

**Hold Fast to What Is Good Sermon Series on Romans 12:9-21**

**May 10, 2020**

**First United Church of Christ Northfield**

**Lauren Baske Davis**

**Romans 12:9-21 (MSG) Read with art by First UCC Children on “holding fast to what is good”**

*Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle. Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality. Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath. Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy; share tears when they're down. Get along with each other; don't be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody. Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you've got it in you, get along with everybody. Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do. "I'll do the judging," says God. "I'll take care of it." Our Scriptures tell us that if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness. Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good.*

**Sermon**

As we saw in our scripture depiction today, the children and youth of our congregation created art for this Sunday, from the words of Romans 12, “hold fast to what is good.” We asked them to help our congregation better understand—to imagine something that is good that we can all relate to—or something that they specifically see as good and want to hold onto. As you saw, they created art around what they are appreciating and savoring, especially in this time.

Now I don't know about you, but I didn't see any images of devices, TVs, or big expensive toys. I saw nature, flowers, ice cream, sunshine, beloved pets, toys to love or play with, a cozy room, relationships with extended family members—even if that relationship has to be sustained by communicating through screens. I saw memories of cozy fires, playing with siblings, special spaces that bring peace, new blooms, and flowers after the rain. I saw that many of the things these children and youth are holding onto are the things that are beautiful, peaceful, nurturing and loving. Kids and youth can be the wisest teachers sometimes.

I wonder if three months ago, their answers would've been the same? Would our *adult* responses to that question have been the same three months ago? Maybe. Somehow when we slow down and look around for what is good, we find it. Not what's certain, not what's profitable, not what's entertaining, but what is good. And we hold onto to it! As people who are living in uncertainty, it is not just cute or optimistic to hold onto what is good. Holding onto love, to relationship, to the beauty of God in nature, to the goodness of the people, the goodness that God will not abandon in deepest need. All of those are not just nice, they're necessary.

Now, written thousands of years ago in many different times and places, the Bible records God saying that those same things are good, too—nature, relationships, food, sharing, play, moments of peace. You can find over 700 examples of all of those things being described as good. And in our time, when we have been forced to slow down, and ask what really is good, we find it. We find centering in it. And that helps us love ourselves and others better.

My husband, Jon, and I have taken some great trips, but in the course of our life together, we've taken one vacation that was both an adventure and an opportunity to slow

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down. We went to France about 12 years ago. And one day in Paris (even though it was amazing, because it was Paris), it was a particularly cold, rainy day. There were puddles everywhere. It was spring but it felt dark, as if it was consistently dusk all day. We spent the afternoon going into shops, to get out of the rain. And when we stepped into a honey shop, we opened the door to a song, blaring on full volume. It was this (Play :08 to 2:16 of Yo-Yo Ma playing Gabriel's Oboe from The Mission soundtrack by Ennio Morricone<sup>1</sup>). It was this particular version of Gabriel's Oboe from the movie The Mission. The shop owner didn't turn it down because we stepped inside the shop. He just kept it on full volume... and it felt like stepping into warm sunshine. I could feel the vibration of the music in my body, it was so loud. I thought it was funny at the time, but I wonder now if the shop owner was holding fast to what was good on a hard day. His holding fast to what was good, wasn't just for entertainment. It was for sustenance. And his blaring that song, was sustaining for others—for us—too.

And if we, a congregation in transition and in pandemic, are anything like the children who shared their art, or the man in the honey shop, we too, are holding onto what is good. Holding onto to what is good doesn't mean ignoring the realities of this time. We know this is a time of great suffering for people who are isolated, who are ill. For some living with for mental and physical illness. We know this is a time that reveals the stark disparities in our country where black and brown people are dying disproportionately not just from Covid because of the inequalities and racism embedded in our system. Or that there are people who are worried about losing their job, their health care, or their home. Or for people who are already in transition from strife like refugees and detainees. This is a great time of change and loss.

But the reason we cling to God's goodness, the reason we hold fast to what is good, is because we trust and hold hope in a God who is loving. And we also trust that this time holds the possibility for creating something new, something healthier as a global society. This time may also encourage us to do things differently.

When Pastor Wendy and I crafted this sermon series, "hold fast to what is good," we didn't do it to be the positivity police. Holding fast to what is good is not to deny the pain that exists around us. You see, we hold fast to what is good because that's what you do when things *aren't* good. And though we might be healthy and we might be grateful for what we have, things aren't good. And the reality is that a lot of things weren't good in our world before the Covid pandemic hit. Which is why when something is good, we need to hold fast to it. Because we've got to savor the things that are good, especially when other things aren't.

When Paul was writing his letter to the Romans, he wasn't excluding the realities of the day either. Paul wrote to the early Christian communities in Rome hoping to visit them, but on his way, while stopping in Jerusalem, he was arrested, imprisoned, and then instead of coming to Rome to visit, he was hauled there as a prisoner. Paul was aware of the struggles of life. And he was calling us to hold fast to what is good anyway, giving us specific ways to act in love for ourselves and others.

Friends, his message isn't what to do despite hardship, it's what to do from *within* hardship. While experiencing it. Holding fast to what is good gives us an imagination for a better world at the other end of whatever suffering we're experiencing.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPsigWLAqYA>

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I'd like to end with this. Sister Joan Chittister is a Benedictine theologian, author and speaker. She's written some feisty books and devotionals worth reading. One of my favorite pieces is her writing on spirituality for the long haul. In it, Chittister writes about how in the U.S., the first Women's Rights Convention was held in 1848. After that, it took 72 more years for women—white women—to get the right to vote. And it was hard won, even when they got that. "The women who led that fight," she says, "were loud, they went to jail, they were dismissed by 'good' women, they were denounced by ministers, they were force fed and tortured by police while in jail. They weren't 'nice.'" And, she adds, "they were your grandmothers....It's been a long, long haul, and it's not over yet." Then, she says, there are many worthy purposes we could devote our whole lives to doing. Environmental justice. Racial justice. Liberation, equality and humanity for the world.

But to do that work, and to get through the hard times, Chittister says, we've got to hold fast to what is good. Chittister writes, "if we are going to persevere for the long haul, we must not overdrive our souls. We must immerse ourselves in good music, good reading, great beauty and peace so that everything good in us can rise again, and lead us on beyond disappointment, beyond boredom, beyond criticism, beyond loss." Then, she writes, "then life has vision again; then going on seems both possible and necessary."<sup>2</sup>

Friends, we hold fast to what is good because we are living in difficult times. We have moments of sadness, loneliness, or frustration that bring us to tears. We know people who are sick or who have died alone. We know the injustices that existed before any of this current hardship started. And so, we hold fast to what is good to name that suffering and hardship. And we hold fast to what is good so that we may be nourished, fed, and sustained by the goodness of God's gifts in our everyday ordinary lives. Holding fast to what is good gives us what we need to be able to imagine the ways we can best love one another through this. It gives us what we need to imagine going beyond the struggles we are living with, for the sake of all.

I wonder what you are holding fast to now. I wonder how you are savoring it, appreciating it. And I hope you know that God is holding fast to you, too. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Joan Chittister, *Spirituality for the long haul*, posted July 13, 2015, edited from *A Monastery Almanac A Monastery Almanac* by Joan Chittister, accessed 9 May 2020  
<https://www.joanchittister.org/word-from-joan/7-13-2015/spirituality-long-haul>