



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Abiding in God

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

May 10, 2009

Fifth Sunday of Easter (Year B)

John 15:1-8 and 1 John 4:7-21

You would be amazed at all the stuff that comes in the mail to an ordinary church office on an ordinary day. You really ought to stop by the office some day when our Office Administrator is sorting through the day's mail. Obviously, you are familiar with the junk mail that arrives at your home each day. Magnify it a hundred-fold and put a Jesus-fish or cross or both on every page and you can begin to imagine what the daily barrage is like.

This spiritual junk mail typically has one thing in common—no matter what they are attempting to sell us, whatever it is will be “just the thing to turn any struggling congregation into the place to be in your town on Sunday mornings.” They sell everything from off-the-shelf stewardship programs to prepackaged youth events to glitzy marketing campaigns that would make Wall Street take notice. Words like “electrifying” and “magnetic” and “powerful” and “revolutionary” dot their advertisements, and you begin to think that there is a program or course of study out there somewhere that would solve absolutely every problem that the modern church could possibly face.

But as I have thought back over the thousands of advertising letters addressed generically to the pastor that I have received over the past sixteen years, I don't remember seeing one that offered a class or program that the church needs more than any other. No exuberant letter has ever arrived in my office suggesting that their program would turn any congregation into the most loving church around. And, while I have seen countless Bible studies on how to forgive, pray, or use your spiritual gifts, I don't remember seeing one on how to love those seated beside you in the sanctuary. I have received thousands of pieces of mail, each hawking their wares to the church, but not one of them offered any help about the most basic thing a Christian—or a Christian congregation—is to do: love one another.

In one of his recent books, Eugene Peterson suggests why this is true (Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans Press, 2005), 314). He reminds us that love cannot be reduced to what can be taught in a classroom or what can be formulated in a program. The classroom deals primarily with concepts and understanding, but learning to love cannot be reduced to learning mere *ideas* about love. It cannot be reduced to a series of bullet-points. Nor can you simply use a program that depersonalizes things to get everyone doing the same thing for the same goal. Love is much more complicated than that.

In fact, love is the way of life that captures the thinking and believing of Christians. It is who we are and what we do. Christians are people who love.

And, when the church thinks about what God is asking of us in the way of love, we realize that the task before us is large. We are commanded to tell folks that God loves

them and to show forth that love in the way we care for one another. Basically, you and I in the church are invited to become participants in the life of love embodied by Jesus. The task before is large.

As a child, I was nurtured in a congregation that had a firm grasp on what it meant to live a life of love, but we struggled with how to put it in practice. Somehow I had started to believe the naïve notion that Christian communities would be idyllic. Where I got that idea I'm not sure, but it wasn't from the Bible. There are glimpses, of course, of the sharing and witnessing and caring for those in need in the early church, but, more often than not, the communities pictured in the scriptures are a mess. In fact, this pastoral letter from John to his unidentified community is sent to folks who are part of a messed up congregation. They are having trouble with love—the most basic of all Christian things. John's letter—more like a sermon, really—is sent to remind them of what it means to be a community formed and nurtured in love. And when you take John's letter as a whole, you come away with the reality that this love stuff is not something that the church is going to grasp quickly or tightly. “We will be formed over our lifetimes into a community of the beloved, God's beloved who are being formed into a people who love God and one another in the way and on the terms in which God loves us” (Peterson, 312).

And believe me, it will take a lifetime for us to be formed in love. I think that's why God doesn't simply *suggest* that we love one another, or simply *encourage* us to love, or even to make love a goal to strive for. No, God commands us to love, says John: “The commandment we have from God is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also (1 John 4:21). And, what's more, this commandment isn't simply one commandment among many, but it is lifted up as the one non-negotiable center of the community's life.

Now, take a look around or look straight at me. What you see is a community of the baptized that is being formed in this love but that has a long way to go. Eugene Peterson says it like this: “When we come up dripping out of the waters of baptism and look around we observe to our surprise that the community of the baptized is made up of people just like us—unfinished, immature, neurotic, stumbling, singing out of tune much of the time, forgetful, and boorish.” What he is describing is the perpetual difficulty of living a life of love in the community of the church. It would be so much easier if it was just you and God—or me and God.

But it wouldn't be the church. And John keeps insisting in his own inimitable way that we should love—even though he knows that we're going to fail at it time after time. But there is no avoiding the command just because we have trouble with it, because the church is not the church without love.

So, what are we to do with John's insistence that we love? If you listened closely to what he told us in the church, he did a lot in the way of reminding us that we are to love, but he was a bit thin on telling us how to love. “Instead of explanations or generalizations, John settles for a name and the story that goes with it: Jesus. ‘We know love by this, that (Jesus) laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another’ (3:16). Then he lets each of us find the particular but always personal and relational way to do it in the Jesus way: ‘We love because he first loved

us' (4:19)" (Peterson, 327).

It is around this font that we learn that. When this community baptizes, we remind one another of our fundamental identity as God's beloved children. We say something like this: "You are the one God loves. This is who you are, your identity, loved by God." But we do not stop there. We go on to say something like this: "But being loved is not all there is to it. Being loved creates a person who can love, who must love. Getting love is a launch into giving love.

That must be the reality at the center of the church's life. But make no mistake: keeping that at the center of the church's identity is much more difficult than simply claiming our identity based on a common creed or a common cause. To say that the world will know that we belong to Jesus because of our love is much more difficult than saying they will know we belong to Jesus because we say the right things about him.

John, you see, will not let us off the hook just because loving is hard. He insists that we do it—however faint our attempts may be—because that's the center of our faith.

After all, we were brought out of baptismal waters to love. Ultimately every sentence comes out something like this: "God loves you; Jesus shows you how love works; now you love. Love, love, love, love. Just do it" (Peterson, 329).

Today, as we ordain and install officers into the church—as we gather again to remember the claims made upon us in baptism—we are setting apart a group to lead us. And so, I dare say to you who are being set apart today—along with those on the board of deacons and session with whom you will be serving—we need you to love. We need you to love one another. We need you to love God. We need you to love us.

What we need from our officers—more than anything else—is for you to abide in the God who is abiding in you.