

Sunday, August 12, 2012
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For today's reading we return to Paul's letter to the Corinthians.

The letter, written in the year 54, is a response to a letter Paul has received asking for clarification on a number of matters facing the fledging church community.

The church in Corinth is made up of Gentiles of all different socio-economic backgrounds.

The divergent groups meet individually throughout the community with people from their own neighborhoods, but come together periodically as the whole church.

Overall, the letter summons the fractious congregation to manifest the unity and harmony that Paul views a necessary to being a Christian community.

The counsel of the letter is informed by Paul's view of love as the governing power in the life of community.

I chose this particular passage, as a call to our own community to remember the lessons that often are so familiar that we don't hear them anymore.

Read Paul's letter to the church at Corinth, chapter 13.

Sermon - "Clichés of Comfort"

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

How many times have you heard that passage read?

It is a standard at weddings, on greeting cards, a classic for needlepoints or calligraphy.

It is familiar and comfortable.

A time-worn truth that is rarely disputed.

It has, in fact, become cliché.

A cliché is defined as "a trite, stereotyped expression; a sentence or phrase, usually expressing a popular or common thought or idea, that has lost originality, ingenuity, and impact by long overuse."

Lost originality and impact by long overuse!

I wonder what impact Paul's words had on those hearing them for the first time. Were they awed by his ability to make a point?

While I was at Chautauqua I had the opportunity to hear a new, young novelist, Andrew Krivak talk about his book, *The Sojourn*.

He was as engaging and articulate in person as his writing is in the book.

I think that Paul must have had that ability, that gift, of saying things in such a way that they are received and remembered.

Sometimes I hear people say something that I have known is true but am impressed by their ability to put it into words.

I think to myself, “Oh, I wish I had said that.”

Scripture is full of well-chosen words that have become familiar to us:

United we stand, divided we fall (Luke 11:17)

All things must pass (Matthew 24)

Am I my brother's keeper? (Genesis)

Proverbs and the book of Job are filled with expressions that have found their way into our daily conversation:

Better to keep your mouth shut and have people think you a fool, than to speak and remove all doubt (Proverbs 17)

By the skin of your teeth (Job)

The list goes on and on – eye for an eye; eat, drink and be merry, drop in the bucket, fall from grace, forbidden fruit, go the extra mile, it is better to give than to receive.

You get the idea.

The point is that we must work to keep our words fresh and alive.

We must not become complacent in worship or life and stop paying attention to the guiding wisdom of God's holy word.

We must listen with new ears each time we hear something and ask ourselves what is that word saying to us in this particular moment in time.

During the worship services at Chautauqua Institution the reading of scripture is followed by

“These words are breathed into us by the Holy Spirit.”

I want you to listen again to some of today's reading with the idea that the Holy Spirit is breathing these words into you to change you, transform you, awaken you to the presence of God in your life.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but

rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

Paul's lesson is full of wonderful insights and lessons for each of us. His words, no matter how cliché, remind us of how we are to live as Christians.

Of course, we know that we are no longer children, but does that mean we never act as children?

We are surely wise enough to realize that all the material possessions in the world will not replace love – but do we live that way?

Paul ends his plea with his eschatological promise – for now we don't have the whole picture but in the end, when we face God, we will know everything that God has known.

Reflect on that for a moment.

In the end, we will face God and the question will be: "Were you a noisy gong, a clanging cymbal or the living illustration of faith, hope and love?"

Let's take a look at some of the clanging cymbals in our lives today?

What are some of the clichés that we have forgotten to pay attention to?

How can we keep ourselves centered on God's love?

How can we redirect our energies when we find that we are operating without love?