

## **Fully Known**

Psalm 89:1-2, 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

In our scripture reading for today, the apostle Paul is writing to the church at Corinth. Ancient Corinth was a city of wealth and commerce and low morals.

Paul had founded the church there a few years earlier and now he was hearing that there were quarrels among the Christians there.

The church at Corinth is like a small island in the midst of a sea of greed, debauchery, and selfishness.

The members are still keeping their day jobs in a competitive market, rubbing elbows with unethical, immoral, and depraved people every day, being exposed to scenes and language and desires that are not exactly Christian.

I don't know how we can relate to this,

but the fact is that they cannot possibly keep from being influenced by what they see and hear all around them. And they come to church after seeing people claiming to offer the best goods and services for the best prices, you've got to have this and you've got to have that,

and they start arguing over who's better, who's got the best spiritual gift, who's the best Christian, the one that the church just couldn't possibly get along without.

In a society where everyone is out for themselves, where competition is valued over cooperation, where the ends justify any means necessary, people pit themselves against one another. And this carries over into church. At least it did for the Corinthians.

And evidently part of the argument that they have been having is over the importance or the status of speaking in tongues.

Some people are saying that they're better Christians because they speak in tongues, and some people are feeling left out and resentful about this judgmental, superior attitude.

Now, today, most of us mainline United Methodists don't want the gift of tongues and probably wouldn't admit it to very many people if we had it, so it seems to us like a strange thing to fight over.

But we do bring with us into church whatever our culture tells us is important, and the American culture today is just as competitive, just as greed-driven, just as depraved as the culture was in Corinth so many years ago.

And on Sunday we bring into church the same values and attitudes that we have been immersed in all week, and we might look at each other as competitors or rivals.

We might feel superior because we sing better or because we have been asked to participate in worship services or because we never miss a Sunday or a committee meeting or because we brought more cans of soup for Souperbowl Sunday! Or we might feel jealous of the people who can say all that stuff.

Now, I want to make a rather audacious statement this morning. I want to suggest to you that the reason we fight and argue among ourselves at church is more than the competitiveness and other traits that we pick up from the world around us.

I believe that the arguing and the disagreements we have with one another are actually the result of the strain that we feel from trying very hard to hide our true selves from each other.

Out there, in the forty-hour, 50-hour, 60-hour-week, work-hard-for-your-money kind of world, we don't dare show others, our competitors, rivals, enemies, that we are hurt, tired, angry, burned out. They might take advantage of us if we did that.

And we carry that over onto Sunday morning worship and into the other work of the church. For one thing, we might be interacting with the same people here that we deal with away from church.

But even if we never see each other outside of church, we have that habit, that ingrained tension within ourselves that tells us it might be dangerous to be too open and honest with one another. If we spend the entire week wearing our game face, putting up a false front, it is not so easy to take it off when we get together, even if we want to.

Is it?

And even though we should be a safe place, a haven, a sanctuary, for one another, sometimes the reality is that it just doesn't work out that way. Because we are human, we hurt each other, we slip and say the wrong thing, take our own hurts and fears out on each other.

We come together to be the church, yet we cannot quite leave the values of the world, the habits of the world, the sins of the world behind. The people we should feel the safest with, the most at home with, our church family, are often the ones we hurt and are hurt by, the most.



Now, you may think I have gotten pretty far off-track from today's scripture. Or maybe you don't even remember what the scripture was! I see some of you checking your bulletins to remember. Think about it, did you really listen as it was being read? Or did your brain turn off as soon as you heard the first words, because you knew what was coming next?

I know what happens. I sat in the pew for enough years to know that a familiar passage is an opportunity to plan what's for lunch, or make a mental note of your grocery list, or think about the tv show you watched last night, maybe even to send a text message or two. You tune back in later, which is why so many preachers start with a joke. It's to help bring you back to listening.

Well, let me remind you of what Paul wrote----Love is long-suffering. Love is kind. Love is not jealous or rude or boastful. Love hopes all things, believes all things. Love never fails.

And all of that is familiar enough and we understand it even if we don't live it out very well sometimes.

But the line that jumped out at me when I started to prepare this sermon was this---“Then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.”

“Fully known”---that's a very scary thought to me. To think that someone could see behind the game face I put on every day, to see who I really am and **what** I really am---I don't much like that idea.

I find it much more comfortable to hide, to pretend, to seem stronger and more secure than I really am. And I don't think I'm alone in this.

Let's look at this scripture a little more. This famous passage about love is often recited or sung at weddings, but when we look at the context of Paul's writing, it is interesting to see two things that have nothing to do with marriage, but instead have to do with the relationships of people in a congregation.

Remember, the Corinthians have been fighting about spiritual gifts and their order of importance. So Paul has just finished writing about the church as the body of Christ, how not all are called to one task or another, not all are given the same gifts. And then he says that we are all called to “a still more excellent way,” the way of love.

He begins by pointing out that “speaking in the tongues of humans or even of angels”!! is nothing but a lot of noise unless the words are spoken with love.

He continues on through the list of spiritual gifts, saying that none of them are worth anything unless they are used with love. None of them are eternal. Only love is eternal.

And then comes this strange little part about mirrors and knowing in part and knowing fully and being fully known. What is this part doing here? Can't we just talk about love? What does it mean?

In three years of seminary, the most important thing I learned is how little I actually know. I have found out how "in part" I know, how incomplete my knowledge of God is.

God is infinite! How could anyone possibly know more than just a little teeny part of God? We understand God through our own limited knowledge, our own limited experience, something like looking through our own mirrors, with each distorted slightly differently.

And looking through a different mirror, you might know a completely different part of God than I know. And guess what? That might mean that we completely disagree about God and WE CAN BOTH BE RIGHT!! Someday we will see God more clearly, but for now, this is the way it is.

Knowing that God fully knows me is scary, but it makes sense. God, as my creator, of course has intimate knowledge of the deepest part of me. But this passage is talking about more than that.

Coming right after the explanation of the church being Christ's body, there is another connection here, a connection that involves our relationship with each other.

First Corinthians 13 is, after all, talking about love, and so the knowing fully and being fully known must have something to do with love. Paul is telling the Corinthians that what they are missing is the love that they, as Christians, ought to have for each other.

All of the fighting and comparisons and competitiveness have gotten in the way of the bond between them. It has short-circuited the love that comes from God, the love that IS God, and prevented it from flowing between the members of the church at Corinth.

Love among ourselves, of one part of the body of Christ for all of the others. Of caring for the whole body, not just the piece of it that we are. Of **knowing** the entire body of Christ, and still loving it, all of it.

Not just the best-looking, most famous parts. Not just the parts that get the most attention, not just the loudest ones. The whole body.



Those who do a lot of work and those who sit quietly. Those who are seen all the time and those who work behind the scenes. Preachers and pray-ers. Teachers and cleaners. Those who cook and those who eat. Choir members and Bible studiers. All of us, loving each other, needing each other, depending on each other, are the body of Christ.

Paul tells us that love never fails. Prophecy and tongues shall pass away. All of our earthly deeds and positions will pass away.

Someday even our faith will not be needed because we will see God face to face.

Someday our hope will be realized, and so it will no longer be hope but reality.

But love will last. Paul tells us that “The greatest of these is love,” because God is love. And the God who is love is eternal!

As God is love, so Christ is love, and so we, as the church, the body of Christ, can be love. Let us continue in the way of love, allowing our game faces to come off, allowing others to know us more fully,

feeling safe enough with each other to be our honest, real selves, allowing ourselves to be loved in the name of Christ, allowing the love of God to flow through us to others,

and seeing a glimpse of eternity.

Amen.