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Hate the Sin and Love the Sinner

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Matthew 7:1-5; 23:27-28

Do we have any sinners here today? Raise your hand if you're a sinner. What about saints? Do we have any saints here today? Raise your hand if you're a saint. All right. More sinners than saints. All right. I jest, but we'll come back to that a little bit later in the service. The phrase, "Hate the sin, love the sinner" is not found in the Bible. The origins of this phrase come from two authors. The first is St. Augustine and the second is Mahatma Gandhi. The earliest use of this phrase comes from St. Augustine in a letter that he wrote to a convent of nuns in 1421. In this letter he encourages them to act with love for persons and to have hatred for sins. The modern rendering of this phrase that we are used to comes from Mahatma Gandhi. In 1929 when he wrote his autobiography, he said this, "Hate the sin and not the sinner." As a precept, although easy enough to understand, is rarely practiced, and that is why it is the poison of hatred that spreads in our world. Gandhi argues that using this phrase is an excuse for people of faith to judge one another because it can't be effectively practiced. Today, we're most commonly used to the phrase appearing as, "Love the sinner but hate the sin."

There are a few Biblical passages that use a similar sort of phrase. In Jude the writer emphasizes that Christians should be known for their mercy and hatred of the effects of sin. Jude 23 says, "Save others by snatching them out of the fire and have mercy on others mixed with fear, hating even the tunic that their bodies defile." Romans 12:9 says, "Let your love be genuine. Hate what is evil. Hold fast to what is good. Love one another with mutual affection. Outdo one another in showing honor."

Now, while both of these passages mention two separate commands – to love the sinner but also hate the sin, the phrases are not interdependent on the other. In both passages it is the effects of or the results of sin that should be hated. Now, don't get me wrong. There are times as people of faith that we need to stand boldly against sin. Sin that is harming those who do not have power should be recognized and should be stopped. We should detest violence against other humans. Sins like child abuse or spousal abuse or hunger or racism or systematic poverty should nauseate us as people of faith, and we should use every inch of power that we have to correct these wrongs, but generally love the sinner and hate the sin is not being used in these ways.

Now, the Bible says a lot about God hating sin in Proverbs and Psalms and all other pieces of our Old Testament, but substantially the Bible has way more to say about God loving humanity, like Romans 5:8: But God proves his love for us in this, that, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Or John 3:16: For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. Or 1John 4:19: We love because he first loved us. Or 1Peter 4:8: Above all maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins.

And, while sin is serious and discussed at great lengths in the Bible, it is not the job of us as Christians to hate the sin. Instances of God hating sin have to be understood in the context of the whole Bible. God hates sin because of what sin does to humanity. Sin separates us. Sin separates us from ourselves. It separates us from others, and it separates us from God. See, God doesn't hate sin for sin's sake. He

hates sin because it separates us from ourselves and others. So, let's talk about sin. It's a UCC church. We don't talk about sin very often, but sin actually matters. A central part of our faith journey is learning how to deal with our sin. When we harm others, when we harm ourselves, scripture calls us to make those things right. We are called to flee from evil. The Bible uses two words for sin. The first is in the Hebrew Bible. They use the word nadach which means to stray from the path. It's a beautiful words picture. You imagine this well-groomed path that you're walking along, and all of a sudden you make a choice to step off of it and go a different direction. In the New Testament, another word is used, and it's the word picture of to miss the mark. It's the idea, if you would, of the archer pulling back his arrow, choosing to take aim and to shoot and missing that for which she has aimed. This is part of life. Anybody ever gone off the road or tried to do something and missed? Like twelve times this morning, right? This is part of our journey, but if we just keeping missing and we say, "Oh, no big deal; we just missed," and never retake aim and shoot again, we're missing a core part of what it means to live a life of humanity and to move forward in our faith.

Father Jim Keenan, one of my mentors defines sin as the "failure to bother to love." We all stray from the path at one time or another. We all miss what we're aiming for. In Romans 3:23 Paul reminds us that we all sin and fall short of the glory of God. We also know that Jesus, this guy that we choose to follow his way – Jesus is known frequently as the friend of sinners. So, didn't Jesus say to us we should love the sinners? No, he didn't actually say that. Nowhere in the Gospels does Jesus say that. In fact, what he does tell us is that we should love our neighbor. He even told us a step further - that we're to love our enemy. That would merely mean any neighbor that has brought us harm or wished harm upon us. Now, love here in the Greek isn't some sentimental goosh, right? Love here means to be determined to seek that which is best. So, when Jesus tells us to love our neighbor, he is saying that we should be determined to seek that which is best for our neighbor. But, get this. When Jesus tells us to love our enemy, he is also telling us that we should seek what is best for those who have harmed us. So, then, why doesn't Jesus tell me to love the sinner? I think because it's not the identity with which Jesus sees you. Jesus is walking with his disciples toward the end of his life, and he says, "Now I call you friend." When Jesus sees us, he doesn't see a sinner. He sees a friend.

Now, I started this morning's message by asking you to raise your hand if you were a sinner, and you wholeheartedly raised your hands – strong, but when I asked you to raise your hand if you considered yourself a saint, only like six of you in this room did. Here's the beauty of life. We are simultaneously both sinner and saint. Paul frequently calls the churches he's writing to "saint's" in the epistles. Now, why doesn't Paul say, "Dear Sinners of Ephesus?" Would you read that letter? "Dear Sinners of Philippi, you bring me great joy!" Really? Jesus doesn't call us sinners because it's the wrong identity to be focusing on. In Christ I am no longer slave, but I am free. Be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Be transformed about how you think about what you think about yourself and you think about the world and what you think about others. For then you will know what is good and acceptable and perfect with the will of God. You want to move away from the patterns of sinful nature? Transform how you see yourself in others.

Here's a truth. I cannot simultaneously hold my hate for your sin and my love for you. So, when I'm busy hating your sin, or even what I might understand to be your sin as an outsider, I have a harder time naturally loving you. This is why Jesus says in the Gospels the words that Danielle read to us, "Do not

judge or you, too, will be judged, for in the same way you judge others, you will be judged. With that measure you use, it will be measured to you.” And, then, Jesus has this beautiful play on words: Why would you tell someone to take the spec out of their eye when you have a big honking log in your own? First you have to take the log out of your own eye. In essence don’t worry about what’s in someone else’s eye. Pay attention to what’s going on in yourself. If you have to fix something, fix what’s going on inside of you.

Think about the story of the woman caught in adultery. Remember this story? Jesus is outside, and this woman has been ripped from her home and dragged down the street by religious leaders who are carrying big rocks, and they drop the woman in front of Jesus, and they say, “Jesus, we caught her committing adultery.” For one thing, what are they doing there? That’s a whole ‘nother question. But, we caught this woman committing adultery. What should we do with her? Then, there’s this beautiful image of Jesus bending down and writing something in the sand. We don’t know what he wrote, but he stood up and said, “You who are without sin cast the first stone.” Then, all of a sudden they start pelting her with rocks. NO. That’s not what the Bible says. They dropped their stones and they went their own way. Those who were about to stone her were going to stone her because they hated her sin, but in the process of hating their sin, they had forgotten her humanity. Hate clouds out judgement. When I can no longer see you because of my hate, I’ve missed the mark of what it means to be a follower of Christ.

When my religion or your religion is calling me to hate, it’s time for us to change religions. Love the sinner and hate the sin doesn’t work because it doesn’t lead us to love. Instead, it leads us immediately into a place of who’s the sinner and what they are guilty of. It’s often code words for me saying, “Okay, I’m judging you a little bit because you’re a sinner, and you should be ashamed of what you do, but even though I’m better than you, I’m going to love you anyway.” Using hate the sin, love the sinner against anyone, all it does is to divide people into two groups, those who have sinned and those who are judging. It can be used to exclude anyone.

Now, to deal with this half-truth fully, I would be remiss if I didn’t talk about how this phrase has been most often used in the life of the church, not necessarily this church, but the “Big C” Church and the church that I grew up in. This has become the Church’s way in the last few years about how they talk about LGBTQ, and to be clear about where I stand as a scholar of the sacred text and theology and ethics, I do not believe that being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer is a sin. So, in my mind, this is null and void from the very beginning, and it is an un-useful phrase. Now, I’m happy to have coffee with any of you and discuss that and lay that out. I’m not going to do that in a sermon, but I’m also very clearly aware that for some people within this room and for the people who are watching on our video and within the world broadly that this issue of gender and sexuality is still an issue of conscience for them, that they’re grappling with the sacred text, and they’re grappling with how they see the world, and they’re trying to make sense of it, and in doing so, they’re looking for phrases that help them express their love and where they stand in the sacred text.

But. For LGBTQ people, people of faith, this phrase has been one of pain, one of hurt and one that has harbored misunderstandings, and for that reason alone, for no other reason other than that, we should throw this saying out completely. If the things we say are hurting the people around us or alienating other brothers and sisters in Christ, we have to change what we say. This is what it means to be

community. This is what it means to be a community of the kingdom of God. So, might I suggest a new phrase, one that comes directly from our sacred texts? You can quote me on this one, one that as far as we know comes directly from the mouth of Jesus Christ. "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love. Love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus says, "Love God. Love your neighbor as yourself, and upon these two commands hangs all the rest of the law and commandments." Anybody got a Bible in here? Hold it up. Everything within these pages is held within those two commands. Love the Lord your God and love your neighbor as yourself.

I'm indebted to Rev. Adam Hamilton and his church in Kansas City, Church of the Resurrection, who first preached this sermon series. So, I would like to close with some of his words about these four half-truths that we've been looking at over the last few weeks. "I would like to remind you of the whole truths that we found behind the half-truths we rejected. We reject the idea that God only helps those who help themselves. We recognize that God expects us to do what we can to help ourselves. So, we pray and we work. Ultimately, the very definition of grace and mercy is that God helps those who cannot help themselves. We reject the idea that God won't give you more than you can handle. This is partially because we reject the idea that God is giving us the adversity in the first place. What we do believe is that God will help us handle any adversity that life might bring us. We reject the idea that this, too shall pass because for many of our brothers and sisters in faith this, too, will not pass, but we hold true to the fact that God is with us, that God will not leave us or forsake us because God will not go against their own character. And, finally, we reject the notion that God calls upon Christians to love the sinner and hate the sin. When we choose to focus on sins of others and speak of hating their sin, we violate the words of Jesus Christ. Paul calls us to hate our own sin, but Jesus calls us to love our neighbor. When we demonstrate love and not judgement, we draw people to Christ rather than repel people from him. So, may we choose love."

Please pray with me. God, may we love you more today than we knew how to love you yesterday, and may we love our neighbors as ourselves. Amen.