



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**
Presbyterian (USA)

The Practice of Holding On

SCRIPTURE:
Romans 12:
9-21

March 17, 2024 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

It's a list. The Apostle Paul, in this letter to the Roman church, his last written letter, his longest written letter, his summary of his theology, is writing a list. He is coming to the close of his letter in this twelfth of 16 chapters.

In these weeks of Lent, we are exploring practices that strengthen our faith. We explored the practice of prayer. We explored the practice of fasting. We explored the practice of letting go of worry and anxiety. Last week with our guest preacher Dr. Scott Black Johnston, we explored the practice of empathy. Today we explore holding on.

The Apostle Paul starts off where the Apostle Paul always starts: Love. Remember he is the one who wrote in his letter to the Corinthians in chapter 13, "and in the end now these three abide: faith, hope, and love, and the greatest of these is...?" That's right. Love. Paul says, "Let love be genuine." Let it be real. Don't be fake about it. Be authentic.

"Hate what is evil." It's a strong term and Paul means it. We're supposed to hate some things. We hate evil in all its forms. We hate idolatry. We hate lying. We hate abusive behavior. We hate bullying. We hate the killing that happened in Israel and is happening now in Gaza. We hate the gang violence in Haiti.

"Hold fast to what is good. Love one another with mutual affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal. Be ardent in spirit. Serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope. Be patient in suffering. Persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints. Extend hospitality to strangers."

These five verses are directed to the community of believers—the church. This is how we are supposed to treat one another. Paul is keenly aware that this first century church, which is gaining converts every day, has to be a powerful witness. Yes, the church is growing but it feels fragile.

The next verses, 14-21, are not about how the church is to behave with itself but how the church is to behave with outsiders—non-Christians. Scholars estimate that Paul wrote this book of Romans in 56-57. Jesus was crucified in 33-34. When I turned 33 years old, a good friend of mine sent me a birthday card. On the cover it read: "Happy 33rd Birthday!" On the inside it read: "I hope you have a better year than Jesus did."

This is 20 years after Jesus' death. The Roman church, despite it being located in the capital of the empire or perhaps because it was located in the capital of the empire, was not the strongest of the first-century churches. The churches in Greece and Asia were far stronger. The Roman church was fragile. In Rome, everywhere you turned, there were temples dedicated to the many Roman gods. And Romans were famous for being devout. They would go to various temples every day. No wonder this new faith called "Christianity" was so fragile.

Paul says, "Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. 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 upon you, live peaceably with all."

Many scholars believe that when Emperor Nero comes to power in 54, in Rome, the persecution of Christians begins. Nero sees this rising faith and considers it a threat to his authority. The phrase that gets the Christians in trouble? Four words: Jesus Christ is Lord. There is only one who is Lord and it is not Jesus Christ. Nero is Lord.

So it is radical when Paul says, "Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse them. Do not

repay anyone evil for evil. Live peaceably with all. Never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God.” Then Paul quotes from Deuteronomy 32:35, the song of Moses, when he says, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay says the Lord.”

Instead, Paul says, “If your enemy is hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.”

So that’s an idiom, right? It comes from Proverbs 25:21-22. An idiom is a colorful phrase that makes no sense literally, but it means something. Paul is saying when you confront an enemy, be extra kind to them. In this way, you will make them ashamed of their behavior toward you.

Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good. Remember? Let love be genuine. Hate what is evil. Hold on to what is good. Hold on.

It was years ago. I was visiting Mom and Dad in Seattle. I must have been preaching somewhere so I stayed with them. It was the middle of the night and I was asleep upstairs in my old bedroom. I was awakened by yelling. It was coming from downstairs. It was not angry yelling but frantic yelling. I quickly went downstairs and in the middle of the living room was Dad and he was jumping up and down and yelling and making noises and Mom was there and I realized Dad was having a panic attack. Something I had never witnessed, and I started asking, “Dad, what’s wrong?” and I could hear Mom saying, “Dick you’re okay. You’re okay.” And then Dad said, “Hold on. Hold on.” And it took me a second to realize he wanted us to hold on to him.

So Mom and I wrapped our arms around him while he was still jumping around and I said, “Dad, breathe, breathe, we have you. We’re holding on to you.” And Mom was crying, Dad was crying and I was crying. And then by the grace of God, after what seemed like hours, I could feel him begin to calm down until we were all standing there in the middle of living room in the dark just breathing and Dad

kept saying, “Hold on. Hold on.”

After a while, he said it was okay to let go of him and he sat down on the couch between us. I asked him if this was the first time this had happened and he said, “no.” I asked, “How many times has this happened?” And Mom said this was the fourth time. I asked if they were all like this and Mom said no that this was the worst one so far. I had never seen Dad like this. It was frightening.

Eventually, we all went back to bed. Dad slept late the next morning because he was exhausted by the panic attack. He went to see his internist and he referred Dad to a psychiatrist. He checked Dad out and referred him to a therapist—an episcopal priest who had many pastors and priests as clients. He understood the pressures that many ministers carry. He helped tremendously and Dad did not have any more panic attacks.

Many years later after I had arrived here to be with you, Dad had a stroke, his second one. He had recovered from the first one well, but this one was harder. It left him without speech and at times Dad would feel like he was falling. His body would tense up and he would look frightened. I was visiting him in his room at the rehab center and when he would tense up and look scared, I would wrap my arms around him and tell him, “Dad, I am holding on to you.” And a few days later when I left him, to come back home, I hugged him and told him, “I am holding on to you. I am always holding on to you. I love you.” Those were the last words I spoke to him because he died from complications from that stroke. “I am holding on to you. I am always holding on to you.”

Let love be genuine. Hate what is evil. Hold fast to what is good.

So this week, as we prepare for Palm Sunday, hold on. Find something or someone that is good in your life and hold on. And as you hold on, know that Jesus Christ is holding on to you.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.