



# Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## The Law of Love

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

September 7, 2008

*Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)*

Romans 13:8-14

You may not have noticed it, but we've spent a lot of time in Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome this summer. While we went to other readings on some Sundays, the lectionary has been leading us kicking and screaming through Paul's letter to the church in Rome since the first day of June. For 15 weeks now, we've listened to Paul's heavy theological jargon—wrestling with such concepts as justification and sanctification, law and grace, and we've heard countless other big dollar theological words that many of us had never heard before and some of us hope to never hear again.

For three months plus a week, we've been systematically dazed by Paul's circular logic; knocked in the head with Paul's technical language; and have had more trouble with Paul's challenging syntax than we ever had learning a foreign language.

Perhaps you found yourself thinking at some point along the way, "Is there anybody who can make sense out of what Paul's saying?" Well, it's finally happened. Here, near the end of his letter, we get to something we all understand—Love.

"Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law." Finally, after all these weeks of scratching our heads and muttering that we'll never understand what Paul's talking about, we hear some words that make us dance. Like a stranger in a foreign land who finally hears someone speaking her native language, our hearts rejoice because Paul finally utters a word we know—Love.

If there's anything we understand, it's love. Everything from greeting cards to post-it notes; from the greatest poetry to the catchiest song; from movies as old as *The African Queen* to those as current as this summer's smash hit; all of these things and more in our culture extol the virtues of love.

Ask the youngest child to explain symbolism to you, and they may not be able to do it. But, hold up for them a red rose and ask them this: "What would it mean if I gave this to my wife?" and without a second's thought, they'll shout the answer: "It means you love her." If we understand anything at all in life, it's love.

I remember one of the first songs I learned in church as a child.

"Love, love, love, yes that's what it's all about. God loves us, we love each other. Mother, father, sister, brother. Everybody sing and shout. Cause that's what it's all about. It's about love, love, love. It's about love, love, love."

If there's anything we understand, it's love.

But then again, maybe we don't. If you take a close look, you will probably notice that our understanding of love is lacking. It could be that all of this talk about love in church and culture has tricked us into thinking that talking about it is the same as doing it, that speaking about it with every breath means we understand it, when it may just be that

we don't. It could be that, when it comes to love, we have settled for a reduction of what it really is.

It seems to me that Paul's words about love have been reduced in a real way—in a way that usually takes one of two tracks. Paul says, "Love your neighbor," and we've understood that to mean, "You've got to love everybody." And when you look at Paul's words through that lens—of loving all humanity—two problems come up. One is the burden of trying to love everybody; the other is the problem of professing a saccharine, surface love for the whole world, without ever letting that love find a way into the nitty-gritty of life.

The first camp is inhabited by those who genuinely desire to love humanity, but find themselves bogged down by the enormity of that calling. They judge themselves harshly when non-loving thoughts creep into their minds, or become paralyzed by their inability to love their enemies. Paul's call to love their neighbor is heard by them as a huge burden to be carried, a burden from which they would rather shrink.

The second camp is filled by those who say, "Love everybody? Sure, no problem." These are the ones who carry huge Bibles and literally ooze a piety that is hard to stomach. And then they profess a sugary-sweet sentimental gushing love for the whole world—"I love everybody!" is their mantra. Only trouble is, since everybody is a surface word, they never get beneath it. And because they are so cloaked in their own piety, they never notice how their actions keep them disconnected from people. You see, they never actually have to love *anybody*, because they love *everybody*.

Neither camp seems a good place to pitch our tents, does it? Thank goodness Paul invites us to a new land with words we've heard all our lives: "Love your neighbor."

Paul seems to be calling the church to a different understanding of his words—locating this love not in the universal, but in the particular. "Love your neighbor." If we listen closely, perhaps we'll discover that he doesn't say, "Love everybody." Nor does he say, "Love the whole world." No, Paul lodges his call to love not in the universal, but in the particular. He brings it close to home, bringing into focus the people we meet day in and day out, those we actually interact with. "Love your neighbor."

I suspect your neighborhood is probably like mine. We have a neighbor that I like to call the speeder. He comes flying down the main road, and, if you're in front of him, he rides your tail the whole way. Or, if you're walking, he almost blows you down as he passes. And if he glances at you to see your "Slow yourself down look," you know what he does? He speeds up.

I suspect you have neighbors like that too. Perhaps it's the cashier who ignores you. Or the person in the express line with 23 items. Or the teacher who doesn't seem to like your child. Or the one who withholds attention or affection or care in an attempt to punish you, when you don't even know what you've done to incur their wrath. I feel certain that when I remind you of Paul's words "Love your neighbor," someone pops into your mind who makes you wish it weren't so. That love everybody understanding is looking pretty good about now, isn't it? But Paul won't let us off the hook. Love, if it is to live can't be taken out of the real-flesh-and-blood neighborhoods in which we live. "Love your neighbor."

This is the culmination of all that Paul's been talking about in his letter to the church in Rome. Everything he's been spinning our heads with he sums up like this: "Love is the fulfilling of the law." All of the stuff about how Jesus transforms our lives comes to fruition in this: "Love."

"Love, love, love. That's what it's all about."

In fact, when Paul encourages us in this beautiful chapter to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ," he's echoing what he wrote in other places. He's telling us to put on love, to be cloaked in the deep and abiding and tenacious kind of love that marked the life of Jesus, and still marks those who follow him today.

In just a few minutes, we will commission our teachers and musicians among us to live out their baptismal identity in faithfulness. Among the questions we will ask them is this one: Do you welcome the opportunity of this service because you are determined to love your neighbors? My hope is that those who will answer that question will do so with an understanding of love that is more than a half-inch deep.

The self-giving love of Jesus is not a surface love. It's not a shallow love. And it's not a love that is afraid to confront or a love that lets others get by with whatever they want. And it's most certainly not a love that forgets that we are to love ourselves as well.

The type of love with which we are to love our neighbor, says Paul, is the love that we have seen in God, who loved us enough to become one of us, to redeem us and make us new. And, as the cross of Christ makes abundantly clear, that type of love is willing to be vulnerable for the sake of what God will do to redeem the world.

I invite you to immerse yourself in the depths of that story of God's amazing love—and it is a deep, deep story—by making the commitment to grow in your faith, and to put on the Lord Jesus Christ, that your life would truly show that you love—not just God, but your neighbors as well.