

“Hold Fast”

Philippians 4:4-8; Colossians 3:12-17 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – October 27, 2024

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might hold fast to the heart of Christ and live with full compassion for all. In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen.

This sermon is going to feel more like a Bible study than a sermon for a bit here. Because there are some more words we need to read. If you haven't gotten your Bibles out yet, please go ahead and do so now. Those two readings we just heard sounded very similar, didn't they? They are both what scholars call “exhortations,” the parts of Paul's letters and the other epistles devoted to teaching the guiding values with which Christians should carry themselves. They are mostly relational, that is, aimed at reminding us how to behave toward one another and other people in general.

So before we dig in deeper, let's read a couple more. First of all, let's turn to First Thessalonians, chapter 5. You can find it on page 205. We will read verses 15-22. And now, let's read Romans, chapter 12, verses 9-21. It's on page 162. Okay, so that was four variations on similar ideas. Let's sit with them for a minute. Remember, you can go back to the first two as well, from Philippians and Colossians, on pages 198 and 201. What are the words or ideas that stuck out to you? Is there an exhortation that seems particularly difficult? Is there a “memory verse” you would like to grab hold of from any of these passages, something to carry with you as you go about your week?

What's interesting to me about these passages is how history is shifting my perspective on them. In previous times, they seemed to me like fairly generic good ideas, almost bland moralizing that people mostly nodded along to but didn't necessarily listen to that carefully. They seemed like universals, things that were true and good 2000 years ago that still serve as worthy guidelines for us today. They are a point of connection between us and the earliest Christians, because they are such broad principles. And those connections are important, right? Because most of the time, in order to read scripture responsibly, we need to keep in mind how very different our lives are from those of first-century Christians or any of the other people living so long ago. It's almost impossible for us to imagine what it was like to live under Roman occupation, in a time with only rudimentary technologies, when social structures were so much more rigid and determinative. How can we even begin to understand what it felt like to be a Christian, when confessing Christ could mean imprisonment, torture, or even execution?

For most of my life, it has seemed as though the stresses of the early Christians and the way they handled them probably weren't that relevant to my daily experiences. And let me be clear: I do not think any of us are headed for execution; this is not a sermon about Christians being persecuted. But I do not think it would be inaccurate to say that life has gotten more complicated in the past few years. Division is high; anxiety is soaring. The stakes of our big decisions are higher than we've been accustomed to. In many ways, it feels as though our society, nationally and globally, is teetering on the edge of ... something. Destruction? Revolution? Certainly something difficult, possibly

something ugly, and potentially something violent. It's not the same situation as the early Christians, but the stresses of their lives are starting to seem more relatable.

The New York Times is reporting today on a new poll showing that three quarters of Americans say that "democracy is under threat." It's not clear from that single statistic if they all believe the threat is coming from the same source or not, but clearly we are worried. I have friends on social media – smart, engaged, capable people – who are sharing with one another their high levels of anxiety, how they are struggling just to carry on their lives, because their worries about the election, the nation, their neighbors, the world are overwhelming them. People are worried about the election; they are worried about what will happen after the election. It is new, for the United States, to have to concern ourselves with whether we will have a peaceful transfer of power or not. That is not something we've had to worry about until recently. Here in a decidedly non-swing state, it's possible the effects of all this are a bit muted, but we know that there are plenty of people right here in East County who could easily be compelled toward violence, if things don't turn out the way they want.

So what is a Christian to do, in a world that has become so scary? First of all, we can do what we're doing right now: we can lay out our fears, together, here in the light of God, asking for solace and wisdom. Fears we refuse to face are fears that can sneak up from behind and capture our hearts while our minds remain unaware. Next thing we know, we're behaving in ways that are reactions to our anxieties, rather than expressions of our deepest convictions.

A few weeks ago, we gathered for our first Supper of Substance, to consider and discuss our concerns about the upcoming election. One of the questions we pondered was this: Imagine that the worst happens, and the things you're most worried about regarding the upcoming election come true. Which faith convictions or guiding values would you turn to most? How would your faith and your values inspire you to respond to what comes next?

And this is where we come back to our scripture readings. Because what are these exhortations but passionate reminders of the ideals we aim to live by? Compassion, forgiveness, thanksgiving, peace, solidarity, mutuality, kindness, humility, patience, hospitality, joy, honor, truth, love, love, love... We may not be able to fix our world with our votes, or even with our activism, but we can always, always continue to choose love. We can commit ourselves to choosing kindness and honesty and grace, no matter how bad things get.

Once we start to recognize how important it is to ground ourselves in our highest convictions, even and especially in difficult times like these, we can see how important these exhortations were for the Christians in Philippi and Colossae and Thessalonica and Rome. These are not mere generic moralizing; they are Exhortations! In times of difficulty, there is no more important message for us to share with one another than encouragement to remember to be people of love, people of grace and gratitude and humility, that is, followers of Jesus. Historian Heather Cox Richardson, in her "Letter to An American" yesterday was quoting extensively from a "War Talk" pamphlet sent to

members of the military during WWII; this one was aimed at helping the troops understand the dangers and operations of fascism. One line in particular stuck out to me: the propaganda of fascism, it said “insists it is smart and ‘realistic’ to be pitiless and violent.” No! No, no, no. As Christians, that is the sort of thing we must stand up and say No to. It is neither smart, nor realistic, nor patriotic, nor appropriate, nor decent, nor neighborly, and most definitely not Christian to be either pitiless or violent. Let us exhort one another to remember that our calling is love; our calling is kindness and mercy and peace and truth. “So far as it depends on you,” Paul said to the Romans, “live peaceably with all.” All we can do is what depends on us. We cannot magically call into being the world we desire. All we can do is carry ourselves within the world we have in the manner of Christ Jesus.

What are those deepest values that you will turn to if your worst fears come true? Where will they take you? We grew accustomed to a world where there were norms and mores that held society’s most violent impulses in check. That is not the world we live in anymore. How will we respond to our new reality? Faithfully, I hope.

Compassionately, courageously, honestly. The very fact that these letters full of exhortation have come down to us over the centuries is testament to the fact that humanity has been through times of upheaval and uncertainty, violence and chaos before. Can we find comfort in reminding one another that, at some level, in whatever way each of us makes sense of it, we are people who believe the world is in God’s hands? We practice hope, even when we find it difficult to believe in wholeheartedly.

We know that saying everything is in God's hands doesn't mean that bad things won't happen. God, as we have seen, is much less impressed by the power of death than we are, nor nearly as attached to security. And yet, we can continue to choose love. We can continue to choose mercy and kindness and humility. And even if hope is hard to see, for me, each time we choose love, each time we are brave enough to stand up and speak out for mercy and compassion and generosity of spirit, each of those moments is a testimony to the goodness and presence of God.

Let us exhort one another. Let us comfort one another. Let us join together and bear witness to the goodness of God, the compassion of Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit to bind us together across all divisions. Let us understand, deep in our souls, that empty platitudes will not meet the moment. Rather, let us call one another, soul to soul, to truly live the gospel – holding fast to the good news of mercy and justice and love and peace, with joy and thanksgiving. No matter what comes, let us follow Jesus. Hallelujah and Amen.