

## **Holding to the Good** **Romans 12:9 – 13**

*Hold fast to what is good.*

These words are part of the benediction I heard every Sunday when I was a child. They came after that long prayer --the pastoral or intercessory prayer – which, when you are very young, seems to go on forever. It's the prayer where everyone got so quiet, and my stomach started to grumble, knowing that lunchtime was getting close. After we prayed, we'd sing the closing hymn and I was, in my mind, half way out the door and on my way to the dining room table.

But then would come these words as part of the benediction. And I would stop. And pay attention. And know something of the deep meaning of these words. I knew they were God's words to me. God was sending me, sending us all out into the world for a purpose. We were given something to do. Something to be. Something important. Something special. Something holy.

*Hold fast to what is good.*

Our commitment to hold fast to the good expresses itself in what we do together today in worship. We have just received two new members into this community of faith. They have expressed their desire to serve Jesus Christ as members of Christ's body, with and alongside the people of Catonsville Presbyterian Church. They promise to "catch the vision and dream the dream" of service, of justice, of transformational love.

I want to share a little bit more about them, and their decision to reaffirm their faith – to claim it, to hold it fast.

Rick Santos is someone our congregation knows well. In his role as CEO of IMA World Health, one of our mission partners, he has been part of the ministry of CPC for over a decade. In his sermon delivered in this sanctuary this past August, he talked of the work we've done together every Mother's Day weekend, assembling Safe Motherhood Kits in Fellowship Hall. Alongside people of the community, we've put together hundreds of those --- saving lives of women and their babies all around the world--- and we've done this with great love and great enthusiasm.

I was moved by Rick's words in his sermon, "Saying Yes and Saying No." He shared what it means to say "Yes" to God's will in one's life. He talked about his encounter with Robert McAfee Brown when he was a college student at Ghost Ranch: that saying yes means "taking a stand, doing what is right and just, no matter the situation." Later in his message, Rick said that saying yes is to commit one's self to "the idea that the church happens every day, not only on Sunday." We are connected with one another, he said. "When we say yes to each other," he said, "we say yes to Christ."

In his greeting before the sermon, Rick said, "I'm happy to continue to be part of your community today," and I am so grateful that he is part of the community in a new way this morning.

People do not make the decision to join a church, to reaffirm their faith in Jesus Christ --- they do not make this lightly. It is done after much discernment, much prayer, much reflection.

Beth Klingaman shared with the session something of what that process was like for her in her decision to unite in membership with CPC. She describes, rather brilliantly, of the pandemic creating a "freeze tag time." It caused her, as it did all of us, to think about what's important, to evaluate carefully life's questions and contradictions. In an email she wrote to me, she described it like this: "You never know when the leader's going to call out 'Freeze!' Then, you look around you and, if you're living your life with genuineness, what you're doing at the moment you had to freeze was all that really matters to you."

Find the good. Hold fast.

Beth has been part of the CPC community for a long time. She shared the memory of being 8 years old and working with her grandmother, Ann Klingaman, to sharpen all the pencils in the pews here in the sanctuary. A good memory. And also a good metaphor for service in the church, I would think.

In considering formal membership, Beth noted that this community of faith is – in my words, holding fast to what is good – particularly in its commitment to social justice. In her words, this community is a faithful expression of grace.

"As we go into the winter," she said, "I want to be formally connected with the community. This is the moment that feels right."

Welcoming Rick and Beth into this body of faith is a profound moment. And I hope, you, the congregation, as you heard them make their vows, that you heard those words also being asked of you:

*Will you be faithful? Will you fulfill your calling as a disciple of Jesus Christ?*

We are all asked, and we are all charged, to hold fast to what is good.

Friends, this truly is a day of joy. Not only have we received these saints, these beloved children of God into membership, but we are about to take part together in a glorious mystery. Together we will celebrate the Sacrament of Baptism, as we welcome Nathan, son of Beth Klingaman and Josh Semiatin. We're acknowledging him as a member of God's community, one who has already been claimed by an infinite grace.

In this sacred ritual of word and prayer, water and Spirit, you will have an important question asked of you: *Will you promise to nurture Nathan, to help him to know and love and follow Jesus Christ?*

This is a serious promise and *we* do not make it lightly. In it we affirm our own commitment to hold fast to the good. We promise to show Nathan how a Christian lives: with kindness and compassion, with a passion for justice. We promise to support the weak, to honor all people. To return no one evil for evil. To love our neighbor. To serve our Lord. We promise to hold to the good.

As we celebrate this sacrament, we remember our own baptism. And we know that each day we are called to live it out in the service of Jesus Christ our Lord, a life of service filled with challenge and with joy.

I have said this before: there is no question that we are living in difficult days. We are living amidst a pandemic, our nation is fraught with political divisiveness, we are claiming our responsibility to address racial and economic injustice. It is a time that calls us to reflect and discern our response to such challenges. I hope that, as you do, you hear these words of today's scripture – the words of our benediction -- the way I did as a child, the way I do even now. May they be God's words to you: you are being sent out for a purpose. We are given something to do. Something to be. Something important, something special, something holy.

Baptism is God's *Yes*. A *Yes* that tells us that nothing, not even death can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

So let us celebrate and give thanks that God is holding on to *us*.  
Let us commit ourselves to hold fast to one another, and commit ourselves to the  
good of God's world.

Hold fast to what is good. Hold fast.