

**“How to Save Civilization”**  
**Preached on Sunday, Nov. 16, 2025**  
**By the Rev. Martin Copenhaver**  
**at the First Congregational Church,**  
**Camden, Maine**

**Romans 12: 9-21**

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 affliction; persevere in prayer.

Contribute to the needs of the saints; pursue 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 arrogant, 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.”  
Instead, “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.

**John 20: 1-10**

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.”

Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in.

Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’s head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed, for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.

Then the disciples returned to their homes.



May I start by making a confession? I have a confession to make. I find it hard to be a person of faith these days. That’s my confession, and it pains me to offer it. Lately I’m finding it more difficult to be a person of faith. It’s not that I doubt the existence of God or the love of Christ. I have not ceased to rely on God’s grace. My relationship with God is still the wellspring from which everything else in my life flows. That has not changed. And yet, I find it hard to be a person of faith these days. After all, when you survey all the horrific things that are being done these days by people who claim to act in God’s name, it’s difficult to be a person of faith, isn’t it? I have no quarrel with God, but I do have a quarrel with so many who represent themselves as God’s friends. Religious fanaticism may always be wrong, but in our time, it is also dangerous.

According to our gospel reading this morning, when Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb where Jesus had been laid. Upon finding the tomb empty, Mary cries out, “They have taken away my Lord!” Mary believes that Jesus has been stolen, hijacked, snatched away by hostile figures. I feel that way a lot these days. The public face of Christianity in America today, the way in which Christianity has been used by political interests to consolidate their power, the way our faith has been used to justify violence and intolerance, makes me want to cry out, with Mary, “They have taken away my Lord!” How else are we to explain that the faith of Jesus, a penniless rabbi who taught that we are to love our enemies, welcome the stranger, love the outcast, who blessed peacemakers and said that these are the children of God, has come to be declared as pro-rich, pro-war, pro-torture, pro-intolerance, pro-American? So, I find myself wanting to say, “They have taken away my Lord.”

We live in such a fractious and fracture time. The challenge to cherished institutions, the mistreatment of immigrants and the marginalized, the divisiveness, the cruelty. It seems like every day there is something new and disturbing. Dorothy Parker—the caustic writer in the last century who was famous for her razor-edged wit—would answer her phone with this greeting: “What fresh hell is this?” That’s very close to what I say when I open my computer in the morning and start to read the news: “What fresh hell is this?”

I am not going to catalogue all the outrages of this time. We don’t have enough time for that. A couple of years ago, I was in a protest march with someone who carried a sign that said: “Too many issues for one sign.” Well, there are too many issues for one sermon, also.

Suffice to say, so many in our time, to use Jonathan Swift’s acid phrase, have “just enough religion to make us hate one another, but not enough to make us love one another.” The fruits of religious faith seem to be such a bitter harvest these days. So, it’s hard to be a person of faith these days. I find myself sympathizing with the increasing number of people who have concluded, “If this is what religious faith looks like, I want no part of it.” I sympathize with people like that—but I am not one of them. I am not one of them because I know that religious faith is so much more than what the extremists would have us believe.

I do not believe that this time requires that we walk away from our religious beliefs, or even to diminish their importance. Rather, I believe this is a time that requires that we draw upon the best of our religious traditions. We need enough religion to make us love one another. Religion does have great power, but when something has the power to do great good, it also has the power to do great harm. Religious faith is a bit like nitroglycerin—it can be used to blow up a bridge or it can be used to heal a human heart.

There is an urgent need for people of faith who can recognize God’s image in the person who is not in their own image. And who will be capable of that in our time? Who will be able to recognize God’s image in the one who is not in my own image?

It will not be the religious extremists, who are ready to exclude anyone who does not agree with them.

And the secularists will not be of much help in this new era, either. Those who hold thoroughly secular worldviews do not appreciate religious conviction and so are strangely ill-equipped to deal with many of the central issues of our day, so many of which have important religious dimensions. People who dismiss religious faith often end up dismissing people of faith. They lack the vocabulary and the points of reference to enter into many of the most important conversations that are taking place today, within our culture and across cultures. Besides, secular people do not benefit from the best of great religious traditions, all of which emphasize the importance of receiving strangers.

Much the same could be said of those who hold their religious convictions lightly. This is not their time, either, because they are not particularly equipped to relate to those whose faith is central to their very existence. No, today something more is required.

This is a time for people who have deep religious commitments and thus can appreciate the commitments of others. What is urgently needed in our complex, interconnected world are people of faith who, the more deeply they hold their own religious commitments, the more room they make for those not like them.

So, what I want to do in the time we have remaining here is to consider the role of the church in such a time. Will you join me in doing that?

Let me begin by saying that we may be horrified by what we are witnessing in our world and in our country these days—but we should not be surprised. Caesar is once again acting like Caesar. And, in response, the church needs to act like the church. That means, in part, laying claim to our prophetic tradition, speaking truth to power, giving voice to the voiceless. This is not a time for timidity. It is a time to speak up for the last, the least, and the lost and to speak out loudly enough that Caesar can hear.

There is an old rabbinical story about a village in which a crop of grain became contaminated. Anyone who would eat some of the contaminated grain would become insane—a horrifying prospect. So, the villagers faced a deadly dilemma. They could refrain from eating the contaminated grain and starve to death, or they could eat the grain and go crazy. There was, however, one small portion of uncontaminated grain—not nearly enough to feed the whole village, but enough to sustain a few people. Together they decided they would give the uncontaminated grain to a few villagers and ask them to eat only that—the uncontaminated, nourishing grain. They thought that was the only way to save the whole village. Why? Because the rest of the village needed someone who could tell them they are crazy.

Church, in the gospel we have been given the good grain. We have been entrusted with it. Through the lens of the gospel, we can see that the rest of the world is kind of crazy and it is up to us to say so.

A number of years ago now I was with a group of United Church of Christ pastors in which Jeremiah Wright described the role of worship in his African American congregation in the South Side of Chicago, where he was a pastor. He said something like this, “My people spend every day, all week, being told in a variety of ways that they are of no value. Their lives are of no account. And I have two hours on Sunday morning, just two hours to tell them that what they have heard the rest of the week is a lie. Their lives are precious. They are the beloved of God.” We might also put it this way: in those two hours, his congregation is invited to feast on the good grain and live in the assurance that what they hear the rest of the week is contaminated. It’s crazy. It’s a lie.

“Let love be genuine,” wrote Paul to the Romans, living in the shadow of Caesar’s dark ways. “Extend hospitality to strangers,” he wrote. “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them... Live in harmony with one another... 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.” We don’t hear much of that lately, do we?

From reading Paul’s description here of what it means to live like a Christian, what such a life looks like, it seems clear that it is not enough to decry Caesar’s ways. It is also important to describe and commend and live out an alternative reality, grounded in and shaped by the love of God.

Beyond laying claim to our prophetic tradition, beyond pleading with Caesar to be a bit more just, it is incumbent on us to provide an alternative to Caesar's ways—an alternative narrative, an alternative way of being in the world, an alternative community. “Do not be conformed to this world,” is the way Paul put it. “Provide an alternative to what you see in the world,” we might want to add.

Recently I re-read the book, *How the Irish Saved Civilization* by Thomas Cahill. Are you familiar with that book? If not, I commend it to you. It was written 30 years ago, but there are ways in which it seems to have been written for this time, for this moment.

Here is what Cahill means when he says the Irish saved civilization. In the roughly four centuries between the fall of Rome and the Middle Ages—in the period sometimes described as the Dark Ages—learning, scholarship, and other cultural achievements virtually disappeared from the European continent. Various hordes of marauding people left ruin and chaos in their wake. First there were the Anglo-Saxons, then the Normans, and the Vikings. They were not literate people, so they did not know the value of the written word. They would burn books for fuel. During those dark and fateful centuries, the very survival of civilization was imperiled.

At the same time, dotting the landscape of Ireland, there were abbeys where communities of monks kept the traditions. They sheltered the books and painstakingly copied them. And not just the Bible, but also Plato and Cicero, preserving the treasure trove of western civilization.

They kept the tradition alive until the world was ready to hear the gospel again. I think of those abbeys—and the monks who lived there—as the hurricane lamp that keeps the flame from going out. Or, like the hand that cups the flame amidst the winds of change.

But more: They not only preserved the tradition; in certain ways they advanced it. Over time, in the process of copying all of those manuscripts, they began to build on the alphabet, to write letters differently. They were inspired to heights of artistry. Think of the Book Kells, that stunningly beautiful illuminated manuscript of the four gospels, which was a product of an abbey. And they found ways to live in community in ways we might describe as progressive. For instance, they did not adhere to strict divisions between clergy and laity.

In these and other ways the abbeys preserved the traditions, and advanced them. They valued what had been entrusted to them. They kept the faith. And, according to Cahill, in so doing, they saved civilization.

I think you probably know where I am headed with this. I believe we have a similar role to play, as the abbeys did, in our own dark time. No analogy is perfect. And if we push this analogy too far, its flaws will be evident. We are not threatened by marauding Barbarians who are burning books. Nevertheless, I do think the faith that we proclaim is under siege in our time. The treasures of our tradition are threatened. And the world needs living, breathing, vital congregations to preserve the tradition and to advance it, in a dark time, most urgently in a dark time.

And I'm going to go a step further. In our time I think there is an acute need for our kind of church. How would I describe what I mean by “our kind of church.” I don't use the word “liberal” because it sounds like politics. I don't like the word “progressive” because I'm not sure I believe in progress. I prefer the word “open” to describe our kind of church. Open. I mean that in at least two ways.

We are open to God's ongoing revelation. The Bible may be fixed, but our understanding of it can change over time. John Robinson, the pastor to the Pilgrims, sent them on their way to the new world

with this reminder: “There is yet more light and truth to break forth from God’s Holy Word.” In the United Church Christ we give this insight a more contemporary wording when we say, “God is still speaking.” So, we are open in that way, open not only to what our scripture says God did, but also open to what God may be saying and doing in our time.

I also think we can be described as “open” in the sense that we are open to others who are different from us. We welcome the stranger and are open to being changed by the encounter. We are open to people of different religions. We don’t draw a bright red line to demarcate who is in and who is out. Instead, we have a strong center, but porous boundaries. That is, we have a strong center in the gospel of Jesus Christ, but we recognize that we all stand in different places in relationship to that center. That is, we are open to other people’s experiences and convictions.

Let me say again: I think the world needs—is in desperate need of—open churches that keep the faith in these dark times. We have a vital role to play, much as the abbeys did, in a previous dark time.

William Muehl, who taught preaching for four decades at Yale Divinity School, used to remind us: “Always remember that many of the people you address on a Sunday morning almost decided not to come. Do you think that’s true? May I have a show of hands?”

Well, let’s imagine that is true for at least a few of us. You almost decided not to come and now the preacher is saying that this church has a role to play in saving civilization?

Exactly.