

“Hold Fast to What Is Good”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
August 30, 2020

Romans 12: 9-21

Rochelle Stackhouse talks about a confirmation retreat that took place at her church: *The teenagers involved were asked to create a “covenant” that would govern their behavior toward one another during the course of the three-day event. The room erupted in laughter when one teen shouted, “No drama!” as the first suggestion. Other suggestions followed quickly: Do not talk when others are talking. Respect the leaders. Participate fully in activities. Soon the page was filled, and each teen came up to sign his or her name in agreement. Over the next few days both leaders and participants had occasion to remind the group of what they had signed as a corrective to behaviors outside the covenant’s boundaries. These verses in Paul’s letter to Christians in Rome would function brilliantly as a group covenant for any gathering of people of faith* (*Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2011: 14*).

Indeed, this litany of imperatives by Paul is even more timely for us, both as members of the Body of Christ, and as members of the human race. As we witness acts of violence and hatred which are perpetrated in the name of racism, we need to hear, “Hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good.” As we watch the weakest members of our society suffer from poverty, homelessness, and food insecurity, we need to hear, “Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.” As we struggle in our faith to believe that there can be hope amid so much despair, we need to hear, “Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.” As we harbor animosity toward those who are of a different race, political party, or theological perspective than ourselves, we need to hear, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

We are living through a time in our culture and our country when are tempted, even encouraged, to think first of ourselves at the expense of our neighbor. Now, more than ever, we need to be called back to the gospel message: “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good.”

After eleven chapters of laying out the revelation of God’s love in Jesus Christ, Paul moves in chapter twelve to how we are to live in the light of that love. We are “to present our bodies as a living sacrifice,” to be “transformed by the renewing of our minds, so we might discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect” (12:1-2).

And in the passage we have read this morning, Paul centers on the tension between good and evil, love and hate. Love is not meant to be skin-deep; it must permeate our whole selves. It must not stop at the surface when we are done with a project to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, or

house the homeless; it must penetrate our hearts and souls and minds, causing us to pray, to work, to lobby for the needs of the less-fortunate so that justice might prevail. Love must be genuine; for if it is, then good will prevail, and hate will not.

In encouraging his listeners, Paul then states ways to show how love must be genuine: outdo each other in honoring and helping one another, be ardent and strong in spirit, meet suffering with patience, help those who are in need, and welcome the stranger (12:10-13). These actions are the natural extension of love leading one's heart, and they reflect the same love God showed the world in the form of Jesus Christ his Son.

In the remainder of this passage, Paul is concerned over how the church will respond to those who persecute Christians. We read throughout Acts and the Epistles how those who affirmed their faith in Jesus Christ were often the objects of hate and persecution by those in authority. And Paul is careful to make a distinction between how Christians are to respond to those who commit evil against them.

While he states very clearly to "hate what is evil," he does not say repay evil with evil. Instead, Paul says, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them . . . Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God" (12:14,17,19). These words reflect the teachings of Jesus, especially in the Beatitudes, as he taught not to bring violence upon those who hate you, but to show love instead.

Paul then quotes directly Proverbs 25 when he says: "If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads" (12:20). To truly follow Jesus, you must be able to put away your feelings of revenge or retribution, and instead offer help and compassion to those who seek to hurt or work against you. No one said it was easy, but that is the message Paul – and Jesus – is trying to teach all of us.

Rochelle Stackhouse continues: *The type of love Paul describes here is energetic and profoundly optimistic, and rather countercultural in nature. When one considers the competitions most popular in our society, the competition to honor one another would not even make the list. Similarly, Paul's call to "hold fast to what is good" flies in the face of popular culture that calls us to cling to whatever we can get. While the sense of this phrase might imply clinging to something for fear of letting it go, one might also read this as "embrace what is good." Paul invites Christians to consider love and good to be the constant partners accompanying the Christian and providing context for both attitudes and actions . . .*

(What Paul is describing here is a "hermeneutic of generosity,") which means evaluating people's actions from an assumption that their motives are good even if, at first glance, one might suspect the opposite. To honor people as the apostle Paul exhorts, which includes attitudes and actions such as not being haughty, being hospitable to strangers, and taking thought for what is

noble, reflects an underlying hermeneutic of generosity toward those to whom one relates, both in and outside of the church. When presented with this hermeneutic, the teenagers on the retreat included this challenge in their covenant and had cause to refer to it as inevitable conflicts arose during the weekend.

Adopting a covenant including Paul's exhortations and a hermeneutic of generosity as core values has an impact on the growth of a Christian community and its work of evangelism. Unquestionably, when visitors attend worship for the first time in a congregation (rife) with conflict, they are unlikely to return. Growing churches often report that those who joined after a time of visiting did so because they found in the community a spirit that attracted them by its power of love and hospitality, not just in the way the members treated visitors, but also in the way they treated each other. Churches are practice fields for living the covenant of love Paul describes (ibid, 16-18).

This morning, we have the joy of welcoming six new disciples into the membership of John Knox Presbyterian Church. Monday evening, the Session met with Ian Lowe, Dave and Susan Lindgren, Don and Anne Charboneau, and Joann Morasco, and all shared with us what brought them to this congregation. Across the board, they explained how more than anything, they felt genuinely welcomed by those who were here, and they were touched by how they witnessed that hermeneutic of generosity being lived out in this community of faith.

As these six disciples are formally received into our community of faith today, perhaps this is an opportunity for all of us to reexamine why this place matters in our lives. Perhaps we, too, should consider how this litany of Paul's might serve as our covenant for discipleship in community, both within and outside the walls of the church.

When our sister or brother in Christ says something that causes our insides to boil, rather than being haughty and erecting a wall of silence, perhaps we are called to live peaceably with him or her through love seeking understanding. When fear begins to consume us - fear of getting sick, fear of a stranger of a different race, fear of losing hope - rather than retreating ever further into our silos of isolation, perhaps we are called to not lag in zeal, to be ardent in spirit, and to overcome evil with good. When we find ourselves focused solely on our needs, our security, our well-being, rather than loving ourselves and those who are easy to love, perhaps we are called to love one another with mutual affection, not repaying evil for evil, but blessing those who persecute us, so that we might live in harmony with one another.

When we are tempted to allow evil - in all its forms, both blatant and subtle - to have its way, rather than keeping silent, shouldn't our calling be to hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good, loving what is genuine in the eyes of God?

May we all live by our own covenant which is grounded in this litany of discipleship. Thanks be to God. Amen.