

McCabe United Methodist Church

March 18, 2018

Half-Truths Series: "Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin"

Sermon on Luke 18:9-14 & Matthew 7:1-5

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Last Sunday morning, as I do most Sunday mornings on my way to church, I popped-into Starbucks to get my usual dark roast with a light splash of cream. Walking out with my coffee, I saw a stack of Bismarck Tribunes...and the front-page headline both caught my eye and made me chuckle. Some of you may have seen it as well:

"Sinner funeral scheduled Friday."

Now. This headline is not meant to be funny and please know I mean no disrespect when I say it made me chuckle. Clearly, this headline refers to Governor *George* Sinner who was North Dakota's 29th governor...who served our state from 1985-1992, and who died a week ago Friday. Again, this headline was *not* meant to be funny. Nevertheless, it made me chuckle.

When I saw the headline, of course I *knew* it referred to *Governor* Sinner, but I chuckled and thought, "Well, that headline could apply to *anyone* whose funeral happens to be scheduled for this Friday."

"Sinner funeral scheduled Friday."

See, as people of Christian faith, we believe that we are *all* sinners who fall short of God's glory, and that we are in desperate need of God's grace in order to experience salvation and healing in this life. A headline like this could mark the scheduling of *anyone's* funeral. (If that funeral were happening on a Friday, that is...)

So, when I saw this headline early last Sunday morning, I couldn't help but chuckle a little at it. And then I thought, "Well, isn't that perfect for this weekend's sermon on the half-truth "love the sinner, hate the sin..."?"

But I'll get to this specific half-truth again in just a bit. First, let's briefly remember where we've been up to this point in this sermon series...

Throughout this series, we have used Rev. Adam Hamilton's book entitled *Half Truths* to consider some statements used by many Christians...statements that, while they may *seem* fully true – and they may *sound* like something in the Bible – are actually *not* fully true and are *not* in the Bible. Not fully, anyway.

The half-truths we've explored in this book and series, again, are:

“Everything happens for a reason.”

“God helps those who help themselves.”

“God won't give you more than you can handle.”

“God said it, I believe it, that settles it.”

And today's *final* half-truth: “Love the sinner, hate the sin.”

What's tricky about each of these phrases is that they really do *seem* like they could or should be fully true...and, again, they *sound* like things that could or should be in the Bible. But none of these phrases are, actually, in the Bible...and none of them are fully true when it comes to our beliefs as United Methodist Christians.

As Adam Hamilton writes early in his book, “Here's why it's important to examine these particular half-truths: I think they can sometimes hurt people. I think they can lead people to conclusions about God that not only are untrue but that may push some people away from God.”¹

The half-truth we're exploring this weekend, as we close-out this series, is most certainly guilty when it comes to pushing some people *away from* God. Like the other half truths, “love the sinner, hate the sin” *sounds* appropriate for Christians to believe and say...but, upon further exploration, proves to be a dangerous half-truth we might want to consider eliminating from our faith vocabulary.

When we think about *sin*, we understand sin as “straying from God's path” or “missing the mark,” as though we're shooting an arrow and aiming for the bullseye...but find that we can't always hit it.

Sin can also be understood as any thought or behavior that separates us from God and from our neighbor...any thought or behavior – intentional or unintentional – that causes physical or spiritual harm to ourselves or others.

This season of Lent – this journey toward the cross of Good Friday and the empty tomb of Easter Sunday – is meant to be a season of reflection, a season of confessing our sins and turning away from them. Though we wish not to be, we *are* sinners in need of God's mercy and grace. So, it would seem like we'd be okay to believe and to say the phrase “love the sinner, hate the sin.”

¹ Hamilton, Adam. *Half Truths*. 10.

But, see, the biggest problem with the phrase “love the sinner, hate the sin” is that it gives us permission to have an inherently judgmental attitude toward others. Let me say that again:

The biggest problem with the phrase “love the sinner, hate the sin” is that it gives us permission to have an inherently judgmental attitude toward others. After all, Jesus never explicitly told us to “love sinners.”

Granted, throughout the gospels, it is reported that Jesus “ate with tax collectors and other sinners” but, when it comes to who Jesus told us to *love*, he did not say anything about “loving sinners.” Instead, he told us to “love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves.”

Are our neighbors sinners? Sure. Are we ourselves sinners? You better believe we are. But imagine the difference in attitude toward others when we think of all the others in our lives as *neighbors* rather than as *sinners*.

Recall the parable Jesus told in Luke 18 – the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector praying at the temple.

The Pharisee – a religious leader, a pastor-type like me – had an over-developed sense of his own righteousness...and an *underdeveloped* sense of how to love his neighbors.

The prayer the Pharisee prays is just dripping with judgment, isn't it? “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.” And then he stops praying.

All this “saintly,” religious guy could manage to pray about was how much better he was than other people...and about the good, holy things he does. Fasting and giving a tenth of your income are good and holy things to do – of course they are! But there's no need to use such good and holy things as means to place yourself on a pedestal over and above others.

When we do that, we're putting ourselves in a judgment seat God never gave us to sit in...and we're putting ourselves on a pedestal we'll likely topple right off of with the slightest change in wind direction.

If we want to truly follow Jesus' command to love God and love neighbor, our seats shouldn't be judgment seats...and it's pretty hard to relate with neighbors when you're towering over them on a self-made pedestal.

Far better to have the attitude of the tax collector in Jesus' parable – the one who beats his chest and prays, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” And that is not a prayer out of an unhealthy sense of self-loathing. It's a prayer prayed out of a sense of humility before God. It's a prayer acknowledging our need for God's mercy and grace.

“God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” It's a prayer acknowledging the log in our own eye that prevents us from clearly seeing the speck in our neighbor's eye.

In thinking about those words of Jesus from Matthew chapter 7, I was tempted to find a log, bring it to church, and do a little “log in my eye” demonstration during this sermon...but, I didn't really have a log on hand *and* I worry about scratching up my glasses with a big piece of wood so close to my face. But! I did find this cartoon online:

Two guys in suits standing face-to-face. One guy has a big log – a *plank*, really – coming out of his right eye...and he says to the *other* guy, “Hey Bub, you have a little something in your eye there.”

It's pretty humorous: the guy with the log in his eye moves toward the guy who supposedly has a speck of something in *his* eye, and, good grief, the log could knock the poor guy over! To say nothing of the fact that his vision isn't what it should be thanks to the log. The image is powerful.

And what's challenging about this cartoon – for me, for sure...perhaps for you as well – is that, far too often, *I* am the one with the log in my eye. Though I hate to admit it, I'm pretty great at identifying the logs and specks in the eyes of others – especially if I am feeling judged by them.

But, the bottom line of this image is the point Jesus makes through it: any time we judge others – placing ourselves in the judgment seat or on a pedestal above them – we do so with clouded vision, with blocked perception.

And that's because we only ever see and perceive others through our own sin-tinged selves. That in mind, it is far better to humble ourselves toward God, to acknowledge our sins and foibles, to ask for mercy, and to then focus on the “love” part of this weekend's half-truth...rather than to put *any* emphasis on the “hate” part of it.

In his 1929 autobiography, Indian peace and resistance activist Mahatma Gandhi wrote this:

“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.” In his chapter on this weekend's half-truth, Adam Hamilton goes further saying,

“Gandhi was not advocating the idea of this half-truth: “I believe he was observing that most find it hard to hate another's sin without harming the sinner.”² *“Most find it hard to hate another's sin without harming the sinner.”*”

When we focus on *hating* the sin of others – rather than simply loving others as our neighbors – it is highly likely we will end up spiritually knocking them out with the log protruding from our own judgmental eye.

I don't know about you, but, to me, trying to tweeze the speck out of someone else's eye doesn't seem very loving...especially knowing just how much damage we could do if, in the process, we sideline them with the 2-by-4 we are wielding.

Now...in *theory*, “love the sinner, hate the sin” applies to all of us. But Adam Hamilton points out in this particular chapter of his book *Half Truths* that he seems, most often, to encounter Christians using the phrase “love the sinner, hate the sin” specifically in reference to people who are homosexual.

As Pastor Mark mentioned in his sermon last week on the half-truth “God said it, I believe it, that settles it,” we Christians interpret the Bible quite differently from one another when it comes to homosexuality.

In fact, I can guarantee that, wherever you are seated right now, as we worship, somewhere not too far from you is someone who does not believe the same thing you believe regarding the Bible, homosexuality, and God's particular perspective.

As far as today's half-truth is concerned, it is certainly meant to apply to all manner of “sinners” and behaviors deemed quote-unquote “sinful.” That said, like Adam Hamilton, I have also most often heard it directed toward people who are homosexual: “love the sinner, hate the sin.”

Of course, if we are ones to abide by this statement – and if we are ones who have said it ourselves – we should apply it to *everyone* we deem to be a sinner...and, if we believe that we are each of us sinners who fall short of God's glory, then it applies even to ourselves., right?

But, if we're being truly honest and reflective, how many of us would welcome the idea of this phrase being used about us?

I don't know what your particular sins of choice tend to be. *My* sins include – but are certainly not limited to – self-indulgence, gossip, gluttony, and judgmentalism...but, “love the sinner, hate the sin,” right?

² Both the Gandhi and Hamilton quotes are cited in *Half Truths*. 142-3.

Technically, the statement applies to me and it applies to the particular sins with which I most struggle. So, the statement is *true*, I guess. I certainly hope people *can* love me despite those sins. But it wouldn't exactly feel good to have someone direct this statement toward me.

“Jenny, I love you, but I sure do hate your sins.” Thanks, but no thanks. I'd rather be seen for the totality of who I am. I'd rather have people allow me some grace for my sins, trusting that I will do my best to allow *them* some grace for *their* sins...and trusting that God is working on *each of us*, helping us grow *beyond* our sins.

But, see, the thing is...no one ever *has* directed this phrase toward me. At least not to my knowledge. It would hurt if someone did, but, so far, no one ever has. That is *not* the case, however, for a member of McCabe who faithfully worships with us nearly every week and who also happens to be gay.

(This member has shared this story with both Pastor Mark and me – and he has given us permission to share it with you all. I'm going to call him “Brian”, but, to be clear, that is not actually his first name.)

Brian grew-up in a church tradition that was not United Methodist and he struggled for years with his sexuality, knowing his particular church clearly taught that homosexuality is a sin. His sexuality was a spiritual wrestling match for him, but, eventually, he came to a sense of personal peace about it...and he decided he was ready to tell his family.

Shortly after telling them, one of Brian's close family members said the phrase “love the sinner, hate the sin” to him...and it was such a painful punch in the gut that he intentionally disconnected from Christianity for 15 years. *15 years!*

Remember that quote of Adam Hamilton's I shared a bit ago – one that we shared very early in this series? Hear it one more time:

“Here's why it's important to examine these particular half-truths: I think they can sometimes hurt people. I think they can lead people to conclusions about God that not only are untrue but that may push some people away from God.”

Whatever our particular beliefs happen to be regarding what constitutes sin and what doesn't, the point of Jesus' teachings is that it's frankly not our job to make those judgments about others.

We can reflect personally on what sins cause *us* to harm ourselves and others...but judging others and hating the sins of others are tasks best left for *God* to sort out. Besides, I know I certainly experience more joy in life when I focus on loving people

as my neighbor, rather than on hating the specks of sin in their eyes. An attitude of love simply brings more joy for everyone – don't you think?

Let us pray...

God of us all, the challenge to love others is the most important challenge your Son Jesus placed before his first followers; and, as his followers today, we still struggle with it. Where there are logs of sin in our own eyes, grant us mercy and forgiveness. Remove from our hearts any self-righteousness. By your Holy Spirit, give us the grace to see others as you would have us see them – as neighbors who are worthy of our love and care. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.