

1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13. Everyone knows that part of scripture. Even people who never attend church other than to show up at weddings have heard 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13 because it seems to be the top choice to be read at Christian wedding ceremonies. And rightly so. 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13 is a powerful and inspirational bit of writing.

Even though we have not gathered today for a wedding, 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13 is perfect for Vestry Sunday because St. Paul did not write it with a bride and a groom in mind. It was directed instead at a church congregation. Not just any church congregation. The letter was intended specifically for the badly divided, confused, conflicted, quarrelling congregation at Corinth. Happily, we are none of those things. But Paul's instructions to the troubled Corinthians nevertheless needs to be taken to heart by all Christian congregations, including us, especially on Vestry Sunday.

Listen again to a few of the verses:

“If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, *but do not have love*, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but *do not have love*, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but *do not have love*, I gain nothing.”

This is great stuff, but there is more. Listen to these words and remember they were written as an instruction to church congregations like us: “Love is patient; love is kind; love *is not* envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It *does not* insist on its own way. It *is not* irritable or resentful. It *does not* rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the *greatest* of these is love.”

1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13 is an instruction for living together as a church. It is a guide for measuring how well we are living together as a congregation, and isn't that the whole point of holding an annual vestry meeting? Vestry Sunday is an occasion to look back at the year recently ended in order to look ahead into the new year and thereby measure the quality of our life together as a congregation.

How do we measure the quality, the success, or lack thereof, of a church congregation? Of this congregation of St. George's specifically?

Normally what we do, because it is the easiest way to measure or quantify the activities of a church, is count heads and count money. By those two measures, St. George's is doing okay. Not great, but okay, given the many obstacles that two years of covid pandemic constraints have placed in the way of our normal way of functioning as a church.

As you will see when we review our financial statement and proposed budget, our parish finances are stable, and under current circumstances that is a significant accomplishment. Your generosity in ensuring that our parish met and continues to meet its many financial obligations during these unusual times is an indisputable testament to your faithfulness and kindness.

As for counting heads at worship, our record is mixed. I know that for many of you I can count on one hand, and at most two hands, the number of times you have missed attending worship over the past year. That is a remarkable record of faithfulness and commitment that you have shown to your God and to one another. Your consistency attending worship is nothing short of inspirational to me

Unfortunately, that is only half the story, because a significant portion of our pre-pandemic congregation has not, for a variety of reasons, been able to attend worship regularly if at all. Our brief period of in-person worship between mid-September and mid-December was revealing. Holding two services – one on Zoom and one in-person – did not increase overall attendance. We merely maintained our average attendance. That is okay, for

now, but it does point to a challenge we will need to address when we return, God willing, to more normal conditions in the months ahead. Simply put, extra effort will have to go into gathering again our dispersed flock.

It is now clear that churches of all denominations in all places have been severely strained by the pandemic. Attendance at worship everywhere has plummeted and it is widely predicted that even after covid is largely behind us church attendance will not bounce back to anything approaching pre-pandemic levels. I have been a historian long enough to know that it is unwise to rely on predictions of irreversible trends, but there is no denying the challenges facing churches are huge. Some churches have already closed because of the pandemic; more will close in coming months and years.

As for us, let's celebrate that as the worst of this long and unprecedented pandemic begins to recede, we are fine. St. George's, Middlesex Centre, is not going to be one of the pandemic's victims. We have counted dollars and counted heads and we are okay. We are blessed. For now.

In fairness to any churches that are deemed failures because they have only a handful of active members and almost empty bank accounts, it needs to be said that some of those churches might be among God's greatest success stories, if the people holding those churches together love each other. Therein lies the challenge for the people of this congregation, and all congregations. Are we living up to another measure of success that has nothing to do with counting heads or dollars? St. Paul pointed to this measure in his letter to the Corinthians when he wrote that the first, last, and only requirement for a congregation is that it demonstrate love. We are a church. As members of a church we are called by St. Paul to a higher standard. If we do not, as a church, demonstrate love, then we are just a noisy gong, a clanging symbol.

For the past two years, since March 2020, the world has been living 'between times.' The time between the onset of the global pandemic and the still unknown end date is largely a time of waiting. Waiting for life, at church and elsewhere, to return to something approaching what we previously thought of as 'normal.' The relatively brief agenda for today's annual vestry meeting, absent any major new initiatives for the parish, reflects that we continue to wait.

A topic not mentioned in the vestry book, but one I have raised briefly with the parish council, is whether it might be prudent during this 'between time' of waiting to ask one another if there are advantages in exploring with the bishop opportunities for aligning St. George's with another congregation. For much of its long history St. George's has been part of a two-church and sometimes three-church parish. Our relatively recent status as a single congregation overseen by part-time rectors is the exception, and I am concerned about the long-term viability of St. George's unless it can again share resources with at least one other congregation. Perhaps that is a subject we should begin to discuss as a parish over the coming year.

There is one part of St. Paul's instruction to the congregation at Corinth that I am now going to ignore. He wrote that "love is not boastful or arrogant or rude." That poses something of a problem for me because I am proud of this little parish of ours and I like to boast about its people every now and again, without being "arrogant or rude."

And so, with apologies to St. Paul, permit to finish this report with some boasting.

Today I boast of all the members on our parish council who demonstrate time and again how to combine level-headed and intelligent decision-making on all parish matters, major and mundane, with a clear sense of Christian charity and conviction.

I boast of Janet and Randy, our wardens. All of us have benefitted this past year from their practical, creative, and unfailingly faithful approach to administering our parish, of which spearheading the major parish hall upgrades last summer is just one example. Randy and Janet are being joined by

Mary Ann as deputy warden. Mary Ann's hosting of our Zoom worship services for months on end, and her major role assisting Patsy organizing the St. John's Christmas gift project are worthy of my boasting.

I boast of Michele, our treasurer, who oversees our parish finances with the same care and commitment as if they were her own, and of Heather, who has stepped up to take care of the banking while Michele is in Mexico.

I boast of Kaywyn, our parish secretary, who ensures that parish communications are efficient, as well as serving as our newest Zoom guide.

I boast of Patsy, our deacon, who continues to minister to our parish and deanery in an array of ways both conventional, such as coordinating our prayer team, and unconventional, such as training herself as our website developer.

I boast of Sarah, our music director, who despite the constraints of covid has continued to bless our services with music, thereby creating, as she noted in her report to vestry, "community and joyful worship together, as we always have." I am confident that at some point during 2022 it will become safe for our choir to return, robe up, and enrich our worship once again. That will be a great day.

I boast of our readers and intercessors, who by leading us in prayers and proclaiming the holy scriptures week after week, ensure that our shared worship is appropriate, complete, and pleasing to God.

I boast of Janet and Patsy's creativity and enthusiasm teaching Children's Church via Zoom. By focusing on youngsters and their families, they are advancing one of our most important ministries.

I boast of Fred and John, our delegates to the diocesan synod. They are our informed and tangible connection to the Diocese of Huron and the many governance decisions it undertakes.

I boast of our many church cleaners and snow shovelers whose labours and shared pride in caring for their church also save our parish a great deal of money.

I boast of Bob, and Andy, and Jamie, who devote their considerable talents and valuable time overseeing the ongoing maintenance, both inside and out, of our beautiful but old church. They report that "our building is in excellent shape and should not require major attention in the near future." We rely on their guidance to make the best decisions concerning our property.

I boast of Liz, Carol and Elaine, whose dedicated service as our altar guild made certain that the proper liturgical paraments were always neatly in place, even during months when our church was closed to worshippers.

I boast of Heather and Michele who organize, and all the parishioners who have volunteered to serve meals at the St. John's meal program several times a year.

I boast of all who faithfully and without fanfare have performed other outreach ministries: Mary, who has maintained contact with Tangme and Melaku, the children our parish sponsors through Compassion; Canada; Bill and Hilda, who continue to lead a very effective and lucrative recycling campaign to support Camp Huron; Carol and Bob, who take the lead multiple times annually preparing frozen meals for the Ailsa Craig Food Bank,

and who also extend our parish's pastoral care with a card ministry to seniors or any others whose circumstances, whether in good or difficult times, need to be remembered.

On a strictly personal note, I boast of Cathie, my wife of 43 years, who is and always has been the very model of a minister's spouse, and now patiently permits me to juggle two jobs at this stage time in our lives when I really should be spending more time with her.

Finally, I boast of all of you who call St. George's your parish home, and who make it a priority in your life to worship together either in the church or on Zoom week after week, month after month, year after year. I boast of you, for giving of your time and talents and treasure in whatever measure you can spare to this congregation. Extraordinary people make St. George's an extraordinary church. It already was an extraordinary church the first time I joined it as rector thirty years ago this coming June. It remains an extraordinary parish today, because of you.

One final thing. I began by asking how we should measure the success of a church. According to Christian tradition, after Jesus had been crucified and then raised from the dead, he met Peter and the other disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee where they cooked some breakfast over a charcoal fire and had one of their final conversations. At that time, Jesus asked Peter, the disciple who not many days before had denied even knowing Jesus, "Do you love me?" Jesus did not ask Peter, "Do you know how to run a church?" He did not ask, "Are you a good parishioner?" Jesus asked him, "Do you love me?"

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