

SCRIPTURE READINGS for the 6th Sunday after Easter (Narrative Lectionary)

Acts 18:1-4 Founding a church in Corinth

After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. 2 There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, 3 and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. 4 Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.

The Way of Love 1st Corinthians 13:1-13 (Translation: ESV)

I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not 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 have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.

So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

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REFLECTION: “Be strong, be considerate”

“Be strong, stay safe”. This is one of the popular slogans these days. Another is: “Be strong, be kind”. Another: “stronger together”. And the Nova Scotia flag, symbol of our province.

Which one do you like best?

While all are well intentioned, there is a subtle difference between them. Two of the slogans have the community in mind, one focuses on the individual.

All of them use the word “strong”. One does not qualify what “strong” means,(“stronger together”).

The other two define “strong” by adding another adjective: Be “kind” or “safe”.

Am I splitting hairs? If you think I am and you are ready to lay this sermon aside, please stay with me a bit longer. I trust it will get more relevant quickly!

For how we understand “strength” is super important in the Christian Good News.

How we understand strength is the heart and soul of Paul’s teaching. And you must decide what “being strong” means to you. For there are rivalling interpretations out there and you must choose.

Strong can mean anything, right?

And in these days, everyone wants to be strong.

For some that means to “suck it up”. For some that means to take to the street and defy government Covid restrictions. For some that means to embrace forceful theories for our current dis-ease which are easy to repeat and propagate-(never mind whether they are true). For some it means to work towards independence from others. For some that means to arm themselves in an uncertain future. For some it

means to grow a “victory garden”. For some it means intensifying communication and relationships with others. Everyone wants to be strong.

So let's ask: As Christian individual what type of strength do I find modelled in the New Testament? This search brings us right to Paul's letters to the Corinthians. They are trailblazers in the way they call the Christians to re-examine their notions of strength. As we understand what went on in Corinth, and specifically in the Corinthian congregation, we uncover insights which are hugely helpful for our day. Let's hear their story:

As Paul arrived in the port city of Corinth, he met up with a Jewish couple from Italy; Priscilla and Aquila. They had lived and worshipped as Jews in Rome, but Emperor Claudius had first banned public worship for Jews in Rome and a few years later expelled all Jews from the city. This happened in the year 51, so about 18 years after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. The Roman historian Suetonius writes “*Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome*” (Divus Claudius 25). Although scholars are not all in agreement on this point, it is likely that this “Chrestus” conflict involved disputes about Jesus (Christ= “Christus” in latin). It is possible that the same kind of argumentation and conflict that arose wherever the disciples preached Jesus as the Messiah (Christ) during worship in their synagogues had reached Rome by the late fourties.

The brand new church in Corinth is highly diverse. Prisca and Aquila, with whom Paul quickly becomes friends, are Jews from Rome, others who make up the fledgling Christian congregation are culturally Greek (Such as “Apollos” an important man who bears the first name of a greek God). You also have those who are culturally Jewish and ethnically Semitic. In the Corinth congregation were people of wealth, education and high social standing, as well as illiterate dock workers, slaves, and economically vulnerable people. Men and women, singles, widows, entire households with children. Women held leadership roles just as men did. Guesses as to the number of people in this congregation during Paul's early years vary anywhere between 50-150 adults. The congregation had enormous potential because of their diversity and enthusiasm, but sadly they seem to have had just as much trouble to reconcile their differences as we have today in North America. Different socio-economic classes and education levels barely interact; and there seems to have been a tendency in Corinth for some people to do things together and to blatantly leave others out (see 1st Cor. 11:17-22).

After Paul had left there the congregation split into sub groups which had rivalries going “Chloe's people” and then those who say they follow only Christ, “Apollo's people” and then those who say that they follow only Paul. Needless to say that was devastating to Paul. On top of that, their values seem to have been entangled with those of society around them. Society all around them valued physical strength(sports), language power (rhetoric, public speaking), luxuries and physical pleasures (food, drink, baths, brothels)...so why should'nt they continue to do so once they were Christians?

This is not surprising for a young church. But Paul had his work cut out for himself. We know that he wrote at least 4 letters to them, giving guidance in specific questions; but sadly only 2 of those are preserved. There may have been even more. This congregation caused him quite a bit of heartbreak. So much potential, yet so much arrogance among some people!

So what is the core message he offers them?

He develops the image of the church as the “body of Christ”. Only together is the church strong. Now that the risen One now longer walks among us, as Christians we must understand ourselves as Christ's body in the world. That is a tall order, but at the most basic level it means that everyone has a valued role to play. Each community should see itself as a living organism where each is a valued part of the whole. He says things like “when one is hurt, all are hurt”, “when one is happy we all rejoice” and he proves how often the smallest and most modest parts of the body have essential functions. Everyone who has ever had a toothache would agree! Everyone who has ever seen a toddler walk up the aisle in

worship or seen a person with down syndrome shake hands at the door, would agree! (Now you already see a parallel for us in Covid times: Are the lives of the elderly less important than those of the rest of the population? The way some people talk and the way nursing home staff are underpaid one would think so!)

The Corinthian's notion of value and strength was tied to the clichés of beauty and knowledge, charisma and station...to the Hollywood values of the day. Appollos would have been the witty cool guy who gets all the "likes" on social media. There were popular "stars" who prophesied and had visions. On the other hand there were those who came always late to the supper and Lord's service because they had lifted crates at the ship docks for a few pennies all day. When they too wanted to refresh themselves at the potluck table that preceded the service there was not much left for them. This is the context in which Paul develops his thoughts on what makes a strong community, a strong individual, and his thoughts on the value of vulnerability.

Christ, and only Christ crucified is the One in whom we recognize the strength of God . Jesus statues that show an aryan style muscle man are an abomination.

If God's love and strength are shown in a suffering Messiah on the cross how could God's people expect carefree lives. Paul pleads in prayer to be relieved of an ailment but the answer is: *"And God said to me "My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness" and Paul continues...."Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong."* (2.Cor, 12:9)

The answer reminds one of Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane; and of how Jesus accepted a very difficult outcome. This has nothing to do with self loathing or masochism. Its not an invitation to degrade one self or to seek suffering. But it is a statement that says that true strength is revealed in suffering and in how an individual and a community reacts-to a threat. If they still muster love and caring that is an attitude that deserves the name strength.

Paul thinks that everyone must develop an appreciation of vulnerability-of their own and of others vulnerability. Only when the Corinthians cultivate an appreciation of vulnerability will they have a sense of compassion and will they flourish as a community. Otherwise its each for themselves, everyone on their own.

This is the context in which he writes the profound and famous words of the 13th chapter. The one ultimate value for a Christian community is Love. Because God is Love. But God also appeared vulnerable among humans. Jesus, himself vulnerable, created acts of Love towards the vulnerable- such as inclusion, healing and the kind of preaching that lifted the burdens of those who carried too much. Ultimately he showed love by letting himself be put to death among the outcast, as "one of them". Paul says that because of what was revealed in Jesus Love is the measure of the law, of all actions, of all ethics. This was revolutionary in 51 AD. It is still revolutionary today.

Think of the Covid restrictions and read again Paul's description of what love is, what love does:

"4 Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. 7 It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

How does that sound to you while there is so much crying for the reopening of trade, for government restrictions to ease? So what does it mean to be strong in times of Covid? Being strong is the strength consideration and kindness.

When you make masks you are strong, when you thank those who help you, you are strong.

When you endure restrictions for the sake of the community you are strong. When you try to find out the truth rather than subscribing to packaged theories you are strong. When you refrain from criticizing those who are trying their best, at least until you have walked in their shoes- you are strong. When you keep from boasting about your own achievements so that there might be room for another -you are in

fact strong. When you are patient with yourself you are strong. When you do not give up hope, you are strong. Is this message heard enough?

In our days, I am heartened by the popularity of Brene Brown, PhD. She is an articulate, humourous, down to earth American social worker, psychologist, story teller and author. She appears on many platforms and has become incredibly popular while avoiding the usual “self help” cliches. For a secular public she tells stories of courage arising out of vulnerability. Instead of talking about weakness, she talks about vulnerability. Instead of telling faith stories, she tells courage stories. Hers are not stories about blind courage, but stories of actions that arise from embracing our fear.

Compare that with how Jesus talks about “faith” to just about everyone who courageously approached him with an illness, or a plea. Or see his interpretation of “faith” in the story of the widow who keeps bothering an unjust judge. (Luke 18:1-8) Or “seeing their faith” in the friends who let their pal through the roof (Luke 5:17-26) For Jesus faith had a lot to do with determination and courage. There are definitively parallels. Where Paul speaks about the need to practice endurance, Brown talks about children experiencing “boredom” as a “sacred experience”. She talks about “the gifts of imperfection” where Paul speaks about the value of gifts that build up even though they are unspectacular. She speaks of self acceptance, including the acceptance of one’s imperfections, where Paul speaks of Christ dying for all so all can live (knowing they are accepted and made whole). Brene Browns secular voice has influence. What shows her as heir of Paul’s teaching is the way she redefines strength for everyone. Strength is really only strength when we embrace our vulnerability. Only then do we become strong enough to also accept the inevitable vulnerability of others (which we can only tolerate when we accept our own). Although she speaks “secular” she is familiar with Paul. She was raised in the Christian faith and abandoned the strict and judgmental version she encountered in the churches of her youth. After 20 years, she returned to a church “where there is room at the table for everyone”. Exactly what Paul was trying to make the Corinthians into! Now she says “I would say my faith is probably the organizing principle of my life.”

I would like to close by drawing your attention to the fairy tale which I suggested for the children’s time. Because here as well we have echoes of Paul’s redefinition of strength. True strength is linked to kindness the story says. And vice versa: those who think they are strong, but are not kind – are not successful in the end. Perhaps you would like to read it, even if you don’t have children around. (See “The queen bee” in the attachment)

Important messages in a time when so many voices clamour in a much ruder show of “strength”.

So, “be strong, be kind.”

And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding,
guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus.
(Philippians 4:7)

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