

Hold to The Good

Romans 12:9-21

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The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

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The Second Sunday of Ordinary Time / MLK Weekend

Next Sunday I will preach my final sermon here at The House of Hope. But there is no rule I could find that says I can't preach two final sermons. With time running out and opportunities to say what needs to be said, I am considering this sermon as my first, final sermon.

It has been an extraordinary privilege to preach on a weekly basis for the past 20+ years. There is a great deal of pressure and responsibility that comes with that, but the honor and satisfaction I have received in doing so, has been extremely rewarding and fulfilling to me personally.

It's a unique thing we do, as a community of faith—to identify and call out one essentially from our ranks, and entrust them with reading, studying and meditating on the Word of God, discerning the Spirit's leading in all of it, not just in terms of what the Word says, but what it is saying in light of current events and things unfolding in our lives, and to then share those insights and understandings with the whole community. Even if you don't have answers but are merely posing questions to be consider. I want you to know how seriously I have taken that charge and how much I will miss that.

As my retirement approaches, numerous people have said to me, "I'm going to miss your preaching," and I've wanted to respond, "Me too!" Not because I enjoy listening to myself talk, although my family might beg to differ, but because of the honor that has been mine of being charged with and compensated for the discipline of sacred study, and attempting to share a spoken word that reaches people, that touches people, that challenges, comforts, inspires and motivates people. It's an incredible thing.

And I have learned, through trial and error, and have shared with my preaching students, that good preaching is never about merely tearing something down, or naming injustice or calling out that which stands in opposition to the gospel. It may have to do that from time to time, but it cannot do that without also offering hope—the hope that ultimately comes from our faith.

And good preaching seeks to name something, or lift something up that is already in the heart or on the mind of the hearer. It names what the hearer already knows and feels, allowing them to feel less alone, and that perhaps, God has a word for them. That is what I have always sought to do and I thank you for the privilege you have given me over the last ten years to practice my craft and live out my vocational calling.

And so for my first last sermon, I chose to venture away from the Common Lectionary. There, the gospel text for today was from John's gospel. It's about Jesus calling the first disciples. Phillip, who is already on board finds Nathaniel and tells him that they have found the one Moses and the other prophets talked about, Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth. And Nathaniel responds, "Can anything good come from that "S...hole" Nazareth?" Now, he didn't actually call it an "S...hole," but he might as well have. His impressions of the city and its people were not hidden.

I made the decision to select a different text before our nation, in the eyes of the head-shaking world, heard our president, brand people from Haiti and El Salvador, and the continent of Africa with his racist, vulgar and, I'm convinced, ignorant comments. That he followed those comments up by questioning why we can't have more people from Norway coming to America, leaves no doubt about the racist attitudes he harbors.

I chose to preach from Romans 12, because there can be no clearer or eloquent expression of how Christian people should live their lives. How we should treat others and carry ourselves in the world. And I wanted to lift that up to you one last time.

Because in a day and age when people of faith, many of whom serve in congress, cannot even muster the courage or moral outrage to stand up and speak out against blatant racism, something is terribly wrong. They either do not understand the basic teachings of the Christ they claim as Savior and Lord, or they are choosing to ignore everything he taught and stood for when it comes to who are our neighbors, who are our brothers and sisters, how we are to treat the poor and marginalized, as well as the strangers within our gates.

You cannot possibly think that I'd be doing my job today if, after the week we have endured, and in a church where we are about to welcome Harry Belafonte, not only a great entertainer, but one of the real pioneers in the Civil Rights Movement, a member of Dr. King's inner circle—you can't possibly think that I'd be doing my job if I got up here today and didn't call out blatant and vulgar racism as it's been on display this past week, do you?

I don't know? Maybe you'd like nothing better than for me to just ignore it. Maybe you are coping by ignoring it? Well I wish I could. I wish I could just tune it out, but I can't. The work you called me to do with the book we call sacred about the person we call Lord, simply won't let me. Not ever, but especially not on this Martin Luther King Jr. weekend.

Look, you've got to understand, that I have a brown son. He's been pulled over while driving for no reason. I look into his face and no matter how hard I try to see it, he does not look like me. For the past ten years, your church has been served by a pastor with a mixed race family. Don't ever forget that.

And today, my out, married, lesbian daughter, with her seminary degree, is kneeling down and having hands laid on her head as she is being ordained as an elder, in fact right about now, in her Presbyterian church in Texas. Texas, of all places! It's something that would not have been possible just 6 years ago. But as a parent of children from minority populations that are frequently disparaged

and threatened, I worry at times about the safety of my children. And hate speech must never be tolerated.

The tone and tenor of our nation's discourse, at this moment, if that's what it is, is all wrong. That is if you read your Bibles and believe in the teachings of Jesus Christ and understand at a very basic level what faith asks of us. What it demands from us.

Jim Wallis, from Sojourners, asks what white American Christians will say in the face of hateful and dangerous racist language? What will we do when our brothers and sisters, made in the image of God, are being attacked? Wallis says this,

Silence is not morally or biblically allowed; and silence is complicity, according to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. My recommendation is that every MLK event in America, [tomorrow] make the move from commemoration to commitment. It's time for Christians, especially white American Christians, to speak out and step up as Christians to the kind of racial talk and actions that are now becoming normalized in the United States of America...(*Sojourners*, online statement).

I am going to read Paul's words once again, and as I do, I invite you to keep score for yourselves, both in terms of how you are doing, but also by assigning a grade to our country. Because while we are not a Christian nation, as some like to claim, as Christians, we should nonetheless desire that our country models behavior that is in keeping with what we claim to be our highest spiritual ideals, for all of God's children.

And so I ask, how are we doing at this particular moment in time? How are you doing?

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection, outdo one another in showing honor. Contribute to the needs of the saints, extend hospitality to strangers.

How are we doing so far?

Bless those who curse you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly...

How are we doing?

Do not claim to be wiser than you are.

How are we doing?

Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Never avenge yourselves, but

leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine [not yours] says the Lord."

Still keeping score?

No, if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink...do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

And there it is, a tidy summery of the Christian life as I understand it, as I have tried my best to proclaim it for the past 20+ years, and as we are called to live it. And its tone is so radically different than the tone we hear from virtually every other sector of our lives. Obviously, we have work to do. But when haven't we?

We have always had work to do, and the good news is this: in a world that has so many things wrong with it, there is also so much that is good in it, including the overwhelming majority of the people who share the planet with us...who are good, wherever it is they call home! It is also good news that as people of faith, and based on the loving, sacrificial life of our Lord Jesus Christ, we don't have to make it up. We don't to we have invent the wheel. And we certainly shouldn't be confused about what it is we are supposed to do.

We have been given a vision, not of a place or of a time in the sweet by and by, but of a way of life guiding us now, along our earthly way. This way of life often runs counter to the way that is more popular and that seems more expedient. But this different way offers real hope and real peace. It offers us the kind of peace frankly, that surpasses all understanding.

It appeals to our better, truer-selves. This way is loving and genuine; it is gracious and compassionate; it is hospitable and honorable; it is never arrogant and self-serving, and it goes out of its way to welcome the stranger. This way of life is all about the good—The Good.

People of God, despite the distractions and noise, there is so much that is right and good at work in this world. Believe it!

See the Good. Be the Good. Hold to the Good!

Amen.