

We continue in our summer sermon series, “Bumper Sticker Theology,” and today’s bumper sticker is not found in the Bible. Jesus did not say it nor does the sentiment behind it reflect anything Jesus taught. This phrase also, like most of the others, is said by Christians with good intentions- at least I hope. Today’s bumper sticker is **“Love the sinner, hate the sin.”** “This phrase seems to have originated with St. Augustine, a bishop from North Africa who lived in the late 4th and early 5th centuries. In his capacity as a church leader, Augustine was writing a letter to nuns, asking them to remain chaste. In the letter he called them to have a ‘love for mankind and hatred of sins.’ However, it’s doubtful that Augustine meant to coin a phrase that Christians would use to describe their dislike of someone else’s sins. Mahatma Gandhi wrote something similar in his 1929 autobiography, but he added an important thought. ‘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.’ Gandhi was most likely observing that most people find it hard to hate another’s sin without harming the sinner” (Adam Hamilton, *Half-Truths*).

We all sin. We all have deviated away from the path God calls us to follow. Yet, some don’t like to claim- like Paul says in Romans- that we all have sinned and fall short of God’s glory (3:23). And sometimes as Christians we come across as hypocrites or as self-righteous, looking at others with disgust or pity. “I think what turns people off most about religious people is when we point out the sins of others but act as though we have no sins of our own. When ‘love the sinner’ is our mantra, we’ve put ourselves in a

position of seeing others as sinners, rather than neighbors” (Hamilton)- just as in need of God’s saving grace as we are.

At the end of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s Gospel, we find Jesus telling the crowds, including his disciples not to judge others. Jesus knew that people, including his disciples, would always struggle with the tendency to judge others. And he tells them, as he often did, by using an absurd and memorable metaphor: the splinter in your sister or brother’s eye compared with the log in your own eye. So then why does he say don’t judge if he knew it would be pretty much impossible not to judge? Many scholars say that the word “judge” here is neither accurate nor helpful (Warren Carter, workingpreacher.org). It is really misleading as we all judge and should at times, especially when it comes to discerning how we are to live in relation to God’s purposes. This interpretation of judging suggests something that is impossible to live up to and to obey. The verb used here commonly signifies end times’ judgment or condemning someone to hell. Therefore, it’s really “Do not condemn someone to hell.” “This translation addresses various situations involving other people: conflict, fear of outsiders, intolerance of difference, prejudice, disdain, anger, etc. In such situations, people can write others off as beyond redemption, outside God’s grace, and consign them to hell. The command forbids the arrogance of denying mercy, even dignity, to another. Followers of Jesus have no right to declare someone is beyond God’s mercy. If a disciple denies mercy to another, mercy will be denied to that disciple (7:1-2). Instead this text urges

self-awareness and prioritizes self-correction in engaging another (7:3-5)” (Carter).

All this to say that before we can call out another person’s sin, we first must address our own. This kind of condemning is not for us to do. There’s a story told from Billy Graham’s eldest daughter, Gigi, who was interviewed after her father’s death. She tells the story of her escorting her father to *Time* magazine’s 75th anniversary party, which was 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 the President lying under oath about his relationship with staff intern, Monica Lewinsky. Billy Graham and Gigi’s seats were next to President and Mrs. Clinton. Mr. Graham was warm and gracious to them. After dinner in the car ride back to their hotel, Gigi and her father discussed the difficulties the president and the 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” (Hamilton).

Yes, the first part of this bumper sticker is actually true. Of course we’re called to love sinners. Jesus did it all the time. He was called a friend of sinners. However, though Jesus loved sinners, he never actually said, “Love the sinner.” He said, “Love your neighbor.” In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus took it a step further and said, “Love your enemy” (Matt. 5:43-44). Putting words in Jesus’ mouth is always a slippery slope. Jesus, in our

second reading in Matthew's Gospel, sums up the Ten Commandments in two. A Pharisee, who is described as an "expert" in the law tests Jesus with a question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" (22:36). Maybe this was a trick question because there are 613 commandments or laws in the Jewish faith, and the Pharisee knew them all. The "holiness code" in Leviticus specifies in extreme detail laws such as you cannot wear cloth of dual blend (polyester/cotton) nor have tattoos, along not planting two types of seeds in your field, keeping the sabbath, maintaining specific purity rituals after childbirth or a menstrual cycle, etc. "But buried deep in that holiness code was one, single command, Leviticus 19:18, that Jesus said was more important than the 611 other commands. Jesus responded that the most important commandment is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength' [Deuteronomy 6:4]. The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself' [Leviticus 19:18]. There is no commandment greater than these." The questioner liked Jesus's answer and affirmed that these two commands were 'more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices'" (Daniel Clendenin, journeywithjesus.net). Here Jesus linked our love of God with our love of neighbor because you cannot separate the two. Jesus declares that "all the law and the prophets" hang on these two commandments, which means that without obeying them, the others really cannot be obeyed. "Love God. Love your neighbor. On these two commandments hang everything that matters in this world. Period" (Debie Thomas, journeywithjesus.net).

This kind of love isn't about feelings or emotions. No, this love the Bible describes requires discipline, practice, and exercise. This love requires effort on our part. "Jesus doesn't say, 'I sure hope love happens to you.' He says, 'Love is the greatest and first commandment.' Meaning, it's not a matter of personal affinity, feeling, or preference. It's not a matter of luck. It's a matter of obedience to the one we call 'Lord.' Biblical love is vulnerable-making and requires trust; it spills over the margins and boundaries and takes time and effort. What would it cost us to take Jesus' version of love seriously? Do we even want to? And yet this is the call. This is life in the kingdom of God. Which means that we have a God who first and foremost wants our love- not our fear, penitence, or piety. And we have a God who wants every one of God's children to also feel loved. By us. Not shamed. Not punished. Not chastised. Not condemned. But loved." (Thomas)

And with this bumper sticker, the stickiest part theologically is the second half- "hate the sin." Jesus hung around with a lot of drunkards, prostitutes, thieves, adulterers, traitors, tax collectors, and countless other sinners. He broke bread with them, healing them, and even called them to be his disciples. Jesus never said, "I love you, but I hate your sin." "When Jesus speaks to sinful people, he doesn't talk about their sin; he talks about God's forgiveness" (Hamilton). Are their sins we should hate? Absolutely! We should hate that people are victims of human trafficking. We should hate that children die every minute of starvation in our world of plenty. "Part of our witness as Christians is to stand up to evil and resist it. Generally,

though, when we use this bumper sticker, that's not what we're talking about" (Hamilton).

I need to name that these days when I hear this bumper sticker used it's usually tethered with a very large anchor to the topic of homosexuality. Not gluttony or slothfulness or wrath or greed or pride or idolatry or adultery or any other sin. As Christians many of us are divided about the question of same-sex marriage and ordination. Churches have split over this division. I received a phone call about six months ago in the office the kind of which was a first in my 25+ years of ministry. The man on the other end barely allowed me to get out my name when he gruffly asked, "Do you allow homosexuals in your pulpit?" I really didn't understand him at all at first. But if I would have, I would've told him that this pulpit is not mine. Maybe I was shocked by his tone and brazenness?! He got louder and repeated the question. I tried to collect my thoughts and put them into a coherent sentence. "Sir, Triune is a church that welcomes everyone and believes that we are all children of God made in God's image. "I'm glad they are in church because they need to hear the word of God. But that's not what I asked you," he snapped. Again, had I had time to get a word in edge-wise, I would have said, "Don't we all need to be in church to hear God's word?" I blurted out ahead of my thoughts: "Sir, if you're asking me if we've had someone who is gay in the pulpit here at Triune, the answer is yes." "Thank you for your honesty," he said. "I will no longer be giving you any of my money." And he hung up. Scripture contains a handful of passages from Moses to Paul that clearly disapprove of some forms of same-sex practice.

While I would like to expound more on this, time in this sermon does not allow. Maybe we can host a Bible Study, if there is interest, to take a deeper dive? An increasing number of Christians, including myself, don't understand homosexuality to be wrong, much less a sin. Upon much study of Scripture and lots of continued questions and prayer and pastoring over these years, I support full inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community. For me this is not a political standing; it's a theological one. Now I have many friends, including some of you, who may hold a different view theologically and that is ok. There is room at the table for all of us here, and I sincerely mean that.

But what we can agree upon, I hope, is the surety around Christ's call to love God and one another. Love is what Jesus repeatedly demonstrates to sinners, including you and me. Our job isn't to condemn people to hell but to love. For as heirs of Jesus Christ, we cannot love God while refusing to love who and what God loves. Christianity without love is no longer of Christ. If we defined ourselves by our sins, we would be unlovable. But God in Jesus doesn't say or do that. No! Amazing Grace! And in response to God's gift of grace, we are called to follow in the footsteps "of the one who stood in the presence of his accusers and enemies and declared love the be-all and end-all" (Thomas). The only truth in this bumper sticker stops with the first word, "Love." Let us love God and one another while striving to "lay aside our own sin and demonstrate humility and grace towards others" (Hamilton). Thanks be to God! Amen!