The following sermon was preached on a Sunday when a group of people had announced their intention to picket University Baptist Church because of their ministry with gay and lesbian persons. The response of the wider community was overwhelming and humbling. At least twenty other congregations (including two Jewish congregations) were represented by delegations and many other individuals joined them. The Sanctuary was packed as this diverse gathering shared a transcendent moment of unity in our belief that God is love.

What I am wondering today is, where did you all park? And which of you prayed I would get bronchitis, knowing how long winded Baptist preachers can be? But I don't need to say much today because we have a sermon so powerfully embodied for us in the experience of this hour. Someone has joked that laws are made like sausage, but sermons are the same way. The meat of God's word gets ground up and spiced over in some preacher's head and what comes out of his or her mouth often has little resemblance to the original. How else could you explain two groups of people studying the same Bible and coming out so diametrically opposed to each other? Well, it happens with the Constitution and the simplest contracts, too. So don't blame the Bible for what some people do with it. But let me just point to what we are seeing here today and articulate how the Bible is getting fleshed out in real life.

Today we have a study in contrasts. Here are some folks who preach hatred in the name of God. The clarity of their message is striking, shocking even. They are the best argument I know for the separation of church and state. And in many ways they are easier to take than those folks who say God loves but do hateful things! But the real contrast today is with this church and its friends who have dared to say we believe God loves all persons.

Would you ever have imagined a church getting picketed for being too loving? I can imagine somebody picketing a church for insensitivity to its neighborhood or for not caring about the poor and hungry. It might even make sense to picket a church these days for being seduced by the culture, say, for being too materialistic or too greedy for power. But who would picket a church for loving people in the name of Christ? Or refuse to accept its mission money? Or kick it out of its fellowship? Or call it "the fundamentalists of the left?"

In here today we are white and black and brown. We are male and female. We are gay and straight. We are young and old. We are rich and poor. We are fat and thin. We are Baptist and Presbyterian and Episcopalian and Methodist and Catholic and Metropolitan Community Church, we are Christian and Jewish and perhaps even a few non-aligned. We are each unique, as the psalmist says, "fearfully and wonderfully made," the intentional creation of a good and artistic God. And, we believe, God loves every person God has made and invites all of us equally
to the table of life. So there it is. They say God hates. We say God loves. Which does your own heart tell you is true? Which community looks more like the dominion of God to you?

They have their scriptures and their interpretations. And we have ours. John 13:34-35 - "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." 1 John 4:7-8 - "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love." Would you repeat those last three words with me? "God is love." Isn't that music to your ears? Let's say them again and savor each word: "God is love." Yes! Shall we even say it loud enough for them to hear us outside? "God is love!" God is love, and I'm just another preacher, but these words don't seem to me all that hard to understand. The Bible does not qualify by saying God is love for some but God is hate for others. In fact the same passage goes on to insist: "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from God is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also" (1 John 4:19-21).

"God is love" was a radical idea in that day though by no means new. Isaiah had said as much, and so had some of Israel's rabbis. But still, every nation, every race, every tribe believed in its own god against others. They believed, to quote the Austin Lounge Lizards, "God loves me, but he can't stand you." But when Jesus told them they should love their neighbor, that their neighbor meant the Samaritans, or even the Romans, or even the Gentiles, or later, even the Jews, when he said stuff like you should forgive someone seventy times seven, they were offended.

Now to be sure, the Bible says God hates. God hates injustice. God hates arrogance. God hates sin, those things we do to damage one another. God hates the greed and indifference that allows some people to starve while others have food to throw away. But most of all, it seems to me, the Bible says God hates hate. That is why Jesus even tells us "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Luke 7:26-31). Jesus loved, and wherever people had failed to live up to God's best dreams for them, he didn't quit loving them. He wanted to redeem them, lead them to recovery for God.

Ironic, isn't it, that our gospel reading today would have Jesus using the word "hate?" "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26). My Greek lexicon tells me that "disregard" or "detach from" are equally faithful translations, and I much prefer them to "hate." Every commentator suggests Jesus is using the rabbinic method of hyperbole here, gross exaggeration to make a point. Still, I wish he had not used a word that could even be translated "hate," when there are people all too ready to take him literally at this point, while ignoring everything else he has to say about love.

Jesus' point in this entire passage is the sad reality we are experiencing today. Soren Kierkegaard once complained that eloquent preachers were creating many admirers of Jesus, but few
followers. Jesus had become something of a celebrity in his own day, so one day when the
crowds gathered, he tried to get them to understand that his was a hard way, a way of challenging
the typical patterns of power and animosity in his world. Indeed. Everybody was glad to hear
Jesus say God loved them. But many of them turned away when Jesus said God loves everybody
else and we should too. And still more turned away when they saw the hostility Jesus and his
followers drew when they tried to break down their us-against-them walls.

It's still true today. If you follow the way of Christ, or the Torah of God try to love all people in
the name of God, some people will hate you for it. If you feed the hungry, somebody will
complain you are attracting the wrong kind of people to the neighborhood. If you ask, "why are
there so many hungry," somebody will call you a "communist." If you say the Iraqis are our
neighbors, too, someone will tell you its not in our national interest. When you say God loves the
prisoners on death row, they will call you an empty headed idealist. And if you love the people
somebody else hates, they will hate you, too. Hate is a scary, damaging thing, born of fear and
inadequacy. It poisons the souls of the people who feed on it, and it gives them permission to do
evil in the name of the God who commanded us to love. So be careful about saying "God is
love," if you don't really believe it. Don't take God's name in vain if you aren't willing to live by
it. Don't try to love others in the name of God if you aren't willing to pay the price. Because any
time you say "God is love" in a context of hate, that hate is going to turn on you.

You have exposed yourself to hate in coming here today, and I commend you for your courage.
It would have been easier to stay home. I suppose it always is. But that is the call of the cross for
the Christian, to be the church, the body of Christ in the world loving all people with the love of
God even when it costs you something. But isn't this a glorious sight? This is the best counter-
demonstration I can imagine, that we come in here and sing the hymns of the church and share
the Lord's table and worship the God who has loved us and called us to live by that love. Will we
ever take our freedom to worship so much for granted again? I think true worship is always
countercultural because whatever our status in the world, whenever we come to God
authentically, God cuts through all the false pride and power games and greed and hostility and
puts us all on the same level. Then God lifts us up to see that we can do better, we can be more,
we can love others, too, all others, with God's own heart.

The undiluted message of God's love is always subversive to those soulless institutions and
social forces and individual bullies that demean and oppress. See how it happened in Paul's letter
to a slave owner telling him that God's love makes his slave no longer his slave but his brother. It
took the church about 1600 years to understand that as God's judgement against the institution of
slavery, but it happened. Well, the church is still learning, we are still learning how radical the
notion is that "God is love," how it includes everybody and not just some. But that's what the
good news is all about. The love of God subverts slavery and racism and sexism and
heterosexism and every other means we have of hating one another.

That's what's happening here today. I cannot find words more profound than this image that is
here before me. In a moment when a group of people shout hate in the name of God, you have
gathered here to assert the love of God. I am so privileged to pastor a church that has the courage
to stand for God's inclusive grace in spite of the cost. We are so privileged to have friends like
you who have come to join us from your own houses of faith today because you also believe in
the love of God. We can expect to pay some price for living by the good news, and it has been a small price for us compared to the courageous predecessors of our faith, but isn't it a privilege to pay that price? I wish time would permit me to share the letters and emails and phone calls I have received over the last few years, not from the people who want to judge us even though Jesus expressly told his followers that judgement is God's prerogative and God offers grace. I mean the correspondence from people who have said, "Thank you! You have given us hope for our child. You people have helped me recover my faith. Your church has provided a safe place for us to worship and serve God. People like you (meaning all of you!) are the reason I've come back to the church."

My friends, your presence here makes a difference, not only to the rest of us this morning, but to people who could not be here, even to people who are yet to be born. You are expanding the dominion of God. Christ is extending the new creation through you. Aren't you glad to be part of a new work of God to break down the dividing walls of us against them and create a safe place for all God's children?

Now this is what I propose. We have been gathered here today as a community of people who believe God is love. Let us leave this place newly committed to living by that word. Let us go out as God's agents and subvert the ways of hatred around us. Let us show by our own words and deeds that God loves the people our lives touch, God is love. That is our word for those who preach hate, carrying signs and picketing God's church, or passing policies that exclude, or hating people in a thousand subtle but damaging ways. Let all of Austin know, let the wider church hear, let every person despised and rejected by the self-righteous gatekeepers remember that God does love them, and they are not forgotten, and let us love them ourselves more deeply than we have heretofore. Let the whole world see God's love in us and hear our affirmation ring to the rafters until they can hear God reassuring them in their own hearts. What does the Bible say? God is love! What does the Bible say? God is love! What does the Bible say? God is love!

Amen! Thanks be to God! Let us pray.

God of Grace,

Thank you for the privilege we have to proclaim your love today. Thank you for loving us, and help us to love others as you do. Thank you for gathering us as one people here even though we come from so many different churches. Teach us how to support and encourage each other more through the daily challenges we face in following you. And teach us to love even the people who hate. We pray for those who have come here to proclaim hate in Jesus' name today and for those who have proclaimed your love while practicing hate. Heal their hearts, O Lord. Heal their hearts with your love. And as we come to the sacred table which remembers our own need for grace, keep us humble. Remind us there may be areas where we also are blind to our error, where our passion gives us permission to do evil, where our certainty is matched by our absurdity. Most of all, help us not to take your name in vain, but faithfully - and when necessary, courageously - let all the world know that God is love, for all people, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.