

Epiphany 4, January 31, 2016. Annual Meeting. I Cor. 13.

Good morning! It is a deep delight to be back with you this morning, and to be taking up this new role in our life together. I had a nice time away, but have been ready to be back with you, following God's mission from this place out into the world for what feels like a long time.

When the wardens and I decided on this Sunday, our Annual Meeting, as my first Sunday, it became inevitable that this sermon/rector's report would take on a little bit of an inaugural address kind of feel. That makes me a little uncomfortable, because none of our Sundays together should be about me, and I hope that my sermons in general will not be about me or even my noblest goals. We are all here for God, me included. But the inaugural thing is there, even if it is weird, and I think that we might as well nod to it. Indeed, I have some programs I'd like to push. But much more than pushing programs, the texts we read this morning give us a chance to establish a certain theological tone for our next few years together, and I think that we ought to take that opportunity.

We have just finished a really wild year. We said goodbye, sort of, to Paris and Michael after years of faithful leadership and strong friendship. We welcomed Sue and Harlie as deacon and verger, respectively, and several new members who are finding their ministries among us now, or will be soon. We squeezed a welcome and a goodbye to Fr. Bill into a period of just four months. The search committee led you through a process of discernment that led to the vestry calling me as the next rector. Every single staff position besides sexton and choirmaster changed occupant. And through it all, the ministries of this church just kept going.

On this Sunday last year, Laura Jordahl pitched the idea of a Service Corps, and it took shape and grew remarkably throughout the year. On Laura Kliewer's initiative, we hosted Bishop Joseph of Renk for an evening prayer service and deep conversation. The choir and acolytes and chalice bearers and ushers and altar guild continued to lead us in worship. With the Service Corps' help, we hosted a massive blanket drive run by Mary and Charlie Gearing. The youth groups continued to meet and grow and learn together under the leadership of six fantastic adult volunteers, while many of the members of the youth group led our children in beginning their exploration of their relationship with God. We baptized babies, received new Episcopalians, and sent loved ones on to glory, in the hope of the resurrection. And a million other things that I haven't listed, please don't take offense! Folks, the gospel work done in this past year is down entirely to you. So bravo!

And now, the program pitch: one of the many things that we learned in the transition is that we have room to grow in our formation activities. While the Bible Encounter and 9:00 AM Adult Forum continue in their strength, we do need more formation opportunities for folks. And so this Lent, we are launching a model of small group spiritual formation that I hope about 24 of you will participate in. The idea is that we ask for an intense commitment for a short period of time—that you agree to meet once a week for the last five weeks of Lent, with each group centered around a topic or activity. Paul Clark and Sue Youngblood are facilitating a group that will explore our experience of the liturgies and stories of Holy Week. Holy Week is the heart of the Christian year, and this group will explore questions like what on earth happened that week and why? And what happens in us when we join in these liturgies and live through these stories? Priscilla Nied, Rachel Bergstrom, and Jen Enriquez are facilitating a group

for knitters: both experts and beginners. I am not a knitter, but I have been told that amazing conversations happen when you're sitting in a circle blissfully or disastrously knitting away. So come learn and teach and talk. And finally, Laura Jordahl and Natalie Greene are leading an exploration of healing prayer—raising again that potent request from the disciples: Lord, teach us how to pray.

These groups are the big main thing, in addition to worship, that we are doing this Lent and I entreat you prayerfully to consider whether you have something to bring to one of these groups. And to sign up for one in the parish hall while getting your lunch.

But I mentioned the tone of our ministry together, and I'm rather afraid that I have set a tone where I am salesman and you are consumers, which is not at all the direction I want us to take. Let us scratch that one off the list of possible tones and repopulate the list with the texts from this morning. On the Sunday of the annual meeting, we cut the readings to two, from the usual three + a psalm, to make room for all of the business we have to do later. But I regret that this year, because the reading from Jeremiah that we cut is a hilarious option for ways for ministers to work together. It is the story of the calling of the prophet Jeremiah and the soon-to-be prophet goes through the usual rigmarole of declaring how he's unworthy and doesn't want the job and so on. And God responds by assuring Jeremiah that it's a good idea, because "I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant."

So, let us take as option one the model where I destroy, weed out, pull down, and overthrow. Option two comes from our gospel reading today, in which a preacher who has just gotten started comes back to his hometown, tells the people that his ministry isn't all about them, and they try to throw him over a cliff. So there's option two: the one where the preacher gets thrown over a cliff. Thankfully, there is also option three: Paul's letter to the church in Corinth, establishing a tough love as the basis for all ministry together.

Obviously I'll opt for the love chapter. This is one of the most popular passages in the bible, perhaps most frequently heard at weddings. But it is also peculiarly appropriate for reflecting on the relationships within a ministering community. Because Paul isn't really talking about a married couple, here. He is talking about a community of faith that is splitting at the seams, and how it should cohere together. The church at Corinth was a very gifted church. Paul cites all these spiritual gifts, such as prophesying and speaking in tongues and having great knowledge about religion and huge generosity because these were so prevalent at the Corinthian church. But what all these gifts lacked was a governing spirit of love, and so the church was in uproar as they competed with each other over spiritual abilities and maturity.

Paul makes it clear that all these abilities and talents and even gifts of the Spirit are good only insofar as they are guided by a foundation of love. The basis of the church, of any Christian community, is a love that is not primarily emotional affection, but a fierce commitment to God and the well-being of each other. The text preaches itself—Paul interprets what love does pretty clearly. And so rather than exegete it, I will only try to apply it. What does it look like for the foundation of our work together to be this tough, communal, hard-nosed and God-centered love?

First, if we base our life together on this love, we will hope and endure. In my mind, this means that we will have the hopeful courage to try new things, to take risks on behalf of where the Spirit is calling us. And if these new things don't work, if they fail,

then who we are as a community will be fine because our life together is not based on successful programming, but on a love that endures because it is rooted in the very being of God. Second, we will be a forgiving church—we will especially forgive each other, with patience, kindness, and a refusal of those great stumbling blocks of forgiveness: envy, boastfulness, arrogance, and rudeness. We will have to be a forgiving people, because I will need your forgiveness. I will make mistakes, I will be careless, I will at some point miss the cues that you are intending to be so clear. And it is just possible that some of you may hurt or disappoint me, as well. But if our life is based on a love that bears all things and rejoices in the truth, then we will have a foundation to fall back on, a way to recover, a basis to restore right relationship.

Third, we will have to continue a radical reorientation of what we value most. The spectacular gifts of the Corinthian church could not ensure its health. In fact, without love, those very spectacular gifts were tearing the church apart. What matters in a community trying to follow Jesus is not that we are the best at anything, but that our love for others is as sturdy and resilient as possible. Obviously we'll try to do things well and we'll strive for excellence; but success, numbers, and statistics are not our final rubric. Our final rubric is the love that drives our hope and faith forward.

And finally, if we're working from a basis of love, then we'll have to face outward. We will care for each other, love each other, forgive each other, but love rots into sentimentality if it isn't always not only deepening, but expanding. As we love each other, our love must spill out of these doors and out into our neighborhood. Love's not love if it isn't being shared, and we are not a loving community unless we are loving beyond our community.

Love is patient—thank you for your patience through the longest sermon I ever plan to give here. May God bless us and keep us and push us ever onward in this coming year. Amen.