

Musings From the Stated Clerk

Don't we all think of February as the Love month? With Valentine's Day the centerpiece of February, the air (at least the advertising air) is full of teasers for cards, chocolates, roses, and other tokens of love to be purchased for our beloveds. Perhaps we need the warmth of the love theme to fight off the frostiness of January's chill.

And isn't it marvelous that the Revised Common Lectionary Committee provided us with a perfect scripture text to support the cultural "love is in the air" motif? As we look to the first Sunday of February we read the classic scriptural description of love's attributes in 1 Corinthians 13. This is one of the passages of Scripture that even people who have no familiarity with Christianity may know. I've seen it on posters, with the line where the author's name belongs saying, "unattributed."

I've discovered that this text is difficult to preach because to talk about it diminishes its beauty. But, fearlessly, here I go...

What the posters that quote 1 Corinthians 13 don't tell us is that this chapter was written to and for a Christian community that was having internal squabbles. Imagine that – church arguments!

Internal congregational arguments or bickering are all too common. The questions that come to me, in my work as stated clerk, nearly always arise out of disagreement. Apparently, no one needs Constitutional interpretation when things are going well in a congregation.

What Paul wrote to the church in Corinth was a behavioral code. 1 Corinthians 13 is not at all about how we feel, but about how we behave. It is not about chocolates and roses or the motives that prompt us to give them, but about what it takes to be together when we don't feel like it. So, you think the mission dreams your session has laid out are unrealistic? Be patient. You think the leaders in your church (or presbytery) are headed in the wrong direction? Be kind.

In many congregations this is the time of year new elders are being prepared and installed on sessions. They may be learning about our polity. "Old" elders may be brushing up their knowledge of the *Book of Order*. (I bet you were wondering how I was going to connect "the love chapter" with polity, weren't you? Be patient...) Our Constitution is a tool we use in our denomination, at all levels, to help us meet the injunction that "all things should be done decently and in order." (1 Corinthians 14:40) Far from being an obstacle to being and doing church the way we want to, our Constitution is a behavioral code that helps us. When used well, it guides us in our relationships with each other: between the various councils and between individuals and councils. It helps us maintain our integrity as individuals and councils by defining expectations and setting parameters. It helps us, in our ecclesiastical life, to be patient and kind.

Perhaps your beloved would not be touched to receive his or her own spiral bound edition of the current *Book of Order* for Valentine's Day (though I "love" mine!). Better stick to chocolates and roses for that. But in your church, remember that our Constitution helps us live together in loving ways.

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