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John 4: 27-29
Actually, that's not in the Bible: “Hate the sin, love the sinner”
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Earlier this year, NPR’s Terry Gross sat with a reporter from an online media (Vulture). The article begins with a humbling statement: “I wouldn’t be able to keep doing my job,” [Terry says] “if I wasn’t still so curious about people.” Terry impresses her excitement of entering new worlds and perspectives through the eyes and stories of others—especially those who share a different community, religious belief, age, race, gender…that we can learn so much from listing to one another’s stories. Those moments humanize us to each other. We forfeit the predetermined, and often harmful, labels…replacing, instead, with someone’s name, their vision, and their gifts!

This is the third week in our sermon series, “Actually, that’s not in the bible.” This week, we’ll dive into the misconstrued phrase, **“hate the sin, love the sinner**.” (and variations thereof) A quick google search brings up blog after blog, article after article, from writers and theologians talking about the dangers of believing an idea like that phrase, which promotes victim shaming, conversion therapy camps for LGBTQI teens, defends domestic abuse, sexual assault, and it strips us of the freedom to live into God’s grace as creatures with inherent sacred worth.[[1]](#footnote-1)

We need to clarify something here, before we’re in too deep:

Being queer, poor, disabled, or from a different country is not a sin.
(It’s not)

That doesn’t mean those who are gay or disabled or a migrant don’t sin, but these labels are not sinful—much of what concerns those who use the phrase ‘hate the sin, love the sinner,’ are what we call ‘cultural sins.’ Typically, these refer to anything different from an able-bodied, white, heterosexual normative in the world, in other words,…It’s false, incorrectly directed, judgmental piety…and it only leads to things like men who go around destroying rations left out for migrants, or even going so far as to excuse the sin for the sake of “well, he’s a good person, he couldn’t have forced her to have sex…she must have wanted it.” That’s even worse…because the story turns into: “love me, but hate what I do/ do as I say, not as I do.”

(I love you, but)

What is sinful is when we neglect, abuse, and silence one another. It’s sinful when we fail to fully see *all* people—when we begin defining each other through our sins rather than the grace which unites us. It’s sinful when we harm one another for the sake of having some weird sense of moral high ground at the sake of another human being.

Loving others requires a move of humility. Loving others requires that we fight the temptation to judge one another based upon mantras and theological concepts which require an *“other.”*

Because there is no “*other.”* In Christ, through Christ, and with Christ…we are new creations. God calls us God’s own and claims us. *That* is the good news. God loves you and calls you beloved—even, …*especially* when the world attempts to strips away your humanity and identity. Loving one another, seeing one another beyond their sins means admitting that we are also sinful; it’s why we continue living into a church and a people that believes in extending the table and not erecting a wall. “Hate the sin, love the sinner” creates an “other.”

And there is no “other.”

Last week, I attended a conference for queer Christians. Now, not everyone who attended claimed to be on the spectrum (LGBTQ), but many were parents, family, friends coming to learn about this community of Christ followers proudly living into their identity as God’s beloved. One speaker, a queer, black, ordained UCC woman, Bishop Yvette Flunder, shared her interpretation of the scripture from Isaiah 40 *as a way to teach us, encourage us, about the spiritual growth of an engaged community*:

but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,
    they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
    they shall walk and not faint.

She told us that the order seems backwards at first—flying, running, walking—but it also shows a serious consideration of spiritual maturity. When we fly, we are absent from the action on the earth, we fly above it all, checking it out; when we run, we find ourselves among the work and interactions of people, but not enough to engage; finally, when we walk, we walk assuredly, we walk with confidence and vulnerable steps. Her wisdom expressed her move from allowing others to define her through her sin/ or more accurately, her difference as sin, to living into the person whom God has lovingly and carefully made.

There are so many opportunities before us, as Christians to live and present the Gospel message of healing, rather than a hateful, neglectful mantra.

And that’s exactly what phrases like “Hate the sin, love the sinner” encourages… neglect and hate.

In the scripture narrative where Jesus defends the unnamed woman caught in adultery—the one the crowd prepared to throw stones at and kill—Christ redeemed her humanity, affirming that sin they accused her of, is *not* her deepest identity. The core of her being was God, and Christ saw that. Christ did not condone the crowd’s reaction to her sin. Every injustice that we find an excuse for or can explain away as rights to aggressively condemn, our hearts grow a little harder towards accepting and naming the harm our neighbors are subject to.

Jesus does better than love the sinner, hate the sin.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Because we are not known by our sins, but by the grace and Spirit of the ever present and loving God. We are called to advocate and cultivate healing for one another.

Blogger John Pavlovitz writes on the topic of “love the sinner, hate the sin”:

*…His [Christ’s] words were never given as license to police someone else’s moral condition, but to use as a mirror to assess one’s own. Any behavior modification, any inner conviction, any heart change would be between Jesus and those hearing his words. We don’t get to play middleman (sic) between Christ and another human being. We are assigned the tasks of feeding, healing, and caring for those we cross paths with, in Christ’s name.”*

Jesus does better than love the sinner, hate the sin.

In John 4, we are presented with the narrative of an unnamed Samaritan woman at the well. About noon, the text says, Jesus approached her…a Jew and a Samaritan…two vastly opposed religious communities…and they gathered around a public space, a well, just to talk. In doing so, Christ rejected any socio-religious barrier keeping them Christ from teaching, loving, and extending the table.

Establishing barriers is so lonely. There is a difference between promoting sin and promoting difference. In fact, the latter is preferred for the collaboration, gifts and skill sets, personalities, and awareness which nurtures growth and fruit in a community. The end of that narrative in John 4 wraps up with Jesus spending several days among the Samaritans as he loved and taught and ate with them—not labeling them or reacting based upon what the world proclaimed, but what God has decreed: we are *all* God’s. period.

There is hope. Always. When we don’t succumb to a false narrative where there is objectification, division, and fear of “the other.” In Christ we are made One, and we are made whole in our brokenness—a brokenness which doesn’t solely define us anymore. A common justification of this phrase is forgiveness (Well, yeah, he did this thing, but he’s sought forgiveness, so it’s ok)…which, yeah, it’s a reality; and as United Methodists, we ascribe to a ‘warming of the heart’ theology—that which happens internally…but without any change in behavior or expression, that forgiveness falls on false ears. “Faith without works is dead (James 2:14).” If you continue to persecute and abuse others, and claim ‘love me but hate what I do,’ we should talk, because Christ never said it, and it fails to encompass the healing work God calls us to. We aren’t perfect, but we are being made perfect. And we continue living into that hope of ‘on earth as in heaven,’ when we forsake narratives like “hate the sin, love the sinner,” which only presume a hierarchy of sin…instead, may we live in resurrection together as one body, striving for the empowerment of each other, for the best of one another… and the maturity to walk rather than fly.

1. *Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, paragraph 4, “Article IV: Inclusiveness in the Church.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Reverend Jeremy Smith in FUMC Portland [↑](#footnote-ref-2)