

KAILUA CHRISTIAN CHURCH
Sunday, September 29, 2024
Sermon: The Dirty Teenager in the Basement
Rev. Irene Willis Hassan

Scripture:

1 John 3:4-17; 23-24

4 Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. 5 You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. 6 No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. 7 Little children,[b] let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. 8 Everyone who commits sin is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The Son of God was revealed for this purpose: to destroy the works of the devil. 9 Those who have been born of God do not sin because God's seed abides in them; [c] they cannot sin because they have been born of God. 10 The children of God and the children of the devil are revealed in this way: all who do not do what is right are not from God, nor are those who do not love a brother or sister.

11 For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. 12 We must not be like Cain, who was from the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. 13 Do not be astonished, brothers and sisters, that the world hates you. 14 We know that we have passed from death to life because we love the brothers and sisters. Whoever does not love abides in death. 15 All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them. 16 We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers and sisters. 17 How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

23 And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. 24 All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

Sermon: The Dirty Teenager in the Basement

When I first moved back to the US from the Middle East, I spent some time in Seattle working for a refugee office. The office was in the basement of a church, and had been there for quite a long time because the rent remained low despite skyrocketing prices in the city during the tech boom. We were the only refugee office in greater Seattle that was still within the city limits proper because all the other offices had been priced out of the area. It was a good deal, and an important one to have a service provider in the actual city where refugees lived and worked rather than out in the suburbs. However, that office moved a couple years ago out into the suburbs like all the other agencies, despite losing such a valuable rental space in terms of location and price.

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There were several reasons for the move – but the main one, that was a continual problem even back in the days when I was employed there – was that the church

seemed to hate us.

We never saw any of the church people, just the kind young pastor named Edward who often came downstairs to enjoy homemade Ethiopian sweets and laugh with the Iraqi knitting group. We enjoyed having Pastor Edward around occasionally to minister to us and the folks in difficult situations whom we served.

Every so often, however, he came downstairs with a pained look on his face. He was charged with providing us complaints from the phantom congregation that we never met. “Tell the men they can’t smoke within 25 feet of the building” “There’s a smell coming from whatever they’re cooking that our ladies’ prayer group upstairs finds distasteful, can you wait to cook until they’ve left?” “Someone graffitied racial slurs on the sanctuary windows again, can you have someone come clean it up?” The complaints we received from the congregation were a regular staple of our otherwise good natured visits from Pastor Edward. My coworker sometimes joked that the church didn’t see us as a refugee office that was assisting the needy in finding new life in a foreign land – they thought of us as dirty teenagers in the basement leaving old pizza and soda cans everywhere and loudly playing video games until 2am. It made existing in that space, despite the good rental price and location, an often very uncomfortable affair. Eventually, the refugee office and the church made a mutual decision to part ways and the refugee office moved into a small hole in the wall office in the suburbs for double the price they had paid at the church.

I selected these verses from 1 John 3 about the nature of sin because I often look back on that situation and wonder who was the sinner there. Granted, we are all sinners kneeling before a forgiving God, but there’s an expectation of Christians that we turn away from our sins and become sanctified in Him when we lay those sins at His feet. My experience of that church was not this image of loving Christians that we see outlined in 1 John.

1 John defines “sin” as “lawlessness.” Jesus outlines what His laws are for us in Matthew 22: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” The author of 1 John repeats this commandment at the end of his definition of sin as “lawlessness” in the verses we read today as an emphasis that this commandment is the law in question. When we fail to do these two things: love God with every part of our being, and then love our neighbors – this is when we find ourselves susceptible to sin.

In the situation of church and refugee office, it didn’t seem to me that these two laws were being obeyed. I think the church probably thought that they were protecting God’s holy place from the sinners in the basement, and that they were loving their neighbors by providing a sizable space in a great location for cheap rent. The laws are obeyed,

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they believed: keep God’s church property holy, and also provide a merciful space for the needy. It makes sense logically. Yet, in practical application, the refugee office and church ended up growing so mutually weary of each other that the relationship did not last. It doesn’t seem like an agreement that was made in the image of God’s Kingdom would crash and burn with such resentment.

In the chapter we read today from 1 John, the author surrounds this section about sin and lawlessness with assurances to the congregation that the world will necessarily hate them. I often wonder if the church wrote off that relational breakdown with our refugee office as the world being full of sinners trying to contaminate their sacred space, including our ragtag little refugee office full of chain-smoking trauma victims and women using thick foreign spices for cooking.

Sure, smoking is a sin because it disables the smoker from using his health and finances toward serving God. Messiness or disrespect of a shared space is also sinful, as it's selfish and doesn't demonstrate love in relationship to the people you're sharing space with. Perhaps these perceived disrespectful or sinful actions were valid concerns of the congregation, but voicing these concerns in the way that they did didn't demonstrate to me or any of my colleagues at the refugee office attention to the commandment to love God and love our neighbors.

We show that we love God when we invite others into the freedom Christ brings us and offer His abundant healing and grace to others. Yet, the congregation never once came down to speak to us directly in the entire time I worked there. They could have sat outside with the chain-smoking Eritrean man and learned from him that he smokes heavily because it dampens the memory of his whole family getting blown to pieces by a terrorist militia. They could have sat with the Venezuelan woman in the kitchen and learned that frying plantains helps her bring some of the happy memories she left behind into her new environment that feels cold and foreign. That congregation could have extended a thousand olive branches of invitational love to their "dirty teenagers in the basement," but instead they sent passive aggressive third party messages to us through the Pastor until we decided we needed a safer place to work.

That church had a real opportunity to make disciples. Jesus came to heal the sick, empower the poor in spirit and save the lost. The church had a whole village of lost, broken, and desperate people sitting literally under its feet, all of whom could have benefitted exponentially from being ministered to by the love of Christ. But they didn't, and to me, that is breaking the laws of the commandment.

The situation that led to the refugee office fleeing the church basement was filled with sin because it didn't obey the commandments. Loving God means putting all your heart, strength, and soul into making disciples in His name through healing the poor in spirit and

brokenhearted. Yes, it would have been a lot of work (and secondhand smoke) to sit with those men outside on the pavement in front of the church and help them walk into a new reality. Yes, it would have been a lot of work to try to find safe spaces for the memories produced by plantain frying without filling the church building with the stink of grease. But as Jesus' disciples, it's the law that we put all our strength into that work. And it's the law that we love our neighbors as ourselves. I've never received a passive aggressive third party message before and instantly thought of it as an "act of love."

I tell you this story because I wonder where in our own hearts and lives we're sending passive aggressive third-party notes to the dirty teenagers in our metaphorical basements. Where are we taking the easy road of gossiping about someone behind their back, instead of disciplining them into better behavior that's fixed on Jesus? Where are we tricking ourselves into thinking we're following the commandments, but actually we're just preserving ourselves? Where are we manipulating the commandments into something self-serving?

I want to leave you with this: the story of the refugee office and the church isn't just about that one congregation in Seattle. It's a story about all of us. It's a story about how easy it is to slip into protecting ourselves, maintaining our comfort, and checking boxes that make us feel like we're fulfilling God's commands. But in doing so, we can miss the very heart of those commands—to love God with everything we have and to love our neighbors as ourselves, especially when it's messy, difficult, or uncomfortable.

Every person in this room has someone in their life that is difficult, broken, unhealed. That person may even be yourself. When we think about the "dirty teenagers in the basement" in our own lives—whether it's individuals we find hard to love, situations we'd rather avoid, or even parts of ourselves that we neglect—it's a call to step into the harder work of discipleship. It's a call to open our hearts, our hands, and our spaces to those who need healing, guidance, and love, just as Jesus did.

Christ came not for the perfect, but for the broken, for the lost, for those who the world might easily overlook or reject. And we, as His church, are called to do the same. We're called to go beyond the superficial, beyond passive judgments, and actively engage in the work of love, grace, and transformation.

I ask you to reflect on where God might be calling you to step out of your comfort zone, to sit with the broken, and to love in ways that may feel hard or even impossible. Because that is where true discipleship begins. Let us not take the easy path of passive notes and distant relationships. Instead, let us lean into the transformative power of Christ's love and offer it fully to those around us—whether they're in our basements or in our own hearts.

Let us commit ourselves to being Christ's hands and feet, showing the world that the church is a place not of separation but of healing, of love, and of hope. And let's remember, we do this because He first loved us. Amen.