

We don't need to look far to see fractured, divided community. We can see the fault lines unfold as we scroll through or watch the news, especially as this pandemic wears on with its numbered waves and its toll on communities across this planet. Not that those cracks have never not been. In our history as human beings we have moved between cooperation and conflict, between trust and fear, and between love and hate.

At the beginning of this pandemic, this novel coronavirus, as a global community we saw a more unified response to take care of one another as images of whole cities under quarantine, hospitals and staff overwhelmed with the influx of the sick, ICU's full and ventilators in short supply, and limited space to store the dead came to our screens. The fear of the virus itself was our common denominator: fear for our loved ones, fear for ourselves. We moved indoors. We isolated. We embraced technology to keep us connected, even as we saw its limitations. We adapted to a "new normal."

Now, as this pandemic wears on into two years, those cracks and lines seem larger. Anti-mask and lockdown protests have erupted from Turkey to Amsterdam to London, Ontario. Individual and community response to vaccines is causing division and sowing suspicion. Variants to the virus are helping those numbered waves along. And people are weary. People want normal. [I want normal. I drove by an elementary school on my way to work and I was delighted by the very normal sight and simple sight and sound of happy school children playing during recess.]

Fractured community was on the apostle Paul's mind when he wrote this letter to the church he planted in Corinth. It was specifically written to a divided Christian community.

The passage we heard this morning is most familiar to us in its use at weddings because of its beautiful poetry on love and what love looks like. However, Paul was writing to the church and writing precisely because that very love was lacking in the congregation at the time. In the first century, Corinth was a large urban centre in the Roman province of Achaia, the

capital city of that province. The city held a diverse population of various ethnicities and religious groups. This diversity was more than likely reflected in the congregation which Paul had established, though they did come together for a common meal and for common worship.

Paul writes to them out of concern for issues that are causing division among them. It seems that rival groups within the church sought to establish control through different leaders; some followed Apollos, others Cephas. There were those who were using the gifts of the Spirit to establish a spiritual hierarchy. They marginalized the congregation's disadvantaged members. All these practices led to division and conflict.

This morning, as we come together after so many months apart for many in-person activities within our church, our worship together hopes to reflect the reality of our lives as we move between lament and praise. This lament and praise is the reality of where we have lived in this pandemic. We have felt loss and grief, as individuals, as a congregation, and as a wider community. We lament the millions of dead and millions more sickened by this virus, the sacrifices made by essential workers on our behalf, the isolation we experienced from family and friends, the re-ordering of daily routines, the changes within our own congregation and community.

We also have lived in praise. We have been grateful for our own health and health of our families, for our friendships maintained through technologies, for systems of support and community, for our food supply, for vaccines that will stave off the worst of the virus' impact, for being able to gather once again.

Perhaps we don't move as quickly from lament and praise as we do in worship today, in an hour's span. At least, not quite as neatly. It's probably more up and down and back and forth, not a linear progression. More than likely, these days, we find ourselves sliding between lament and praise.

Wherever we are, this is where Paul's beautiful poetry on love speaks to us as individuals and as a community, as he spoke to the church in Corinth in

the first century. This has not changed: love is where we move. That agape, that unconditional love of which Paul writes, not only becomes the bridge in letter, unifying his themes, but it is the participatory reality out of which the community of faith is to live and move. This love is not a theory, it is to be practiced for the good of all. As author and theologian Richard Rohr writes, “For Paul, love is clearly the word by which he describes this participatory life... love is not something we do. It is done to us, and that we participate in. It’s something we fall into.” (Rohr, 2021)

We are invited to “fall into love” because we have first been loved, first been fully known and accepted, by the One who walked *for us* in those places and spaces we occupy too often - conflict, fear, and, yes, even hate. We have been invited to “fall into love” by Christ Jesus who walked *for us* to move us beyond those places and spaces - into cooperation, trust, and, yes, even love.

Love that bears, believes, endures, and hopes. *All things*. Love that knows us fully, fault lines, fears, and all. Love, the greatest of all gifts, steadfast and faithful, planted in us so that we too may mend the cracks.

Amen.