

Sermon Title: *Too Far Gone*

**Romans 12:9-10,14-21 Luke 15:1-10**

<sup>9</sup> Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; <sup>10</sup>love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.

<sup>14</sup> Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. <sup>15</sup>Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. <sup>16</sup>Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. <sup>17</sup>Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. <sup>18</sup>If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. <sup>19</sup>Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' <sup>20</sup>No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' <sup>21</sup>Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

**Luke 15:1-10**

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. <sup>2</sup>And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'

<sup>3</sup> So he told them this parable: <sup>4</sup>'Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? <sup>5</sup>When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. <sup>6</sup>And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." <sup>7</sup>Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.

<sup>8</sup> 'Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? <sup>9</sup>When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost." <sup>10</sup>Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.'

I spent last weekend at one of our Idaho prisons, I was participating in something called the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP)— a conflict transformation program created by Quakers and a few others in the late 1970s to help develop participants' abilities to resolve conflicts without using coercion or violence. These AVP workshops happen in prisons all over the US, and in local community groups and now throughout the world – in fact, just a few weeks before Jenna and I were in Iraq last year, Christian Peacemaker Teams had brought someone in to lead AVP workshops with local leaders there.

As part of this, I spent all weekend referring to myself as “Mennonite Marc” before I spoke – whenever I spoke, I had to say my name along with my corresponding affirmative adjective. Each participant had to do this, to come up with an alliterative adjective that went with their name that was affirming – it was sort of a peculiar thing to hear some big and tough guys calling themselves “Confident Carl” or “Dynamic Dallas.” And to me, this seemed a little hoakie at first, more like something I might do on the first day of school or youth group, not something I would do in a men’s correctional institution. But why we did it, I was told, is because one of the core working principles of AVP is to help build self-affirmation in the participants, to help build their self-confidence in positive ways because the more positive of a view one has of themselves, the less likely they are to respond with violence or in anger when they feel offended or disrespected by the actions of another – the deeper the sense of self one has internally, the less likely they are going to need to seek their sense of self/identity externally. And so we called ourselves “Mennonite Marc” and “Bodacious Benjamin” and we spent time going around the circle listing the things we appreciate about ourselves; we spent time saying what we valued about each other. We spent time trying to restore right relationship with ourselves – this is the

work of reconciliation, the work of reconciliation with ourselves – the work of reconciling the deep need we all have to remember that we in fact are children of God with limitless potential; to build for the first time, or to renew our sense that we are wanted, that we are valued; to renew our sense that each person here has the love and image of God knit deep into their being.

There is so much we do in our world and in our culture that attempts to drown out the voice of the One who created us, the voice of the One who says, “this is my creation, and it is very good.” In theological language, we have historically called this sin – that which breaks right relationship. Throughout this series on reconciliation, I keep referring to the Hebrew term of *shalom*, that sense of all things being as they should be, of all things being in right relationship. And, as you may remember, *shalom* has four components: right relationship with self, with others, with God, and with all of creation (they are on the bulletin board when you enter and exit, if you need a reminder).

So, if this is our working concept of things being as they should be, then sin is anything which breaks relationship – sin is anything which seeks to separate us from our true selves, from God, from our full human family, or from God’s great creation. And when we think about what breaks right relationship between us and ourselves, that which keeps us from believing that the Creator of the Universe is simply in love with us, well, there is much in our world that seeks to do that.

For instance, it’s the sin of a father who disengages from the life of his children; it is the sin of a sibling who cuts their sister or brother out of their life. It is the sin of a teacher who disengages from responsibility to educate the kids at the back of the room, or the sin of a pastor

who uses fear and concepts of hell as their primary tool of ministry. The sin of consumerism that seeks to get us to believe that we are not complete as who we are, but that we need some new object to make us feel whole. The sin of capitalism which makes us believe we are what we earn. The sin of a mayor who disengages from responsibility to steward whole neighborhoods of a city, or the sin of a legislator who disengages from the responsibility to serve and protect whole vulnerable people groups. The sin of a nation who wages continual war on another nation, pummeling them with bomb after bomb in name of National Security – communicating to each one living there that our American security comes at the expense of their security.<sup>1</sup> All “these actions communicate lies to the souls of the brokenhearted about who they are, what they are capable of, and what their value. It heaps shame on the shoulders of people who have done no wrong and has the capacity to crush souls as it declares, ‘You are unworthy.’”<sup>2</sup> These are all ways that diminish the truth that God is simply in love with you, and instead communicates, “God favors some of Her children more than others.” And, my friends, this is sin. I hope my strong theological language is not lost on you here, because I do not throw that word around lightly.

Let us consider for a moment one of the deepest and longest societal sins, the lies about race that our society has, and continues to tell, lies which obscure the message that, the God of the Universe is simply in love with you. In a speech delivered three years after the passing of the Civil Rights Act, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said that, “Even semantics have conspired to make that which is black seem ugly and degrading. In Roget's *Thesaurus* there are some 120 synonyms

---

<sup>1</sup> My list is inspired by, and adapted from one written by Lisa Sharon Harper's chapter “Shalom with Self” in her book, *The Very Good Gospel*.

<sup>2</sup> Lisa Sharon Harper, *The Very Good Gospel*, p.75.

for blackness and at least sixty of them are offensive, such words as blot, soot, grim, devil, and foul. And there are some 134 synonyms for whiteness and all are favorable, expressed in such words as purity, cleanliness, chastity, and innocence. A white lie is better than a black lie. The most degenerate member of a family is the ‘black sheep.’ Perhaps,” he continued, “the English language should be reconstructed so that teachers will not be forced to teach a black child sixty ways to despise himself, and thereby perpetuate his false sense of inferiority, and the white child 134 ways to adore himself, and thereby perpetuate his false sense of superiority.”<sup>3</sup>

These ways and so many more have broken our true sense of self and disrupted our ability to receive and believe the message that the God of love will never stop until 100 out of 100 sheep have been brought back into the fold. Far too many people have come to believe the lie that they are bad rather than beautiful, that we unworthy and unwanted instead of cherish and adored – this has created shame.

Over the past two decades psychologists, psychiatrists, and other mental health professionals have reported that abnormal styles of handling shame play a major role in social phobias, eating disorders, domestic violence, substance abuse, road rage, schoolyard and workplace rampages, sexual offenses and a host of other personal and social problems. Shame is insidious. It hits at the core of our being and moves from there to affect everything else. “It has nothing to do with the truth,” says Lisa Sharon Harper, “it is based on lies about the essence of our being. Voices have driven lies deep into the pits of our souls and drowned out the

---

<sup>3</sup> From Dr. King’s speech, “Where do we go from here?” delivered at the annual convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Atlanta on August 16, 1967.

voice of the One who created us,”<sup>4</sup> the voice yelling, “you are my beloved – you are beautiful in my sight.” The voice crying, “I know you and love you.”

Shame is a social concept, says Brene Brown. And thus, the counter to shame is not self-confidence, as shame is a social concept – it happens between people – thus, it also heals between people. Brown says, “if we share our story with someone who responds with empathy and understanding, shame can’t survive.” Thus, another core piece of the work of the Alternatives to Violence Project is trying to teach and build the skills of empathy – trying to learn to listen with empathy. Through building self-affirmation and empathy, AVP seeks to restore shalom with self, so that we might also have shalom with others and with God.

Some of you might have seen or heard interviews with Christian Picciolini over the past couple of weeks. Picciolini is a former leader of a White Supremacist group who now runs a non-profit called, “Life After Hate”, a group which is dedicated to helping transition people out of White Supremacy – he seeks to be a bridge out of their line of thinking. But at “Life After Hate” they do not do this by arguing with people ideologically, instead their approach is to work with people in a compassionate and empathetic way – to listen to what they have to say. Christian says that as he meets other White Supremacists, he listens for potholes—for what existed in their path that might have produced shame and blame. And then, he says that his job becomes to fill those potholes, whether it’s job training or life coaching or tattoo removal or mental health therapy. “And what happens inevitably is, when people are more equipped, understand what they’re dealing with internally, they don’t necessarily need to blame somebody else for what they feel is

---

<sup>4</sup> From Harper’s chapter “Shalom with Self” in *The Very Good Gospel*.

being taken away from them, because now they're more resilient and they're more able to compete and they're more self-confident." He does work to challenge their ideology, as well, but not by debating. Of his approach, he says, "What I do is I introduce them to people that they think that they hate. And I've introduced Holocaust deniers to Holocaust survivors, Islamophobes to imams and Muslim families to have family dinner. And it's those types of connections", he says, "those opportunities to humanize, that really bring people back, because people join these groups because they're out searching for something that they're not getting in their real life."<sup>5</sup>

We might say, people join these groups because somewhere along the way, whether structurally or individually or probably some combination of both, there was a break in relationship with themselves – there was something, some sin, that obscured a deep belief of identity that they are worthy, that they are beloved.

And I want to take us out of here with a clip from Christian – an interview with him on *Democracy Now!* where he is talking with the nephew of a current white supremacist whose family came out publically in their local North Dakota newspaper essentially saying that they are disowning their family member who was part of the White Supremacist march in Charlottesville. And Christian is responding to this families belief that their son, uncle, and brother is simply too far gone.

**From Youtube**      <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fUw4jA2-ftU>  
**start: 28:27 end: 29:51**

---

<sup>5</sup> From his interview with Amy Goodman on *Democracy Now!* The interview can be found at [https://www.democracynow.org/2017/8/18/life\\_after\\_hate\\_full\\_intv\\_with](https://www.democracynow.org/2017/8/18/life_after_hate_full_intv_with)

*I don't believe that anybody is ever too far gone. I don't believe that anybody is ever too far gone.* In the wake of these past weeks, as we continue to think about our work of reconciliation, this is the good news that I want us to end on, that the work of reconciliation does not end until every coin has been found and until sheep has been gathered back into the fold. Because our God is never satisfied with only the 99, because the God of the Universe is simply in love with you – no matter how much we might have forgotten or obscured that truth – our God's love is so unending that it will not stop, even after death. We follow a God of tenacious love.

And so may we too be a people of tenacious love – a people who live out of the place of that core identity, that the God of the Universe is simply in love with us, that healing and hope might flow through us and to the world.

### **Sending Blessing**

*And now as you go from this place, may the God of tenacious love go with you –*

*helping you to believe the deep truth about yourself,*

*that you are worthy of God's great and unending love*

*– may we truly believe this,*

*that healing and hope might flow through us and into the world.*

*Go in peace. Amen.*