

17<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost, September 7, 2008, Liturgical Year "A"

**ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY**

The Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. + Rector

Scripture: Romans 12:9-21

***"The Anatomy of True Love" (part 1)***

**THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT**

If there is one command that Jesus is known for the world over, it is, ***"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself."*** Jesus not only taught us to love but He told us that God, Himself, loves us. Who can forget Jesus' words as recorded in **Jn. 3:16**: ***"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."***

The Christian faith is unique, indeed radical, for its emphasis on love. You won't find this love in Hinduism, in Buddhism, in Islam – Allah is often called merciful but rarely is mentioned as the One who loves us, and never one who loves us unconditionally. And even in Judaism the love that is called for is not as radical as the love that Christ shows and calls us to.

In fact, it is this emphasis on love that changed much of the Roman Empire. It is the reason for the transformation of whole societies and civilizations. And yet, in our world, even in the church there is much misunderstanding when it comes to what it means to love.

**THE GREATEST MISUNDERSTANDING**

We have a generation today that talks an awful lot about love, but perhaps knows less about it than any generation since the time of Christ. It is amazing how the word love has been twisted and perverted, misused and abused today. Why? Because most people just don't understand what love is. They fall into the trap of thinking that love is an inexpressible emotion. It's oceans of emotion, it's – well, you just can't put your finger on it. Like that silly song by Morris Albert, *Feelings*, released back in 1973. Do you remember how it went?

***"Feelings, nothing more than feelings, trying to forget my feelings of love. Teardrops rolling down on my face, trying to forget my feelings of love. Feelings, for all my life I'll feel it. I wish I've never met you, girl; you'll never come again. Feelings, wo-o-o feelings, wo-o-o feelings, feel you again in my arms. Feelings, feelings like I've never lost you and feelings like I'll never have you again in my heart."***

My friends, that's not love. Love is not a feeling. It may contain feelings. It may result in feelings. But it is not primarily a feeling or an emotion. And I'll tell you why. The Living God, the Lord Jesus Christ commands us to love. And you cannot command a feeling. Think about it. Happiness, anger, sadness, they are feelings and they based on outward circumstances. They come and go, but not so with love. Love is a command. Jesus said, ***"Love the Lord your God... love your neighbor as yourself... love one another as I have loved you."***

I'll tell you something else that love is not. It is not an uncontrollable passion. People have the idea today that love is something that just happens to us, we're more or less recipients of it, or maybe even victims of it, depending on how we think. We fall in love, and then we fall out of love, and it just sort of happens.

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Like that other silly song that was written over 40 years ago – *Please Release Me* by Engelbert Humperdinck; the song of a man singing to his significant other maybe even his wife: ***“Please release me, let me go. I don't love you anymore. To waste our lives would be a sin. Release me and let me love again. I have found a new love dear, And I will always want her near Her lips are warm while yours are cold. Release me my darling let me go.”***

Ah, poor me. I just don't love you anymore, and it's not my fault. We shouldn't stay together, we really don't have any choice do we? But wait a minute. The Bible says, ***“Husbands, love your wives.”*** That's not a suggestion, that's not a request. That's a command. And because it is a command, love involves a choice and it involves conduct. Love is a decision we make and it is something we do. And that, my friends, is why love is not first an emotion or a feeling and certainly never an uncontrolled passion – and there's a word for that - lust.

### **ROMANS 12:9-12; 15**

Now in our second reading from **Romans 12:9-21** the Apostle Paul gives us a detailed overview of what true love involves. He lists the various elements, the practical parts, He gives us the anatomy of true love. So turn with me now to the back of your bulletins. You see what we are going to do today and next week is look at the practicals of love; putting the commandment into action. Bringing clarity to a subject that is often nebulous.

Notice the first thing Paul says, ***“Let love be genuine.”*** In other words, let it be real. Now how is love real? By action. Making the commitment and then backing it up with action. **1 Jn. 3:18: *“Little children, let us not love with word or tongue, but in deed and truth.”***

When is love not genuine? When you say I love you but don't mean it. And how do you know someone doesn't mean it? They don't back it up with deeds. Recall what the Apostle James said in **James 2:17** about those who see their brother or sister in need and say, ***“Go in peace, be warm and be filled,”*** but do nothing!” He said, ***“Faith without works is dead.”*** Likewise, love without action is dead!

Now what else does Paul say? He writes, ***“Hate what is evil.”*** Since when is hate a part of loving God? Well it is when it comes to certain things. You see loving God means hating certain things in this life. Not people, not ourselves. People aren't the problem, it's the evil within them that is the problem. And we all have evil within us and if we are not careful that evil will manifest itself in our lives. And so we need to hate the evil within us and within others. But what does Paul mean when he says evil? Let me give you some examples. Please turn with me to **Proverbs 6:16-19: *“There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are an abomination to Him; haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that hurry to run to evil, a lying witness who testifies falsely, and one who sows discord in a family.”*** We see that the Lord hates certain things. What is the heart of evil? Knowing there is a God and choosing to live without Him. And doing those things that are contrary to His Law – that my friends is evil.

Do you hate such things? You see if I am going to truly love it means that I am going to not only ***not do*** certain things but I am going to stand against them and speak out against them. I am going to work against the evil in this world. 19<sup>th</sup> century British parliamentarian Edmund Burke said, ***“Evil prevails when good people do nothing.”*** That is the truth.

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If I love God then I have to be willing to confront evil head on. First in my own life and then in the lives of others. And when it comes to evil in others we need to understand that love is not allowing people to walk all over us. Love is not letting people get away with wrongdoing. Love needs to be tough. Tough love involves discipline and accountability and it rises from hating evil. When a parent, for example, who does not discipline his or her child, and just lets them do whatever they want, that parent is not showing them love.

Yesterday, I had the privilege of hearing Bishop Paul Luzinda speak from the Diocese of Mukono in Uganda at Reformation Lutheran Church in Rochester. He was visiting All Saints Anglican Church that meets there for worship. (Recall All Saints was thrown out of its church building four years ago by the Episcopal Bishop of Rochester). Bishop Paul is a wonderful, godly man – committed to the spread of the Gospel. In his diocese, there is the highest concentration of witchdoctors in Uganda. He has sought to make it his aim to speak out and confront this evil. The evil has resulted in child sacrifice and has kept much of the population in deep poverty. But the Bishop has taken the lead in standing up to the witchdoctors. As a result many lives have been transformed and the witchdoctors are on the run. But why? The Bishop was willing to take a stand. Just like here in the US, as the Episcopal Church has turned its back on the authority of Jesus Christ as Lord and of His Word, we have taken a stand. If you are going to love God and your neighbor as yourself you must hate evil.

What is the next thing Paul mentions? He says ***“Hold fast to what is good”***. You see if you are going to fight against evil – you better cling to what is good. You’re not going to be able to defeat evil unless you are clinging to what is good. Otherwise, you can fall into the same evil that we are fighting against, and then that will result in hypocrisy.

Do you remember what Jesus said to the man who called him *good teacher*? Jesus said, ***“Why do you call me good, no one is good but God.”*** So in light of that statement, what is Paul saying? We need to hold fast to God. He is the source of our strength, He is the One who will give us the power to love. When Jesus said, ***“Love one another as I have loved you,”*** He was not only giving us a new standard of love, but He was letting us know that we would not be able to love like He loves us unless we have His power. And He said, on the night before He died, that He must go so that He can send the Holy Spirit. Who gives us the power to love? The Holy Spirit. Remember what is the first fruit of the Holy Spirit mentioned in **Galatians 5:22**? Love. So when we hold fast that which is good it means clinging to God and that will mean being filled with the Holy Spirit. It will be the Holy Spirit who will give us the strength to love, it will be the Holy Spirit who will enable us to stand against evil, it will be the Holy Spirit who will convict us so that our love is genuine. We hold fast to what is good so we can do the following.

***“Love one another with mutual affection, outdo one another in showing honor.”*** What’s that all about? That is another way saying be there for your brother and sister in Christ. Lift them up, Build them up. Be positive. Be present for them. Be available for them. **Proverbs 15:1: “A gentle answer calms wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”** We are to build up, not to stir up. There is something else that Paul says that adds clarity to this call to love one another with mutual affection when he writes a few verses later in **verse 15: “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.”**

You see when your brother or sister are going through a difficult time your presence is more important than words. That means to be present for and with them. I mean seriously, what are words going to do at a time of grief or sadness? They aren’t going to accomplish much of anything. Don’t

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worry about what you are going to say. Just be there. Oh yes, you can say things like I am praying for you, is there anything I can do for you? Otherwise, your presence is the most important thing.

Then Paul adds, "***Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.***" Paul is reminding us here of what our motivation should always be. This is not about us, it is not about the common good or the well-being of our fellow man, it is about honoring and serving the Lord. So our love for others should flow out of our love for the Lord. The reason we love is because God loves us. When we love others we are loving God. It's not about serving ourselves or even serving others, it is first and foremost about serving the Lord.

And then finally, St. Paul says, "***Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.***" Now I don't know if you realize it or not, but all three of these are related. They all involve waiting on the Lord. Hope is something good that God has for us in the future. Something we are looking forward to. We speak at funerals about the hope of the resurrection to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. We talk about the hope of the Second Coming, Christ's Return. We rejoice in knowing that one day we will experience both even though we haven't realized them yet. That is what ***rejoice in hope*** means.

A mountain climber goes through the challenges and trials of mountain climbing because of the hope he or she has of reaching the top. And if I'm going to reach the top, I need to ***be patient especially in suffering***. I mean think about it, we need patience not when we are enjoying something, not when things are going well, but when things are not so good, when we are in an uncomfortable spot. Do you need patience when your team is winning at a football game? No, you are enjoying every minute. But when they are losing, you need patience – you're waiting for something good to happen or you just can't wait until the game is over. But Paul says, Be patient. Jesus says, Be patient.

And the way we get through the difficult times and trials of life is through prayer. ***Persevere in prayer***. Talking to God, listening to God, again it is the strength that He provides through His Holy Spirit, as we fellowship with Him. That's why a quiet time with the Lord is so important. You see true love true love perseveres in prayer, it is willing to suffer for and with God and others, and it rejoices in hope because it knows that the battle will one day be over.

### **FOLLOWING LOVE'S COMMAND**

My friends, this is the anatomy of true love. This is what it means to love. It is a command. And it involves choices and it involves conduct. And if we are to obey the command to love we must follow our commander, the Lord Jesus Christ. So may our love be genuine, let it be real. May we hate what is evil and hold fast to what is good. May we build one another up with mutual affection, knowing that it is the Lord God we serve. And finally, rejoicing in hope, may we be patient in suffering as we persevere in prayer. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!