantic about it. This is a love-in-the-church passage. This is love-in-the-mucky-mick-of-life teaching. Thankfully we’re not nearly as troubled as the Corinthians ☺. But it is good for us to reflect on what Paul is saying to **us** – as a church – and to **each of us** – individually.

Reflect on these verses in various translations ...

<i>New Intern'l Version</i>	<i>New Living Transl'n</i>	<i>The Message Transl'n</i>	<i>New KJV Transl'n</i>
Love is patient	Love is patient	Love never gives up	Love suffers long
Love is kind	Love is kind	Love cares more for others than for self	Love is kind
Love does not envy	Love is not jealous	Love doesn't want what it doesn't have	Love does not envy
Love does not boast	Love is not boastful	Love doesn't strut	Love does not parade itself
Love is not proud	Love is not proud	Love doesn't have a swelled head	Love is not puffed up
Love does not dishonor others	Love is not rude	Love doesn't force itself on others	Love does not behave rudely
Love is not self-seeking	Love does not demand its own way	Love isn't always "me first"	Love does not seek its own
Love is not easily angered	Love is not irritable	Love doesn't fly off the handle	Love is not provoked
Love keeps no record of wrongs	Love keeps no record of being wronged.	Love doesn't keep score of the sins of others	Love thinks no evil
Love does not delight in evil	Love does not rejoice about injustice	Love doesn't revel when others grovel	Love does not rejoice in iniquity
Love rejoices with the truth	Love rejoices whenever the truth wins out.	Love takes pleasure in the flowering of truth	Love rejoices in the truth
Love always protects	Love never gives up	Love puts up with anything	Love bears all things
Love always trusts	Love never loses faith	Love trusts God always	Love believes all things
Love always hopes	Love is always hopeful	Always looks for the best	Love hopes all things
Love always perseveres	Love endures through every circumstance	Never looks back, but keeps going to the end.	Love endures all things
Love never fails	Love will last forever	Love never dies	Love never fails

- How can we incorporate some these virtues into our church?
- Which one/two (or more) speak to you personally? How can you incorporate them into your life?

"All you who are called and gifted, hear me. Love is the missing ingredient. Follow after love and the calling, the gifting, and the revelation will find its deepest and fullest expression." (Chip Brogden)

*You were a man of suffering acquainted with grief,
loved and despised in equal measure.
You understand humanity and know our failings,
yet you love us despite the people that we are.
When we, like Peter, deny you by word or action, forgive us.
When we, like Judas, are tempted to follow a different path, forgive us.
When we, like those in the crowd allow you to be crucified, forgive us.
Bring us to the foot of the Cross
to stand next to the one who, looking into your eyes declared,
'Surely this is the Son of God.'
Thank you for your amazing love.
Amen*

faithandworship.com

Monday, March 28: 1 Corinthians 13 (focussing on 13:1-3 and 8-13)

This is too good a passage to only read once. When we read 1 Corinthians 13, we tend to focus on the middle few verses (yesterday) and forget the "frames": the first and last paragraphs of the passage.

In 13:1-3, Paul reminds us that we can do all sorts of amazing things, but if they are not done in the spirit of love (defined in 4-7), they don't amount to anything. Remember this is immediately following 1 Corinthians 12, in which Paul has talked about the many different gifts present in a church, and how we are all important parts of one body, one church. Our attitude – an attitude of love – is essential.

The Corinthians were into "looking good" spiritually – talking out loud in tongues, spouting great prophecies, putting on a show of their faith and even of their charity. But it was showmanship. These great looking things were not done out of love for God – or for anyone else. The Corinthians were making themselves feel good. And they wanted to "look good" to other people. Do we ever do things "to look good" and forget the true motivation we should have?

In 13:8-13, Paul tells us that over time – through our lives, as circumstances come our way, as life happens – things change. We change. The church changes. But if we are built on the foundation of love – God's love for us, and a genuine love for our neighbour – we'll be just fine. We know this to be true. The world changes around us (Covid?). Over time our physical and mental abilities change (sometimes for the better, sometimes not). Our situations change. But if our focus is on loving God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and loving our neighbour as ourselves, we will always find life full, rich, and meaningful.

The older I get, the more I appreciate that it is relationships – with God, family and friends – that are most important. Focusing on them is what really matters most. Thank God for those relationships.

Faith in God, His power, presence, and His everlasting love are the most important things in our lives. The greatest of these – the truth that underlies all the others – is His love. Our challenge is to love others with the same richness and depth that He showed to us (13:4-7). Re-read the qualities of love in 4-7 (yesterday's chart). Be thankful for how God is working in your life. What is God saying to you?

"It is not how much you do, but how much love you put into the doing that matters." (Mother Teresa)

*Make us glad, Lord God, so we might speak boldly of your mercies.
 Help us rejoice, O Lord, so we might adore your Holiness.
 May our chief joy be to glorify and proclaim your holy Name.
 If there is any sin within us, Lord, in your grace forgive us.
 If anyone has sinned against us, Lord, by your grace help us to forgive.
 Almighty, everlasting God, dwelling in love and power in our souls,
 bring people to your light through us,
 make yourself known to the world in us,
 that all might know the true Light,
 the bright and morning Star, Jesus.
 We pray that you would fill the world with your glory
 and show yourself by the radiance of your light to all nations.
 To you be the glory forever and ever.
 Amen*

Gregorian Sacramentary (c.593)

Tuesday, March 29: 1 John 2:7-17

Priorities: what really matter most to you? What things are most important? Good things happen when we get our priorities straight. But what are our priorities, really? If someone were to look at your life from the outside and evaluate your priorities based on

- what you spend your time on,
- what you spend your money on, and
- what most influences your decision making,

what conclusion would they make about your priorities? In practical terms, what really matters most to you?

We can have wonderfully idealistic priorities, but if they don't actually shape how we live, they really don't matter. Based on our actions, what are most important in our lives? Be honest with yourself.

John challenges us to think about those priorities:

- What really matters?
 - *That we love one another.*
 - *Love for God: that we know Christ and the Father.*
 - *That our sins have been forgiven through Jesus.*
 - *That, through His power, we win our battle with the evil one.*
 - *That God's word lives in your hearts.*
- What doesn't really matter?
 - Stuff
 - Achievements
 - Pleasure

These are NOT bad. Too often we give the impression that all things, achievements, and fun are bad. They are not. Many can be very good: it is good to strive to achieve and do what you do exceptionally well; God created fun. We can enjoy His good gifts.

But we have to be careful not to make these things the MOST important things in our lives and crowd out what really matters. It's a matter of balance – making sure our love for God and our neighbour is always more important than these other things. When we keep our priorities straight, then, paradoxically, we actually enjoy ourselves, our accomplishments, and our things much more. Life becomes more fun as we live for God and in good relationships with others.

We **KNOW** this. Our challenge is to live it. *"Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God"* (1 Corinthians 10:31). *"Love cures people, both the ones who give it and the ones who receive it."* (Dr. Karl Menninger)

*Dear Lord, as I come to you today,
Fill my heart and my whole being with the wonder of Your presence.
It is so easy to get caught up with the trappings of wealth in this life.
Grant, O Lord, that I may be free from greed and selfishness.
Remind me that the best things in life are free:
love, laughter, caring, and sharing.
In Your loving presence, I unwind the past day,
starting from now and looking back, moment by moment.
I gather in all the goodness and light, in gratitude.
I attend to the shadows and what they say to me,
seeking healing, courage, forgiveness.
And I choose to give the blessing of forgiveness.
Conversation requires talking and listening.
As I talk to Jesus may I also learn to be still and listen.
I can be totally honest with Jesus as I tell Him of my worries and my cares.
I will open up my heart to Him as I tell Him of my fears and my doubts.
I will ask Him to help me to place myself fully in His care,
to abandon myself to Him,
knowing that He always wants what is best for me.
Amen*

Wednesday, March 30: 1 John 3:11-24

In his letter, John comes back to his favourite themes again and again (last month we looked at his recurring theme of confession/forgiveness). One of his key principles is love. His rationale is basically this:

- God loves us SO much. Think about the love He showed us in Jesus ...
- That love of God has saved us; we have passed from death to life because of His love...
- Since we are saved in Christ, we should love one another with the same kind of love He showed us
- True love inevitably shows itself in action
- If we don't act in loving ways, we have to ask whether we really know the love of God in our lives.

"Dear children," John writes, *"let's not merely say that we love each other; let us show the truth by our actions."* As you continue to reflect on the virtues listed in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, notice how active many of them are. Love is not some vague emotion – it's a matter of actively doing some things and actively not doing others.

Look back at that list of qualities in 1 Corinthians 13. In a very practical way how can you share the love of Jesus today? *"Love doesn't give a person what they deserve, but what they need."* (Unknown)

*Open my heart, O Lord,
and enlighten me by the grace of your Holy Spirit,
that I may seek what is well pleasing to your will;
help me to order my doings after your commandments
that I may live a life that pleases you.
May God the Father bless us.
May Christ the Son take care of us.
May the Holy Spirit and enlighten us all the days of our life.
The Lord be our defender and keeper of body and soul
both now and forever and to the ages of ages.
Amen*

Bede (672-735)

Thursday, March 31: 1 John 4:7-21

John is back talking about love, again. Like a video stuck in one spot, John repeats this theme over and over and over again. He obviously thinks it's pretty important. His thinking echoes what we read yesterday: God showed His love to us in Jesus; His love radically changes us; because of His love in our lives, we love others with the same kind of love; this love shows up, practically, in how we live in relationship with other people. It's not rocket science, is it? But it doesn't come naturally to me. It is very hard to live this way.

John reminds us that *"God has given us his Spirit"* (4:13). We're not in this alone. It's not simply a matter of my will power forcing myself to love others. God's Spirit is actively at work within us – renewing us, teaching us, inspiring us, guiding us, giving us courage, even nagging us. He will help us as we desire to live in this new way. We can pray, asking God to help us become more loving people.

It is a process. For most of us, becoming more Christ-like is a lifelong journey of small steps of obedience and small acts of love. Gradually these become more regular. They become habits. And slowly – over time – we find we are becoming more loving, more peaceful, more joyful, and more like Jesus. *"As we live in God, our love grows more perfect,"* John writes (4:17). It's a process. It takes time. Don't be discouraged. None of us are perfect yet. And none of us ever will be this side of eternity. But we keep at it.

We will make mistakes – that's OK. When I was a child, I made lots of mistakes, but I knew my parents loved me in spite of them all. Nothing I could do would change that. The same is true – even more true – with our loving heavenly Father. When we make mistakes, He still loves us. He always will. We don't need to be afraid that we will lose His love. His love for us IS perfect – He is THE model of perfect love. We never need to be afraid, for *"Such love (God's love) has no fear, because perfect love expels all fear"* (4:18).

Take a risk. Be courageous. Don't be afraid to fail. Love someone else today as God has loved you. Call. Help. Pray. Encourage. Build up. Inspire. Forgive. His Spirit is with you – always. Nothing can change His incredible love for you.

*"The world is charged with the grandeur of God" (Gerard Manley Hopkins).
I dwell for a moment on the presence of God around me,
in every part of my body, and deep within my being.
I will take refuge in your loving heart.
You are my strength in times of weakness.
You are my comforter in times of sorrow.
Lord God I thank you for the gift of freedom.
Help me to use this gift with integrity.
I am free to make choices.
Help me to choose to follow you, to live in a Christ-like way by caring for others.
Remind me to consider always those less fortunate than myself,
the oppressed, the prisoner, those who are not free to worship in public.
Guide me always to seek your holy will in all the events of my life.
Amen*

Friday, April 1: 1 John 5

In this final passage, John summarizes what's most important:

- *"Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has become a child of God ... He has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have God's Son does not have life."* (5:1, 11-12). We are saved through faith in Jesus as our Saviour. (Remember "Christ" is not Jesus' last name; it is the Greek translation of the Hebrew "Messiah" – literally meaning "the Anointed One." Throughout the Old Testament, the promise of the coming Messiah spoke of God coming to save His people in new and profound ways. The title, "Christ" applied to Jesus, affirms that He is God Himself come to save His people, the Saviour of the world).

- *"Everyone who loves the Father loves his children, too"*(5:1). That love of God inevitably shows in how we live our lives in relationship with other people. Talking the talk inevitably leads to walking the walk – although it's a long journey to become Christ-like, we keep at it.
- *"We know we love God's children if we love God and obey his commandments. Loving God means keeping his commandments, and his commandments are not burdensome"*(5:2-3). God's great commands are that we love Him with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, and that we love our neighbour as ourselves. If we do that, life goes well.
- *"For every child of God defeats this evil world, and we achieve this victory through our faith. And who can win this battle against the world? Only those who believe that Jesus is the Son of God"* (5:4-5). It's an ongoing battle to love as Jesus did. But with our faith in God, life does go better. His Spirit helps us along the road.

John saves the most important counsel to the end: *"Dear children, keep away from anything that might take God's place in your hearts"*(5:21). That's great advice. What might take God's place in your heart? Lord, help us to live with You as the most important priority in my life.

"If you have love, you don't need to have anything else, and if you don't have it, it doesn't matter much what else you have." (James M. Barrie)

*O God Almighty, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, grant us, we pray,
to be grounded and settled in your truth.
May our lives be centred on you and you alone.
Holy Spirit, come into our hearts.
That which we do not know, reveal to us.
That which is empty or insufficient in us, please fill us up.
That which we know which is true, confirm in us.
That which is evil and sinful, forgive and remove from us.
That which is beautiful, cause to shine through us for your glory.
Keep us blameless in your service, through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Jesus, be our King.
Amen*

Clement (died 99 AD)

Saturday, April 2: 1 Corinthians 14:1-19

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul spoke about the importance of love. But that wonderful passage follows 1 Corinthians 12. In that chapter Paul had talked about:

- The variety of gifts in the church (not just speaking in tongues – the Corinthians' obsession).
- With our unique gifts, how important each of us is to the body, the church.
- The church is like a body: as each of us functions effectively, using our gifts, the body/church is healthy and strong. If we don't share what God has given us, the whole body/church – and we ourselves – suffer. A healthy body ALL works together. A specific part of the body – you and I – are only healthy when we are functioning as part of the larger whole, the church.

Paul goes back to talking about speaking in tongues, the gift the Corinthians are over-emphasizing. This is not referring to the miraculous gift of speaking in known languages (see Acts 2:1-12). These are unknown languages through which people are worshipping and praising God. There is nothing wrong with this. In private, it can be a freeing way to communicate with and worship God. It can also be a witness of the power of God to those not yet believers. But Paul is arguing that if no one understands and interprets what is being said it is not appropriate for public worship. Even if words spoken in tongues can be reliably interpreted, Paul emphasizes that clear prophecy is preferable anyway.

Note what Paul is saying and not saying: in corporate worship, un-interpreted speaking in tongues is not appropriate. In private, however, praying and worshipping in tongues – if God has given you that gift – can be a blessing. If He hasn't given you that gift, don't worry about it. Nowhere does Scripture suggest this is

everyone's gift or even a common gift (Jesus never mentions it; neither do Peter, James, or John).

What is "prophecy"? Paul uses four words interchangeably in his writings (not just here, but in other letters as well). He often uses one word as shorthand for all the others. They are all listed in 14:6:

- **Revelation** is the same word as the title of the last book of the New Testament. It literally means "revealing," "uncovering," or "unveiling" of things unknown or hidden. The book of Revelation is a revealing of some of the cosmic/spiritual realities in the past, present, and future. In the church, someone who has the gift of "revelation" can help us see how God is at work in our world and help us recognize opportunities for ministry we may not notice ... like that person who could really use some encouragement.
- **Knowledge.** Some people know a lot. They are gifted with a love of learning and an ability to remember and recall information. These are wonderful Scripture memorizers and those who love reading great theologians. In the church we need these people to help us discern the truth. The challenge is that people KNOW a lot of information, but don't necessarily apply it to their lives.
- **Prophecy,** in the Bible, does not normally mean "foretelling the future." Rather it means "forth-telling God's truth in the present." Old Testament prophets said relatively little about the future, but God spoke powerfully through them about the issues and sins of their people in the present. Prophets in the church help us hear what God is saying to us today: how does His Word speak into my life, today? How is He leading us as a church, today? What is God's wisdom for us, today? These guides continually ask a prophetic question: How is God speaking into **your** life, today?
- **Teaching/word of instruction/wisdom.** Knowledge is a wonderful thing, but knowledge, without the wisdom to apply it into practical life, is of little value. Gifted/wise teachers help us apply God's truth to the situations we face. These people help us figure out how to LIVE our faith. How do we, as believers, apply biblical principles to the new challenges we face that are not specifically addressed in the Bible: Social media? Politics? Climate change? Covid? These study guides, hopefully, function in this sort of a "this-is-how-we-can-apply-these-truths-in-our-lives-right-here-right-now" kind of way.

While each word may have a unique sense of meaning, what they all have in common is the sense that:

- we need to hear God's Word speaking into our world and our lives, today – and
- we need to apply God's truth into our choices, way of living, priorities, and relationships, today.

Because speaking tongues – especially un-interpreted speaking in tongues – doesn't bring God's Word to bear on our lives – it doesn't teach, challenge or change us if we can't understand it – it is less important. Of course we have to be open to hearing and applying God's truth. We can **know** a lot. What's more important is we **learn** and **apply** what we know. Most of us **know** far more than we actually **do**. What do you **know** that you actually need to **do**? How **is** God speaking to you, today?

*I pause for a moment and think of the love
and the grace that God showers on me,
creating me in his image and likeness, making me his temple.
"There are very few people who realize what God would make of them
if they abandoned themselves into his hands,
and let themselves be formed by his grace." (Ignatius)
I ask for the grace to trust myself totally to God's love.
Jesus you speak to me through the words of the gospels.
May I respond to your call today.
Teach me to recognize your hand at work in my daily living.
Teach me to live as a person who bears the image of God.
Teach me to live with grace and mercy.
Teach me to live with joy and compassion.
Teach me to live with love and justice.
Amen.*

Sunday, April 3: Psalm 33

As we gather to worship today, it is good to praise the Lord.

The earth is full of His unfailing love (33:5). How do you see His love around you?

- The Psalm-writer reflects on the beauties of creation (33:6-9): how can we see God in the wonders of His creation?
- The writer also sees God guiding the overall story of history (33:10-17): how is God at work in our world?
- And the writer sees God at work in his own life and the lives of those around him (33:18-21): how do you see God at work in your life? In the lives of those you know?

Take some time to notice God at work ... in creation, in our world, in your life ... Be thankful. Praise His for His goodness, grace, and blessings. *"Let your unfailing love surround us, LORD, for our hope is in you alone."*(33:22)

"You really shouldn't say 'I love you' unless you mean it. But if you mean it, you should say it a lot. People forget." (Jessica, age 8)

*I will not stumble for your hand will guide
and in your footsteps I will tread.
I will not grow weary for your spirit sustains
and my soul shall be renewed.
I will not be weak for your truth strengthens
and no evil shall defeat me.
From the depths of the earth
I shall soar upward on wings like eagles,
spread the news throughout the world,
run the race against all odds,
and shall prevail.
Amen*

faithandworship.com