



# Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## No Condemnation

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

July 13, 2008

*Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)*

Romans 8:1-11

There's a lot of talk these days about our culture being one of anything goes. While there may be some of that in the air, frankly I don't see it. If I were asked to say what word marks our culture, I don't think it would be indulgence nearly as much as it would be "condemnation."

According to a dictionary, to condemn is to consider somebody or something guilty. Or, in a slight variation, to condemn is to say somebody or something is bad, that they are in some way wrong or unacceptable.

That sounds more like the things I see and hear. I mean, when I'm standing outside trying to pull weeds and a neighbor walks by and stops to talk, what she most often talks about isn't how great it is that the neighbor's car isn't in the driveway anymore, and surely I know what that means. She's not rejoicing in the neighbor's behavior as much as she's pointing out how unacceptable it is.

Oh, I'm sure there are a number of folks who live by the "anything goes" mantra, but I'm not around them very often. I'm more often around folks who favor the language of condemnation over affirmation.

Honestly, that's why we've spent two of the past three weeks engaging Paul's words to the church in Rome. Not only is the theological weight of the Book of Romans a struggle, but this section in chapters 6, 7, and now into 8 deal with something we find a bit unsettling—our sin.

A few weeks ago, Pastor Ann preached a wonderful sermon from Romans 6 in which she helped us wrestle with whether we should let sin abound so that grace could abound all the more, which is, of course, what some were accusing Paul of suggesting. And then last week, we got to overhear Paul's struggle with his own sin, a struggle in which he admitted without hesitation that he didn't do the things he wanted to do but instead did the very things he hated.

(And, by the way, I thought we had an understanding last week that you wouldn't talk with Pastor Ann about my remarks during the time with the children when I told them that I wished she could be here since she knows more about sin than anyone I know. When she showed up at the picnic last Sunday evening, the line to tell her about those comments was even longer than the line for the chicken.)

Anyway, Paul ends that discussion by asking and answering the haunting question: "Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord."

In those earlier chapters just prior to the passage we read today, Paul has been holding up the tension between the varying combinations of sin, grace, and law. His desire has been to show in no uncertain terms that the law, while in itself a good thing, is limited in

its ability to keep its observers free from bondage to the power of sin. As we continue to proclaim at funerals, Paul argues in the first verses of Chapter 6 that “baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the only way that God’s acts which broke the power of sin may become reality in the individual’s life (6:1-14). Apart from baptism, the enslavement that is the lot of the creature will dominate that creature’s life (6:15-7:6), and Paul relates in Chapter 7 that this is an enslavement the law is powerless to remove (7:7-25).” (Achte-meier, *Romans: Interpretation Commentary Series*, 88)

If the law is powerless to remove our enslavement to sin, then who will deliver us? According to Paul, it is the Spirit who in Christ has loosened sin’s grip on God’s creation. Only by the power of God’s Spirit will we be able to sense in the present a glimmer of the freedom that will one day be known in all creation.

And so, as Chapter 8 opens, we are greeted with a summary of sorts. Paul rehearses what he’s been doing in the earlier chapters by announcing the good news: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

At first, that language about “no condemnation” seems out of place. After all, Paul has spent a lot of time convincing us that we are sinners only to announce again that there is “no condemnation.” What could he possibly mean?

I have always loved the language and thought of the most recent affirmation of faith written by the Presbyterian Church. That particular affirmation is called *A Brief Statement of Faith*. One of my professors in seminary was on the committee to write that statement, and she once talked about the response it generated when it was sent to the church for review. She said that almost everybody commented that it was too long to be called *A Brief Statement of Faith*, but then she said that almost everybody had a suggestion for something that needed to be added. In other words, it’s too short but you need to add this.

One of my favorite part of that affirmation is the section on God the Father, in which we affirm this:

*We trust in God,  
whom Jesus called Abba Father.  
In sovereign love God created the world good  
and makes everyone equally in God's image,  
male and female, of every race and people,  
to live as one community.  
But we rebel against God; we hide from our Creator.  
Ignoring God's commandments,  
we violate the image of God in others and ourselves,  
accept lies as truth,  
exploit neighbor and nature,  
and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.  
We deserve God's condemnation.  
Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation.  
In everlasting love,  
the God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant people*

*to bless all families of the earth.  
 Hearing their cry,  
 God delivered the children of Israel  
 from the house of bondage.  
 Loving us still,  
 God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant.  
 Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child,  
 like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home,  
 God is faithful still.*

One of the reasons I like that particular section is because of its brutal honesty. It states in unequivocal terms that we are worthy of God's condemnation. According to another member of the writing team, it was that line—'we deserve God's condemnation'—that generated the most reaction and complaint from Presbyterians when the affirmation was sent out for review and comment before its final approval by the General Assembly.

People had a hard time admitting what Paul once declared: "I am the chief of all sinners." We Presbyterians, it seems, aren't prone to being that forthcoming about our own sinfulness, as evidenced by the complaints and suggestions that the committee received.

Somebody offered this revision to the committee: "Don't say 'we deserve God's condemnation;' say this, 'Some people deserve God's condemnation.'" Makes you wonder who would be on that list and, of course, whether the person making the suggestion figured he or she is deserving of God's condemnation.

Another suggested that we should all be on the list, but not to be condemned. That person suggested this: "We all deserve to be *evaluated* by God." I guess that leaves it open for God to decide who deserves condemnation, and who does not.

I don't know about you, but I'm glad they left it in there. I have no trouble affirming that I deserve God's condemnation because, like Paul—and King David before him—my sin is ever before me. I'm not unlike the person in my Disciple Bible Study group from a couple of years back who once said, "I could give you an hourly report on my sin."

The reason we affirm our sin, though, isn't so that we can wallow in our guilt. No, it's so that we can treasure again the unending mercy of God. The line we often affirm together when we use the language from the newest confession of faith—we deserve God's condemnation—is not the last line. It is followed by that all-important word—yet.

It goes on to say, "Yet, God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation." Our sin is not the ending, but rather the beginning of our salvation.

That's what Barbara Brown Taylor speaks about in her book, *Speaking of Sin: The Lost Language of Salvation*. She talks about our sin as our only hope, "because the recognition that something is wrong is the first step toward setting it right again. There is no help for those who admit no need of help. There is no repair for those who insist that nothing is broken, and there is no hope of transformation for a world whose inhabitants accept that it is sadly but irreversibly wrecked." (Page 59)

It is good for us to acknowledge the depth of our sin, which we do every Sunday in our worship together. We always confess our sin before God and one another in the prayer of confession. And our sin can take any number of forms, but the result is always the same—we become less human and our relationships with God and others are strained.

That's why the classic prayers of confession that the church prays always speak of "the things that we have done that we ought not to have done" and of "the things that we have failed to do that we ought to have done." They leave plenty of room for all of us to confess the avenues our sin takes.

The church can be a community that lives this truth in the world. As one theologian has said, "the church exists so that God has a community in which to save people from meaninglessness, by reminding them who they are and what they are for. The church exists so that God has a place to point people toward a purpose as big as their capabilities, and to help them identify all the ways they flee from that high call. The church exists so that people have a community in which they may confess their sin—their own turning away from life, whatever form that destructiveness may take for them—as well as a community that will support them to turn back again. The church exists so that people have a place where they may repent of their fear, their hardness of heart, their isolation and loss of vision, and where—having repented—they may be restored to fullness of life." (Taylor, 85)

I saw that happen in a strange way one time. As I have thought about what it would feel like to really take in the news that there is no condemnation in Christ Jesus, I remembered a day many years ago now when a group from the church was gathering to play kickball. One of the captains was Casey, who was about 13 at the time. Casey was what I would call highly athletic and highly competitive. Another member of the group—an adult—was the polar opposite. She was not athletic, bless her heart (to put it nicely) and she wasn't competitive either.

Anyway, Betsy had been Casey's teacher in Sunday School, and over the years they had maintained a great relationship. It was built on mutual love and care. But even with that deep love, none of us expected what we heard when Casey, as a captain, began the process of choosing teams, and he called Betsy's name first.

When I talked with Betsy, she told me that not only was that the first time in her life that she had ever been the first one chosen for a sporting event, it was also the first time when she wasn't dead last. You could sense the deep-felt joy that filled her and does to this day.

I think that's what it feels like to really hear what Paul is telling us, that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

So here's my hope: May we be the type of church for each other and for the larger world where we are not afraid to acknowledge the depths of our sin, but who also acknowledge more loudly still the great, life-transforming mercy of God that saves us.

After all, we may deserve God's condemnation. But don't forget the yet. Yet God. Yet God acts with justice and mercy—to redeem, and because of that, there is no condemnation.