Message: "God's Recipe for Living"
Scripture: Romans 12:9-21

> 9Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; 10love one another with mutual affection;
> outdo one another in showing honor. 11Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. 12Rejoice in
> hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. 13Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend
> hospitality to strangers. 14Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15Rejoice with those
> who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 16Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but
> associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. 17Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take
> thought for what is noble in the sight of all. 18If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably
> with all. 19Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written,
> "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." 20No, "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." 21Do not
> be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

As many of you know, my wife and purchased a small camper trailer this past spring. It's new to us but not new to the world; it's 30 years old, which means it has issues that come with old age, issues the former owners didn't know about or failed to tell us about but which we are discovering now.

For example, on the second trip with our camper, just two nights at Lee Creek campground up near Lolo pass, we made a rather unpleasant discovery; it turned out that the black water tank of the bathroom leaked; it leaked badly. I won't go into the details but let it suffice to be said that you don't want a black water tank to leak. This set me into an investigation of the tank to see what was going on, an investigation that involved removing a tank that was not designed to be removed (and yes, if your wondering, I did swear quite a lot during that removal!). Through that investigation, I discovered that the outlet portal on the tank had been repaired many times before – and the attempted repairs left much to be desired. I discovered that the outlet had been repaired no fewer than seven times, for that was the number of layers of goop that had been poured over the leaking area over time. It was sort of like looking at the rings of a tree or layers of sediment in a cross section of land to trace the history – but it was a history of repairs done very badly, kind of like trying to plug a leaking pipe with scotch tape. The leaking area was obvious once I had removed all the layers of goops – and I could tell exactly what was going on.

It's a truth we all know in our human experience: Sometimes, the only way to see what's really going on is to scrape away the layers hiding the problem.

Well, my saga continued as I worked to replace that outlet portal with the correct repair; it was no small task. It involved cutting out all the goop, chipping away at fiberglass that had been compromised, creating my own replacement foundation out of some old bathtub siding I had laying around (doesn't everyone have old bathtub siding lying around?), resetting everything in two layers of

reinforced epoxy resin, and then praying the right kinds of prayers that the whole thing would set up correctly. It worked – with one exception. There is an essential rubber gasket that goes between the toilet and the tank that had deteriorated completely; it had to be replaced. That's when I found out that not only did they not make this particular model of toilet anymore, they did not even offer parts for that model anymore. Try as I might, I could not find a replacement gasket through the model number; I could not find a replacement gasket through any means, even contacting a few RV stores for advice; every gasket proposed simply wouldn't fit. Everyone I talked to left me with a sympathetic "Good luck" which I didn't find very helpful.

What I did find helpful was simply googling "rv toilet gasket" and then scanning the thousands and thousands of pictures of rv toilet gaskets online. I had no idea how many there would be. But, left with little choice, I began scanning all those pictures for something that looked sort of like the gasket fragments I had left over from my project. It took awhile, but then a picture jumped out at me; it looked like the one I had removed; the dimensions seemed spot on; and then, the heavens opened and the trumpet sounded as I read in the description a note that said, and I quote: "Gasket suitable as replacement for Mansfield/Dometic/Sealand vacuflush model V1047." Guess who has a Mansfield/Dometic/Sealand vacuflush model V1047? That's right – it is the exact gasket to replace my worn one – all made possible by one picture in the midst of thousands.

Sometimes, the only way to move forward is to look for what actually fits, what actually works, trusting that we will know it when we see it.

I am telling you all something that is so well known to the human species that it gets missed extremely often, much like the nose on one's face: that sometimes the only way you know something when you see it for yourself. Knowing what to look for is essential. And knowing what you are not looking for is just as important.

It may seem strange to approach our scripture lesson today by talking about rv toilet repairs, but much of the same understanding is at play when considering how to discern authentic faith from its opposite – and these are days when we have seen an upsurge of inauthentic faith throughout our world. A lot of goop has been heaped over Christianity, goop such as Christian Nationalism and White Supremacy and gender conformity and environmental exploitation……layer upon layer of things certain people in high positions are trying to associate with Jesus.

It calls us to consider an essential part of our faith journey, namely, how do we know when faith is authentic or heretical? This is Paul's message to us today – that authentic faith is to be known by certain observable behavior, particular practices, and specific dispositions, all of which have their foundation in Jesus's life and teachings. Paul is also making the counterpoint which is extremely important in our present context, namely, that when looking at those who claim to be Christians, but who are actually following someone or something quite different than Jesus, we are looking at nothing less than heresy; this too is made known by their observable behavior.

Now, I know it may seem as if we are on the edge of judgement here, and we know better than to judge a person as to their standing before God – but we're not talking about that at all, and neither is Paul. Paul, in this passage, is talking about discernment regarding the tangible, practical, observable actions and dispositions of those who follow Jesus. These are empirical things, measurable things, visible things; they are outward indicators of inward alignment with Jesus. They can certainly be a part of any life, whether or not they follow Jesus; but any life that follows Jesus will tend to have these observable aspects. When they are absent, it is likely that Jesus is, too.

Here is the part of the sermon where your pastor may get into trouble, for we enter controversy any time we attempt to call out heresy. But Paul puts before us a sort of litmus test for faith that we must take seriously. We must do so for two reasons: first, to keep in mind and heart ourselves how followers of Jesus should try to think and act; and second, to recognize faith's opposite, especially when someone claims to represent God's will but speaks and acts in ways contrary to what Jesus counseled. And in today's world we have far too many prominent examples of the latter.

There are numerous Christian organizations that have sprung up in response to such flagrant hypocrisy. One of them I find very helpful is called "Faithful America" which is a network of progressive Christians committed to calling out hypocrisy and the skewing of the Christian faith in order to meet human agendas. Here's the profile statement from their website: "We represent Christians who live out our faith by taking bold, prophetic action for a more equitable, free, and loving world. Our members come from all Christian denominations and none. Some of us are regular church-goers, some of us are not. But we all believe in following Jesus' example by integrating community, spiritual practice, and collective action

to demonstrate love for our neighbors and to resist those twisting our faith to cause them harm."

As a part of that resistance, they have created a "False Prophets" project where they create a list based on public surveys that identifies public figures and religious leaders who promote Christian Nationalism, election denial, diplomacy through violence, environmental exploitation, immigrant vilification, and gender conformity using religious language. They completely misrepresent Jesus in doing so. Here is the top 31 list of False Prophets from last year:

- **Greg Abbott**, governor of Texas
- **Steve Bannon**, political strategist, Catholic activist and former aide to Donald Trump
- **David Barton**, pseudo-historian, activist and founder of WallBuilders
- **Lauren Boebert**, U.S. representative from Colorado
- **Ted Budd**, U.S. representative from North Carolina
- **Ron DeSantis**, governor of Florida
- **Sean Feucht**, activist and worship leader
- **Mayra Flores**, U.S. representative from Texas
- **Michael Flynn**, retired general, conspiracy theorist and megachurch speaker
- **Franklin Graham**, evangelist and president of both the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and Samaritan's Purse
- **Marjorie Taylor Greene**, U.S. representative from Georgia
- **Josh Hawley**, U.S. senator from Missouri
- **Kristina Karamo**, Secretary of state candidate in Michigan
- **Kari Lake**, gubernatorial candidate in Arizona
- **Blake Masters**, U.S. senate candidate in Arizona
- **Doug Mastriano**, gubernatorial candidate in Pennsylvania
- **Mary Miller**, U.S. representative from Illinois
- **Tony Perkins**, pastor and president of Family Research Council
- **Joseph Strickland**, bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Tyler, Texas
- **J.D. Vance**, author and U.S. senate candidate from Ohio
- **Mike Johnson** (U.S. House Speaker)
- **Donald Trump** (U.S. President)
- **Lance Wallnau** (New Apostolic Reformation self-proclaimed prophet)
- **Jim Jordan** (U.S. Representative)
- **Laura Ingraham** (Fox News host)

- **Bridget Ziegler** (Moms for Liberty co-founder)
- **Julie Green** (Self-proclaimed prophet)
- **Mark Burns** (Pastor)
- **Jackson Lahmeyer** (Pastor)
- **Dan Patrick** (Texas Lieutenant Governor)
- **Carlo Viganò** (Archbishop)

Nathan Empsall, executive director of Faithful America, made the following comment regarding the importance of this list: "Christian nationalist leaders come to us in sheep's clothing, claiming to promote the teachings of Jesus, but instead inject poison into society and our churches by distorting Scripture, spreading misinformation and inciting political violence. These false prophets do not speak for a majority of American Christians, many of whom are speaking out to reclaim Jesus's name and promote the true Christian values of love, truth, peace and justice."

Karli Wallace Thompson, digital organizer for Faithful America, made a similar observation: "Leaders who selfishly exploit Christianity for their own personal and political gain must be held accountable to the Christian values of peace and justice," she said . "Christian nationalism is sowing further division in our churches, politics. and local communities. These false prophets must be exposed for the wolves in sheep's clothing they are to protect the future of our religion and our multiracial democracy."

Paul would agree; it is just as important to understand what Jesus advocated as to call out what Jesus did not. Anyone who makes claims about their faith guiding their decisions or agendas must be ready to defend those decisions and agendas with Jesus himself as judge, and their actions as evidence. And the highest accountability must be levied towards anyone who claims to represent God's will on this earth – especially when their representation goes against Jesus.

And how can we tell where Jesus is being misrepresented?

Paul puts before us the template that applies to everyone who claims to follow Jesus –

Do they love others, unconditionally, practically, graciously?

Do they live in the hope of a better world for all, not just some? Are they patient in suffering, impatient with oppression, and passionate about justice?

Do they help those who cannot help them back?

Do they resist enemies without wishing them harm, do they practice non-violence in that resistance?

Are they able to admit wrongdoing and seek forgiveness? Are they humble enough to love beyond differences?

Are they peacemakers, bridgebuilders, and groundbreakers when it comes to working with differences, engaging the stranger, and seeking what's good for all?

These are the qualifications Paul puts before us to discern who is actually speaking for Jesus with both their words and their lives. They are qualifications we each need to incorporate into our growing faith if we are to be assured that we each are actually following Jesus ourselves. But they are also qualifications to be used to assess when someone is misrepresenting Jesus – and to take the further step of correcting their misdirection.