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

***“Top Ten”***

***September 24, 2023***

In the pocket-size NRSV copy of the Bible that I have had on my desk for the last 16 years here and most of the time I was in seminary, the passage that Karen just read from Paul’s letter to the people in Rome is titled “Marks of the True Christian.”

It is filled with the aspirations we who follow Jesus are to try to live into.

It is a beautiful and challenging list and I have yet to meet anyone, even those nearest to death, who would claim to have mastered them all. And still we must try.

As this is my final opportunity to be with all of you for Sunday Worship, I have come up with a list of my own.

It is a list of the top ten lessons I have learned as I have had the great honor of serving as your pastor.

And these are not in any particular order.

So here goes:

1. The Four Family Rule – I learned very early on to assume that if talking to someone in the community about someone else, be very careful. The Four Family Rule (that’s my own name for it) says that if you live in Arlington, Sandgate or Sunderland for more than two generations, you will be related by blood or marriage to one of four families.

And if you need coaching to help connect the dots, Sandy Grover is the go-to person – I have relied on her for these connections and so much more.

To get to work side by side with Sandy has been one of the greatest gifts you have given me.

1. Don’t be afraid of someone or something new – Many of you have become a part of this church over the past 16 years, and officially we have welcomed 41 new members.

With each of you came new ideas and this church is so much richer because you committed to God, and all of us, your desire to make your faith journey here in this place.

1. Sometimes the hardest times present you with new opportunities – The greatest overall challenge we faced together, along with the rest of the world, was COVID-19. On Sunday, March 8, 2020, the 10 a.m. Service of Worship was held as usual and followed that evening by the Arlington Area Childcare Mac & Cheese Extravaganza and the Dessert Auction.

That was to be the last time we gathered in person here in this building for the next year and a half.

We quickly shifted gears and Zoom became our connection to each other during that very isolating and hard time and it ended up giving us the kick in the pants we needed to expand how we do Worship and Bible and Book studies and meetings.

Although not always ideal, Zoom allowed me to see so many of your beautiful faces, even those from faraway places like Michigan and New Jersey, while we prayed with the world for the millions who were sickened with COVID and the over one million Americans who died from its complications.

We also ended up starting back together again under a tent and this was the 3rd summer we got to worship outside amid the sounds of birds and barking dogs and the occasional lawn mower.

1. Take full advantage of the holidays and holy days – Be it the stunningly beautiful sight of your candlelit faces and the poignant notes of *Silent Night* sung in a huge human circle at the end of the Christmas Eve Service or the power of story and extinguishing of lights at the Tenebrae Service on Maundy Thursday or the dew-wet shoes blended with awe on the Mack Molding hill at the Easter Sunrise Service, some traditions have the power to take our breath away, year after year.
2. This community needs us and we need this community – From the Everyone Eats meals and Community Care Kits that we distributed during the peak of the COVID pandemic to the fact that 2/3 of the money we needed for the steeple repair and painting project came from outside of our congregation to so many other efforts, it is clear that when we serve the community, such as through the Summer Lunch Program, and when the wider community gets the chance to partner with us, we all benefit and we get to live into the words from Paul’s letter to the Romans – “*Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.”*
3. The one thing that brings people together more than any other (besides food) is death – Y’all have rallied together and lifted each other up and always extended gracious hospitality whenever there has been a death in our midst.

It has been one of the greatest privileges of my life to have officiated at 195 funerals, memorial, and graveside services.

No two families experience grief and loss in the same way and yet this church always rises to the occasion with quiet care and compassion.

1. Humor helps – My mistakes have been many and the forgiveness you have extended me has always been a gift I’ve appreciated.

And the ability to laugh together when things haven’t gone as expected have made all the difference.

From a literal bat from our belfry sending us running into Bailey Hall in the middle of worship to the treasured peals of laughter coming from coffee hour to the sound of giggling from children, being able to laugh together will be a treasured memory for me.

Also, be sure to check in with Gail Rice – I guarantee she will have a joke for you.

1. There is no one right way to do church – Very few of us grew up in this church and even if we did, we are certainly not doing church like it was done here in the 50s or 60s. In the relatively brief 16 years I’ve been here, when we consider our 180-year long history, we have embraced technology in ways our Federated Church ancestors could never have imagined.

We now have a website, a Facebook page, we Zoom and then put our Services on GNAT-TV – thank you, Brandon, often I am texted questions from y’all and a whole bunch of other folks about church business, we have Wi-Fi in all our buildings, multiple microphones, we have printed a lot less on paper than ever before including the monthly newsletter, this television screen that is connected to the Internet, Bluetooth technology for our printer and I’m sure I’m missing other things.

1. There are a whole bunch of folks cheering us on – I have consistently over the years met many dozens, if not hundreds of folks who are not members and we will never see here on a Sunday morning who believe in us and want this church to thrive. This includes those who use our space, frequent our dinners, pick up or drop off produce on the farm stand or just admire us from afar.

We are held in prayer by so many others.

You, this beloved Federated Church of east Arlington community – you have been my best teachers by how you’ve lived and how you’ve questioned and the care with which you treat each other and others.

And finally –

1. Love is Love is Love – Whether things are going well or not, the thing that sustained me and I know will be life-sustaining for Andris as well, is the knowledge that I am loved by God and by all of you.

In pastoral ministry, no two days are ever alike and some days can be especially emotionally draining.

But remembering both loves – the knowledge and transformative power that comes from knowing God is ever with us and the strength that comes from knowing I was loved by y’all, this amazing group of individuals, has made this time we’ve spent together here in this beautiful corner of Vermont that we have been so blessed to call home – has made it possible for us together to have served God and God’s people. This ministry with all of you has been life-changing.

That’s it.

I leave you with profound gratitude and may God continue to bless you each individually and as God’s church. Amen.