

Romans 12: 9 – 21
Hold Fast to What is Good
May 3, 2020
Rev. Wendy Vander Hart

May God still speak from these words of scripture and sermon.

Pastor Lauren and I could acknowledge upfront that we could spend the rest of the year with these twelve verses from Romans for the richness of teaching and the shaping of community therein. I am grateful for Elizabeth and Theo's collaboration in reading the scripture which slowed down our hearing of it. And while we could go deeper line by line, we are going to spend four weeks on this small verse – Hold fast to what is good.

As I hear the phrase "Hold fast" it conjures for me a grip on to something solid amid shifting seas or fiercely blowing winds. It almost sounds like a command – Hold Fast – akin to batten down the hatches. And this in turn suggests the word "resilience."

I know resilient people. Maybe you can think right now of someone you would characterize as resilient in your own life. I know resilient churches and suspect that for many congregations that resiliency is being tested in these days. From your stories I am hearing testimony to resiliency in this community of First UCC. Will this Covid-19 era become known as the resilient era? I wonder...

In the Fall of 2015, I received an enormous vocational gift – a whole week with clergy colleagues in Florida with a small purpose – to figure out the rest of my life. The conference, entitled Credo, is offered by the Pension Boards of the United Church of Christ and helps clergy look at four layers of wellness: vocational wellness, financial wellness, spiritual wellness and physical/psychological wellness. By the end of a spacious week full of learning, laughing, praying and healing we presented our Credo plans- our map to sustain ourselves in the middle of the demands of ministry. There were so many gifts from that week – many have stayed but one word that I had not paid much attention to before still guides me – that word is resilience.

The faculty who helped us go deeper with the image of resilience, Dr. Kathleen Greider¹ shared this definition of the word: Resilience is a characteristic of "organizations, communities, nations and individuals that are able to *maintain their core purpose* under the widest range of circumstances and ultimately can deal with disruption no matter what it looks like."²

I cannot do justice to the teaching on resilience in that session, but I do want to highlight some of my learning in this definition. As you will see in these words, a key to resilience, to holding fast, is knowing your core purpose. Other circles name it as knowing the "why" of your existence. Knowing "for what" we are resilient matters. Having a sense of God-given purpose helps us hold fast. Knowing our why, our core reason for being, the calling for which God has called and prepared us, grounds us when inevitable adversity arrives.

I know resilient people, maybe you do too. While Kathleen's presentation was powerful, it was also the context of my hearing that opened me wide to its wisdom. Two months before that conference, our family had just learned that the unrelenting glioblastoma with which my mom had been diagnosed

¹ Rev. Dr. Kathleen Greider retired Professor of Pastoral Psychology, Claremont Theological School, Claremont, CA

² Andrew Zolli, "Resilience" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DvuXKNz7_KA) 12

had reared its ugly head again. Because of the treatments she had already endured, there were not a lot of options for her. And frankly, any treatments for the brain with such an aggressive tumor left collateral damage that seemed worse than what it was combatting. Still my mom pressed forward wanting to gain all the time she could with us.

My Mom's last post on Facebook was Christmas Day 2015. Amidst a crowded living room of young adult grandchildren, faces glowing from their electronic devices, I found Mom on her electronic device, her Ipad. Looking over her shoulder I saw a draft of a post that needed some typing errors corrected. We worked on it together until she was satisfied. It captured her core purpose, her faith, as she expressed it in this way...

"May the baby Jesus find himself nestled deeply in all your hearts ready to leap out at a moment's notice as your joy at his presence becomes too much not to share.....may 2016 find you doing that with abandon!" Her faith was the source of her resilience. She lived 22 months past initial diagnosis and her holding fast to what is good is still an inspiration.

We do not recognize our resilience in the absence of trial, we recognize it in the thick of distress. Adversity is an essential part of the definition of resilience. We can mourn that this is so – why would it take a glioblastoma to test holding fast- yet we are also realistic that suffering somehow is mixed with delight, failures with rejoicing, loss with gain. Excrement happens, so does love. Hold fast to what is good.

I know resilient churches, maybe you do too. Old South Church in Boston is located at the finish line of the Boston Marathon. In 2013 two bombs went off during the marathon, one just four hundred feet away from the front door of the church. It was a horrible scene and shook the core of the congregation. You see Old South Church understands itself to be the blessing church. They recognize themselves to be vessels of the blessing God extends into the world. They bless the feet of the marathoners every year the day before the race. In fact, the crowds at that blessing of the runners service has exceeded their attendance on Easter. Old South also blesses backpacks at the start of school, hammers for mission trips, animals, babies – they say if it moves, we will bless it because that is who we are to our core.

The year after the marathon bombing the church showed their resilience when they began a project and invited other churches to join them in their mission of blessing. In 2014 over 7000 people joined them in knitting scarves in the marathon colors of blue and yellow to hand to runners and bless them for the race that year. The week before the race the church had people stationed outside of the church doors ready to offer a scarf to a runner and a blessing with laying on of hands to go with it. The post office was so overwhelmed with the blessing scarves that for weeks they dedicated one delivery truck just to drop off boxes of scarves to the church. They held fast to what is good and in the bombing face of evil the church's resilience blessed thousands of runners – many who had demonstrated their own resilience by returning and running the race again.

I know there is resilience at First UCC, maybe you do too. You have told me your individual stories of finding faith after fundamentalist up-bringsings, coming out of a life-threatening illness with renewed spiritual purpose, finding a breath of fresh air in permission-giving ministries, rising up from depression, divorce, vocational shifts, receiving acceptance as a non-traditional family.

You have also told me resilient corporate stories of First UCC making it through financial struggles, failed pastorates, changes in governance, loss of people. There is resilience yet to build and there are practices that can help us do that. I look forward to our engagement of the “why” of First UCC as part of this time of transition. Finding God’s core purpose for this ministry will be a vital undergirding of this congregation’s continued resilience.

And maybe as we engage this as a whole community, some of that finding core purpose will rub off on each one of us building individual resiliency. As we pray and talk, as we discover and uncover, as we discern and decide may we hold fast to what is good and take heart for the journey. Amen.