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First Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 22:34-40

“Half Truth: Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin”

Today we continue our sermon series on half-truths. These are Christian clichés that on the surface sound true, and we even mean well when we say them. But when we dig deeper we see that they’re not the whole truth, not very Biblical, and sometimes not very helpful. When we really look at them we realize that they’re not really right and not in line with what we actually believe or what Jesus taught.

Today’s phrase is “love the sinner, hate the sin”. How many of you have heard this saying? Now I’ve heard this half-truth most often used in the context of LGBTQ+ people – as in, “Oh, I don’t hate gay people, I just hate their lifestyle. You know, I love the sinner, but I hate the sin.”

But friends, there are so many things wrong with this half-truth, that I hope if you do use the phrase you’ll stop saying it once you hear the whole truth. Because the saying “love the sinner, hate the sin”, like the other half-truths we’ve looked at, isn’t helpful and it’s not loving. I mean, if someone said it about you, how would you feel? I once heard someone say that “It’s sort of a back-handed compliment.” But in what world? When I’m busy looking at and hating all of your sins it’s really hard for me to love you. And it’s hard for you to feel loved when I’m pointing out your sin. It just doesn’t work in reality.

So before we go any further let’s dispel the myth that this phrase is found in the Bible because it’s not. Jesus never said this, nor does the sentiment reflect the kind of things he said. It’s possible it originated with St. Augustine, a bishop from North Africa who lived in the late 4th or early 5th centuries. In a letter to nuns, he called them to have a “love for mankind and hatred of sins.”

Mahatma Ghandi wrote something similar in his 1929 autobiography, and if you google the phrase “love the sinner, hate the sin,” you’ll find his picture associated with the phrase. But he added something to it which most people leave out. The full statement reads: “Hate the sin and not the sinner is a precept which, though

easy enough to understand, is rarely practiced, and that is why the poison of hatred spreads in the world.”

So Ghandi wasn't advocating for this half-truth, but was more likely saying that it's hard to hate another's sin without hating the sinner.

Because let's be honest, when we say this or think this, we're quickly in the land of judgement, and it's not our place to judge. It's God's place to judge.

I recently read about an interview with Billy Graham's oldest daughter, Gigi, in which she was discussing something that happened – something relevant in today's politics.

She was her late father's date to Time magazine's 75th anniversary party held in Washington DC. President Bill Clinton spoke at the event. He had just been impeached by the House of Representatives for perjury and obstruction of justice. The charge of perjury involved what President Clinton had said, under oath, about his relationship with Monica Lewinsky.

At the banquet, her father sat with President and Mrs. Clinton. He was warm and gracious to them. After the dinner ended and Graham and Gigi were riding back to their hotel, the two discussed difficulties the president and First Lady were going through with so many people gossiping and judging. Gigi said her father's simple comment was, “it's the Holy Spirit's job to convict; it's God's job to judge; and it's our job to love.”

When we start looking at people as sinners, we likely don't have a lot of love for them – not if we're being honest with ourselves. I mean, just flip the discussion around. If someone said it about you, how would you feel?

And, if I may say before we go any further and I start sounding really self-righteous, we're all sinners. That's basic reformed theology 101. It's why we confess our sins every week, because none of us are perfect. We've all done things we shouldn't have done, and we've all left things undone that we should have done. We've all fallen short.

In the Old Testament the word translated as sin is chata, and it basically means to miss the mark. Now there are other words used in the OT, but this is the primary one. So when we sin we're missing the mark that God sets for us.

In the New Testament, written in Greek, the word is hamartia which also means to miss the mark or stray from the path. And so in both testaments we have this idea that sin is missing the mark, is straying from the path God wants us to be on. And we do this in three ways: in thought, word and deed – and by what we've done and what we haven't done. So we can sin not only doing something, but also by not doing something. We refer to them as acts of commission and acts of omission. But the basic idea is that we're all sinners. All of us. We all sin. We all fall short of the glory of God; we all stray from ideals; we're all in need of God's forgiveness.

If we were perfect, we'd have no need for God. If we were perfect, the world would be humming along nicely and all babies would be loved and all older people would be cared for and all black people would receive the treatment as white people and all women would earn the same as men. But that's not the way the world works. Because we sin; we mess up. That's why we confess our sins every week, because we make mistakes, and do things we shouldn't do, and most importantly do things God didn't create us to do. Confessing is our way of owning up to it, and being responsible for our share of it.

But after we confess, we hear those wonderful words of forgiveness: the mercy of God is from everlasting to everlasting, in Jesus Christ we are forgiven!

Which makes us forgiven sinners.

But when we label someone a "sinner", we're sort of implying that they're outside of God's grace and unless they stop committing their sin, they won't be forgiven. That somehow what they've done is way worse than what I've done.

But that's just not right.

To label someone a sinner reveals an us vs. them mentality, where you are the righteous person looking down your nose at the poor, wretched, ignorant sinners down below who just cannot get their act together.

Which may make us feel better about our own sins; that way we don't have to admit to problems we've contributed to, like racism, sexism, classism, and a whole lot of other isms, the sins we really should be worried about. But remember – we are forgiven sinners – who then pass the peace of Christ – which makes us Christ's peacemakers in the world. And if we're peacemakers, we're not

looking at people as sinners, we're looking at them as neighbors. And what did Jesus command us to do? Love our neighbor.

As Jesus' teaching made clear, your neighbor is everyone you meet, no matter what sin they've committed, and your neighbor is also those you haven't met. Your neighbor includes anyone who needs your help – no matter what sin they've committed. When you bring food for the food bank, or volunteer at the Rescue Mission or for Project 216, you're showing love to neighbors you will probably never meet, and know nothing about. When our offerings go to support people affected by disasters in another state or country or continent, we're answering the call to love our neighbor.

Walter Brueggemann, the OT scholar, has said that "You cannot in this tradition say God without saying 'neighbor' -it's almost hyphenated – "God – Neighbor." It's the major theme of the Bible articulated most simply in the First Epistle of John with the verse, "If a person says he loves God and hates his brother or sister, he is a liar."

Jesus forever changed the religious landscape when he combined God and neighbor in the Christian moral imperative. And the task of keeping them both present in appropriate tension has been and continues to be a challenge. Love of God without love of neighbor becomes a kind of selfish spirituality, not relevant to the world and not very interesting. Leave out the neighbor and religion has a way of becoming self-righteous and exclusive. Leave out God, and Christianity becomes just another personal improvement method.

So we need both, because it can be hard to love our neighbor, impossible really, without God loving us first because we have a tendency to judge rather than to love. But it's Love that transforms religious institutions, or societal structures—or people. Love warms and softens hearts. Love opens us to new life, to new passion, and to new commitment. Love transforms and converts. Love is a powerful change agent.

Which is why Jesus said, "Love your neighbor." If he had said, "love the sinner", he likely knew that it would lead to judgment, not to change. If I love you more as a sinner than as my neighbor, then I'm bound to focus more on your sin. I'll start looking for all the things that are wrong with you. And perhaps without intending it, I'll begin thinking of our relationship like this: "You are a sinner, but I graciously

choose to love you anyway.” If that sounds a little puffed-up and self-righteous, then you’ve perceived it accurately.

I think Jesus well understood the human tendency to judge others and focus on their sin, and this is why, in the Gospels, he taught us that we should avoid it. Instead, we should focus simply on loving our neighbors, including our neighbors who are our enemies. When “love the sinner” is our mantra, we’ve put ourselves in a position of seeing others as sinners rather than neighbors, and that won’t change the world. But it will make it more judgmental, and it doesn’t need that.

In fact, that judgmental attitude is one of the reasons more and more people are turned off by the Church. And by church I mean universal church. It turns people off when religious people point out the sins of others but act as though they have no sins of their own.

I recently came across a cartoon, where guy arrives in Heaven, meet St. Peter, and St. Peter says to him, “I see you were a good Christian, but you missed the ‘don’t be a jerk about it’ part.”

There are a lot of Christians who missed the memo of not being a jerk. My hope is to be a Christian without being a jerk. My hope is you won’t be a jerk.

Because it isn’t love the sinner but hate the sin, it’s more accurately, and much more biblically, LOVE. Just love.

I hope when people think about First Presbyterian Church, I hope they say the church is filled with people who are the real deal. And they put their faith into practice, loving the way Jesus loved. And they accept all, no matter who they are, or where they are on their faith journey.

That’s what I hope they say.

Amen.

Sources: Adam Hamilton, Half Truths