**Homily for SEPTEMBER 3, 2023 Romans 12:9-21 “Quite a Job Description!”**

*Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

His name was Steve…a big, kinda goofy Southerner transplanted into the Silicon Valley and a then-prominent member of my little church in Aptos twenty-two years ago. Affable, gentle, you would never know he was easily among the smartest people on the planet. And so it was that I asked him one day, while he was at church, to help me with a little computer problem. Well, it was worse than asking your grandkids; he said, oh sure, first you open this, and then move this over here, and select your parameters from this menu in this corner…there you go, all set! Easy as that! And he sure made it *look* easy, but it was about clear as mud to me. He gave me advice that was nearly impossible to follow. I frequently think of Steve when we encounter texts from St. Paul, and especially the kind of text we have heard today. Do this, live *this* way, don’t live *that* way, it just flows off his pen like keystrokes off a computer genius’s fingertips, and it sounds so easy. It is good advice, brilliant sometimes, but just really hard to put into practice, really challenging to actually *do it*. I find that narrowing it down, winnowing it down a bit, makes things better…and so I am choosing, this time around anyway, to focus our time on three aspects of this astonishing Christian job description: being genuine, being ardent, and living harmoniously.

His words sound so reverent, so spiritual: *Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good.* And I am sure that they are possible, and surely desirable, but it gets complicated. Love should be genuine, of course…but what about the many times in the life of parent or partner or sibling when we must love even when we are angry, frustrated, or betrayed? We strive to make love our dominant response, because if we responded *authentically* to every situation, things would get too messy too fast. Or what about hating what is evil? Good advice, but I haven’t yet found the pure strain of evil people or evil actions that Paul seemed to think was the norm, it seems there is a little evil in most everything and everyone. Surely we can’t hate everything and everyone, just to cover our bases? Holding fast to what is good sounds great too, until we discover that the quality of a thing can change over time, and what *was* good may no longer be so. Real twenty-first century living seems to require a much deeper set of actions than Paul would admit or allow.

Here’s a challenging one: *Bless those who persecute you; bless, and do not curse them.* I gotta be honest, I have been a pastor for thirty - five years, and a Christian for fifty - five, and this *still* does not come naturally to me. When some criminal type breaks into our church, or vandalizes the parsonage, many actions come to mind that might pass between me and them, but blessing usually does not head the list! When I come in, day after week after month after year to levels of disgusting filth and squalor left behind by our homeless ‘guests’, I feel that we, Trinity, are being disrespected and persecuted and do not automatically respond with blessing. I understand his larger point, that to have a peaceful world we must maintain peace within ourselves and our relationships, but when the peace is broken, often violently, is the advice broken, too? How can we hold up our end of the bargain from just the one side? He goes on: *Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.* I am so glad he dropped that last bit into the mix, because it was feeling more and more unlikely with the passing of each new letter. I think the center of the meat is right here: So far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. We cannot control the actions or the choices of others. We can hope to influence them by our goodly ways and shining example, but ultimately, we can only do and be for ourselves. The song says let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me…surely, there is no other way but that. But being peaceful is a whole lot more possible and plausible when we are among other peaceful folks, isn’t it? This is a very challenging job description!

My strategy is to zealously embrace the ‘living in harmony’ advice offered by St. Paul. For we live in a world where the striving to be first-chair violin is huge, but the willingness to play second chair is often lacking. But it was the great Leonard Bernstein who, when asked what instrument he would most prefer to play, unhesitatingly said, “Second violin. Because without them, you have no harmony”. And harmony is really where it is at, friends…it has been several centuries now since we graduated from a single, chanted melodic line, and started using consonance and dissonance to create musical expression and emotion. In terms of living harmoniously, we need to remember that not all harmony is harmonious; some of it is intentionally dissonant, making the resolution all the sweeter. And as we live with others, we can intentionally let them take the lead, and harmonize with them, creating a much richer tapestry of sound and soul.

Paul’s writings are full of this kind of broad advice, so calmly given. How broad am I talking? Well, you know I am a bit of a quilter, and I cannot tell you how much emphasis is placed, in the pattern books, on color choice, proper cutting and sewing and pressing and trimming, and after dozens of detailed steps you get the top all pretty and perfect, and the final direction – I am not making this up – is now, layer, baste, quilt, put your binding on, and enjoy! But the stuff in that single sentence takes weeks or months, y’see. How easy it is to give others direction and advice, even *great* direction and advice, but the following of it needs to be injected with a healthy dose of reality and commonsense, too.

The other thing we need, if we are going to attempt these glib but truthful choices in our lives, is patience with others and especially with ourselves. Living into the directions of Christ, even the ones paraphrased by Paul, is often like swimming upstream. Progress will be laborious, and it will be tiring, but if upstream is where you gotta go, then that is what you gotta do. My dad used to say, the only place success comes before sweat is in the dictionary, and he was right. The advice is easy; the living of it, not so much. But the point all but lost in our instant gratification world would not have been lost on Paul, and should not be lost on us: *the right thing and the easy thing are rarely the same thing*. Until we are all seeking good, all swimming in roughly the same direction, conflict and confusion will be part of the deal. The *intentional* creation of conflict and confusion will be part of the deal. The sowing of disinformation, the fanning of economic flames, the exploiting of existing tensions, all part of the deal.

And that is why we worship, friends, especially why we sometimes take these very quiet, gentle moments away, to be refreshed for this lifelong journey into peacefulness and blessing. We step away from the fray, and look again at the goal.

If you read the Gospels you will notice that Jesus did this all the time. And so Paul’s advice, Jesus’ commands and example, they are not impossible or unrealistic, but they also are not easy or commonly valued. Those of us who are making this kind of life need to include plenty of rest and restoration along the way. This parallels our annual celebration of labor this weekend, and the balancing re-creation it encourages. For this race of life, my friends, is not a sprint, and the prize does not go to the fastest. In a jackrabbit world, full of fits and starts, hopping this way and that, we Christians are more like the tortoises. And we know how that worked out, right? Amen.