

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

October 8, 2017

Eighteenth Sunday
after Pentecost

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

Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin

(based on the book *Half Truths*, by Adam Hamilton)

This is the third of the four Christian clichés we're looking at this fall. And I know I've said this one! It sounds so right, it's hard to imagine that there's anything wrong with it.

Because when we say it, we mean to be gracious and kind...an expression of love for others.

And like the other clichés we've looked at, this one also is NOT in the Bible. Jesus never said this, nor does the sentiment behind it reflect the kinds of things he said.

It seems to have come from St. Augustine, who was a bishop from N. Africa who lived in the late 4th and 5th centuries. In his role as a church leader, he was writing a letter to nuns, asking them to remain chaste; and in the letter he called to them to have a "love for mankind and a hatred of sins." I doubt that Augustine meant to coin a phrase that Christians would use to describe their dislike of someone else's sins.

Ghandi said something similar in 1929: *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.* He wasn't advocating this as a helpful notion, rather he was observing that most people cannot "hate another's sin," without actually harming that person.

So first things first - definitions - Sin. In both the Old Testament and the New Testament the Hebrew and Greek word for sin essentially means to "stray from the path," or to "miss the mark." The path or mark being God's intention or will for us. So sin can apply to any thought, word, or deed that is contrary to God's will. It can also be something we fail to do that we should do, like seeing someone who is in need and NOT helping them. By NOT helping we have sinned - deviated from the path that God calls us to follow.

We all sin. None of us lives a perfect life. We think, say, and do things we shouldn't, and we fail to think, say, and do things we should - all the time. The Apostle Paul: Romans 3:23 - *All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*

And so when we consider our "half truth" / cliché today, the first half IS obviously true. Of course we are called to love sinners! This is all over the Bible. And Jesus himself loved sinners - all sinners - even us!

The problem is that the statement "Love the sinner," while true, is not anything Jesus commanded us to do, and it can actually lead us to sin by violating something Jesus did teach his disciples. Though Jesus certainly loved sinners, he never actually said, "love the sinner."

What he did say - and it's an important distinction - is Love your **neighbor**. And by neighbor, he means everyone... your actual neighbors, your friends, your family, your co-workers, the cashier at the grocery store, even people you've never met.

And Jesus also said, Love your enemies - do not return evil for evil. Ghandi said, "an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind." When we show love to our enemies / return blessings for evil, we create possibilities for transformed situations and relationships.

So if we are called to love our neighbors and love our enemies, why doesn't Jesus ever say, "Love the sinner"?

One reason is that it would be redundant, since our neighbors and our enemies are both sinners. Every sinner is my neighbor, and some also are my enemy.

A more important reason, is that Jesus knew that if he commanded his disciples to "love the sinner," they would begin looking at other people more as sinners than as neighbors. And that, inevitably, leads to judgment.

If I love you more as a sinner than as my neighbor, then I am bound to focus more on your sin. I will look for all the things that are wrong with you. And perhaps without intending it, I will begin thinking of our relationship like this: "You are a sinner, but I graciously choose to love you anyway."

And THAT doesn't sound loving at all. It is self-righteous and prideful.

I think that Jesus knew well the human tendency to judge others and focus on their sin, and that this is why Jesus taught that we should avoid it. Instead, focus on simply 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 though we may emphasize that we also are sinners, our focus on the other as sinner defines the relationship in a really unloving way.... I will love you despite the fact that you are a sinner.

Earlier we read what Jesus said in the gospel of Matthew....

Do not judge others, and you will not be judged. For you will be treated as you treat others. The standard you use in judging is the standard by which you will be judged. And why worry about a speck in your friend's eye when you have a log in your own? How can you think of saying to your friend, 'Let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye,' when you can't see past the log in your own eye? Hypocrite! First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend's eye.

Jesus knew that we would struggle with the tendency to judge others, and it was this judgmentalism that Jesus wanted his disciples (then and now) to avoid. After all, Jesus' nonjudgmental approach was what drew people to him.

Very simply - judging others is NOT something his disciples should do.

If Jesus wouldn't say "Love the sinner," what would he say instead? How about...
Love your neighbor despite the fact that you are a sinner.

We love each other because we are people who need love - not judgment.

**So that's the first half of the "half truth."
But the second half has it's problems as well.**

And again - while Jesus spent time with drunkards, prostitutes, thieves, adulterers, traitors, cheaters, criminals....more than spent time with them, he ate with them, healed them, called them his disciples.... but again, we never hear Jesus say to them, "I love you, but I hate your sin."

When Jesus speaks to sinful people, he doesn't talk about their sin, but about God's forgiveness. In the Gospel of Luke, we hear of a time when the disciples had gathered for a meal at someone's house, and a "woman in sin" crashed the party. And she behaved inappropriately toward Jesus - washing his feet with her hair and pouring expensive perfume all over them. Simon wonders why Jesus would allow such a woman to touch him. And Jesus, after rebuking Simon, says to the woman "Your sins are forgiven."

Actually the only time when Jesus seems to display a hatred of sin is when the sin is committed by the religious leaders. We get this a little later in Matthew (Matthew 23:7-28) when he accuses them of being hypocrites "full of pretense."

And you know, that is one of people's number one reasons for not going to church - religious hypocrisy. I think what turns people off, is not the fact that we're ALL hypocrites, but that religious people repeatedly point out the sins of others.

The joke goes about the man who had died and was at the pearly gates entrance to heaven. St. Peter is there at the podium with the Book of Life, looking over the top of it at the man, and he says to him, "You were a believer yes, but you skipped the 'not being a jerk about it' part."

That should be our goal - to be Christians who are not jerks.
There is a Bible verse that gets confused with this cliché: (Romans 12:9)
Love should be shown without pretending. Hate evil, and hold on to what is good.

But Paul is not telling us to "hate sin" in someone else's life; he's telling us to hate the evil WE might be tempted to pursue in our own lives. Don't pretend to show love, then judge in the very next breath. Instead, "Let love be genuine."

A Taste of Heaven is a church that began as a soup kitchen in the early 1980's in a church in NYC. Through the years it grew into it's own church within a church and now it is common to see more people coming just for the church and not just for feeding.

Their pastor, Jes, tells of what happened there last week:

During church, one of the women was clearly intoxicated, clearly disruptive, clearly making all 100 of us uncomfortable. I motioned to our Assistant Pastor if he would go over and just be present with her as she was clearly upset. He is a very calming presence. She was still disruptive even in his exquisite care and I could feel the congregation looking to me "Do something Pastor Jes."

So I said, "Church, let's take a deep breath and calm our spirits. Love is patient so right now I need to pray. I think we all need to pray." So we prayed "God, it's hard to be human. We all know what it's like to cry out to you because we don't feel in control of our lives. Help us to be the church here and love each other, support each other, pray for each other, and remind each other of hope."

I preached. We prayed. And then the magic of the church happened.

As soon as the service was over three women went over to the woman who was clearly still crying and intoxicated. The women, without my prompting, began to minister to her "Do you need a hug?" "You're new here, can we help you?" "You aren't alone baby girl, we know what those cries are about." And then they took her to the bathroom to get her cleaned up and help her return to some dignity.

Yes there is sin in the world, and when that sin is inflicted upon others, we must, as the Bible says, "Speak out on behalf of the voiceless, and for the rights of all who are vulnerable." (Proverbs 31:8)

And we should be aware of our own sin and regularly invite God to transform us, heal us, and forgive us ~ which is why we begin our worship with a prayer of confession each week.

We are also to recognize that we may not see clearly how God sees, nor understand fully how God understands.

What we do know, without a doubt, is that we are commanded to love.... period.
The truth in "love the sinner, hate the sin" stops with the first word: Love.
Love.

Amen.