



## **Annual Meeting of the Congregation**

Pastor Andy CastroLang

February 25, 2018

### **Scripture (CEB):**

#### **Romans 12:9-21**

<sup>9</sup> Love should be shown without pretending. Hate evil, and hold on to what is good. <sup>10</sup> Love each other like the members of your family. Be the best at showing honor to each other. <sup>11</sup> Don't hesitate to be enthusiastic—be on fire in the Spirit as you serve the Lord! <sup>12</sup> Be happy in your hope, stand your ground when you're in trouble, and devote yourselves to prayer. <sup>13</sup> Contribute to the needs of God's people, and welcome strangers into your home. <sup>14</sup> Bless people who harass you—bless and don't curse them. <sup>15</sup> Be happy with those who are happy, and cry with those who are crying. <sup>16</sup> Consider everyone as equal, and don't think that you're better than anyone else. Instead, associate with people who have no status. Don't think that you're so smart. <sup>17</sup> Don't pay back anyone for their evil actions with evil actions, but show respect for what everyone else believes is good.

<sup>18</sup> If possible, to the best of your ability, live at peace with all people. <sup>19</sup> Don't try to get revenge for yourselves, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath. It is written, *Revenge belongs to me; I will pay it back, says the Lord.* <sup>20</sup> Instead, *If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink. By doing this, you will pile burning coals of fire upon his head.* <sup>21</sup> Don't be defeated by evil, but defeat evil with good.

### **Sermon:**

Gosh, there is so much in this little piece of Paul's letter to the church in Rome! In 2,000 years, more or less, we can still find ourselves striving to do as it is written in the letter.

A small church, stuck in the greatest city of the empire, in the midst of its decadence and decay, striving to be holy, be loving, be kind, do right. Weeping with those who weep, happy with those who are happy, treating all with kindness whether the powerful and great, or a

slave. Avoiding revenge and cruel vengeful thoughts, knowing that God is God and God is just, and injustice will be dealt with, though they may not see it in their lifetime. Nor are they to enact vengeance.

Paul writes all this; he lays high expectations on every church! He laid very high expectations on himself, so at least he was consistent.

But the churches of Jesus Christ, (some of them) do not shy away from this challenging text; we strive to live it!

When you look at this little booklet of reports, I beg you not to ignore it. It isn't just reporting old news of the year just past...it is sharing the good news of Jesus, to you and through you!

**“Love each other like the members of your family. Be the best at showing honor to each other.” Vs.10**

Yes, we strive to be the best kind of family for one another. It is certainly true that many of us have felt cruelty and coldness from our biological families, so it is imperative that we be the most loving, generous and respectful family of Jesus that we can be. Whether it is the welcome of the Deacons on Sunday, or the entire congregation's welcome of new members; our welcome to new visitors and old friends, of people exploring a more generous Christianity than they have ever seen before...we do indeed strive to show honor to every person, and love one another.

**Don't hesitate to be enthusiastic—be on fire in the Spirit as you serve the Lord! <sup>12</sup> Be happy in your hope, stand your ground when you're in trouble, and devote yourselves to prayer. Vs. 11, 12**

Now this is a favorite verse of mine. Enthusiasm is infectious; it builds up, it encourages, it fires ideas and possibilities, it grows hope!

If you look at the Moderators report, or the report from any other group, Education and Spiritual Growth, or Trustees, or Music and Arts...you will see and hear between the lines, the enthusiasm, the dedication, the passion that fires the work of these members! There is passion for good music and rich worship; there is passion for relevant teaching for adults and kids. There is commitment and love for children and teens, for a lively faith and a faith that serves and fights, and stands against hate! But our faith is not in our own abilities alone, though God gives generously to us through the gifts of all who gather here. Our faith is also in God! God's vision, God's design for the world and for this humble community

within that vision. Surely it is a vision of love and Spirit fire! Look around and you will see it. Read between the lines and you will hear it in the dedicated, determined voices of Trustees, Treasurer, Teachers, Deacons, Musicians...the generous service of so many souls.

**<sup>12</sup> Be happy in your hope, stand your ground when you're in trouble, and devote yourselves to prayer. <sup>13</sup> Contribute to the needs of God's people, and welcome strangers into your home.**

Over the many years that we have been together, our attitude towards prayer has changed quite a bit. We now know it is safe to speak up and share our prayer needs with one another in worship. It wasn't always that way!

Sometimes our time of prayer together in worship is long and full of our heartaches and our joys. But that is because we need one another's support in prayer, and we trust in God's loving presence when we are at prayer. Nor are we all words; as we sit in silence, there is prayer. As we laugh at the antics of our littlest ones during Children's Time, there is a prayer of gratitude. When we listen to heartfelt music, sing our songs together...then there is also the possibility of prayer. We believe in a loving, close, passionate God and a God who gives us courage and fire, hope and determination to stand our ground, to stand on our beliefs in prayer, and live our prayer in action.

So, we stand with the GLBTQI community, and the forgotten in our community, the outcast teenagers who need a home and a GRE, and the homeless women who need undergarments! We fight for better jobs, and sick leave for workers in our city. We protest against bigotry and misogyny and oppression. We see the face of Christ, and we feel the passion of God, in these labors. And though our lives are short, and the pain of the world is great...we trust in the vision of God and the promise of Jesus...for a world healed and creation restored to beauty. Jesus called it the "kingdom of God."

***It is written, *Revenge belongs to me; I will pay it back, says the Lord.* <sup>20</sup> Instead, *If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink. By doing this, you will pile burning coals of fire upon his head.* Vs. 19-20***

So, Paul quotes from the book of Deuteronomy and from Proverbs, about the limits of revenge warfare and feuding. We do lots of vengeful things still, and there are long, mean fights in society and in the church which go for generations. It is, to put it bluntly, not our job to be vengeful. We do not know well enough, we do not see clearly enough, to be the judge and jury on others. We must trust that the God of all Creation knows beyond our knowing.

And instead, we are bidden to choose compassion. Feed your enemy. Give them a drink of water. Do not kill, might be another way of putting it.

You might even shame that enemy of yours...those “burning coals of fire” might be the shame that is felt when cruelty is met with compassion. Not too long ago, when the “Spokane Street Preachers” were shouting at us outside on a Sunday, trying to intimidate our friends and frighten our children; one of our members went out with hot cups of coffee, with cream and sugar, for them. They recoiled from him. But he offered them coffee anyway.

And we cannot know if burning coals of shame were lit in their hearts. But we also are warned, that we cannot revenge ourselves against them. Only show them sympathy, and protect our children and members with walls of love and acceptance and welcome.

***Don't be defeated by evil, but defeat evil with good. Vs. 21***

Good. Look at the messages inside this little document. Good. Look around you at the people in this place. Good. As we strive to live in dignity and respect. As we strive to care for the people who are in this building, and those who will never come to this building...we are striving to be good, share good, love good as God is Good.

Who are we? We are a church community following Jesus, our Christ, in words and deeds of love and hope and welcome.

Why are we here? Because we believe in God's vision for the world; of peace and justice, of healing and well-being, of beauty and of joy. We know God wants us to help create this world.

What can we offer? Westminster strives to be a unique witness in this city; witnessing to a Christianity that is not judgmental, or patriarchal, not dominating or exclusive. We are a downtown church with doors open to people of every place, every need, every part of our city. We have been here since the beginning and we bring the message of love, hope and welcome in the model of Jesus, to this city.

Let's fight for this, let's work for this; the chance to be here, stay here, serve here. 2018 is here.

Let us live into it with passion, with hope, with one another.

Amen.