

“Touch Holiness”

I’d like to open today’s message with several stories. They are all fiction, but actually, I believe they do resemble real people, both living and dead.

A homeless man stumbled along the street. He muttered under his breath, talking to unseen people. Suddenly, with a choked gasp, he fell to the pavement. He lay in a heap of filthy clothing. Spittle pooled around his mouth in his grizzled beard. At that moment a group of teens turned the corner.

“Oh, gross—geez, what’s that derelict doing lying there on the sidewalk?”

“Must be drunk and passed out—oooh, sick,” another responded.

They hurried past as fast as possible. Others passed with the same distress, holding their breath to avoid the stench that rose from the man. Finally one man, though not stopping himself, called the paramedics. Arriving on the scene, they discovered he appeared to be the victim of a heart attack, and began treatment. It wasn’t easy for them either, to approach and handle this foul-smelling, ragged man.

A young man was enjoying the evening with his date. He kept moving in close to her at every opportunity. He knew his objective: to make as much physical contact as possible. The young woman did seem a little uncomfortable, but she wanted to be polite, and didn’t want to be a rigid prude. She’d let him know if he got really out of line..... it’s HER problem if she’s GOT a problem, right?

The young mother pushed the cart rapidly through the aisles of the grocery store. The baby in the cart was wailing, and the toddler kept grabbing things off the shelves shouting, “Want dis! Want dis!” Finally the purchases were paid for and loaded in the car. The baby and toddler were strapped into their seats. Turning to check on them one more time before starting the engine, the mother saw her toddler distinctly and intentionally poke the baby in the eye. Wails pierced the air. Leaning over the seat the mother slapped whatever she could reach of the toddler in anger and frustration until a pain in her twisted back made her stop and turn away.

The chubby little girl raced over to the playground swings as recess began. But two other children got there first. She slowed her steps, but the others spotted her. They

leapt to their feet, holding their noses. "Oh, no, here comes smelly, smelly, lard-o!" they squealed. Other children around took up the taunts. "Blubber butt, blubber butt," they chanted. Tears stinging her eyes, she went to stand with the playground aide.

He began his sophomore year in the new high school, and it was tough. His was the ONLY darker face in a sea of white. Kids asked him what they should call him, "What are you anyway?- Some kind of spic or wop or chink or what?" Some kids were ok. But it was still tough. He was an outsider no matter what. But then there was an attack on a U.S. embassy, and the kids found out what he was. An Arab. An enemy.

Mid-life was difficult. It seemed that every few hours he was chewing antacids. He had trouble sleeping. His wife wanted him to see the doctor- but how could he find the time? His boss needed charts and info, and some very VEE EYE PEAS were flying in this noon. The doctor visit would just have to wait.

A car sped along the highway. The window was rolled down briefly, and several cans and fast food bags bounced out, rolling along the embankment.

Ok. These stories may have seemed completely disconnected and unrelated. But they aren't. They all give examples of SIN. (Let's use a simple definition of sin here: sin is any action or attitude that is not God's will.) These stories reveal sin, one in particular. These stories illustrate sin against the Temple of the Holy Spirit. They tell of sins against and of the body.

Paul talks about this sin in our Epistle reading today. His words reveal a number of things about the church in Corinth. A group of members were pushing Paul's teachings of being free in the Spirit beyond the limits. Paul appears to quote their own slogans, "All things are lawful for me. Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food." They had a permissive attitude, seeing eating as a physical activity and nothing more.

Then they extended this notion to sexual behavior. They could do what they wished with their bodies, since sexual contact was a physical activity, like eating, and nothing more.

These church members made a sharp distinction between the body and the spirit, and saw the body as totally unimportant. "Nourish the spirit," they taught, "but you can do whatever you want with the body."

Paul rejected this attitude and taught that all we are, including the body, is precious. Our bodies are part of the body of Christ, and are linked to God in ways that are filled with mystery. Since we TOGETHER make up the body of Christ, we are also linked to one another in ways that are filled with mystery.

What we do with our bodies affects other members of Christ's body. What happens to our bodies, happens to our spirits. And because the human body and personality are the dwelling place of God, what happens to our bodies happens to the God who lives within us.

Paul focuses on sexual sins in this passage. Sexual contact and relating are esteemed by Paul to be profoundly serious because the whole human person and Divine presence are involved. There is no such thing as casual or insignificant sexual contact according to Paul.

Paul affirms that we are, indeed, FREE. But we are free, in Christ, to be ALL THAT GOD IS CALLING AND LEADING US TO BE. Our bodies cannot be separated from that process.

Sexual sins of the body and against the body are frequent and widespread. In my 24 years of ministry I have learned that many people have suffered some form of sexual abuse or violation.

Sexual sins can be active and also passive. It is not God's will that we violate other's bodies or being by thought, attitude or physical contact. Advertising that makes bodies into commodities to be used is an example of sexual violation through attitudes. Unwanted touch is an example of sexual violation through contact.

It is not God's will that we do those things. AND, it is not God's will that we permit others to do them, to us, or to anyone else. Accepting touch, or even attitudes that make us uncomfortable, out of a desire to "be nice", "be polite", or to avoid rocking the boat is also sin. We are not living God's will in either active or passive sexual sins against the body.

Sins against or of the body include sexual sins. But there are many other ways we sin against and within the Temple of God's Holy Spirit. When we touch a human body, we touch HOLINESS. We touch holiness. This truth

can help us when we are tempted. Strength to respect and protect our own and others' bodies will grow as we learn to see them as the Temple of God.

When we touch a homeless person, who may be confused or ill, dirty or bad smelling, we touch holiness.

When we leave that person all alone, because we are afraid of mentally ill behavior or bad odors, we abandon holiness.

When we carry out adult temper tantrums against children with physical, emotional, or verbal abuse, we are terrorizing holiness.

When we make fun of people, or simply feel superior to them because of their appearance- weight, features, disabilities, we mock and disdain holiness.

When we are racist or prejudiced, making judgments about people based on stereotypes, we scorn holiness.

When we become hard-driven, workaholics, caught in other addictions, we batter the holiness of our own bodies.

When we ravage the earth with litter, pollution, misuse, we abuse another body in which God dwells--- that of creation. We violate holiness.

When we enter into the ravaging required by war, we must remember that what we do to bodies, communities, and nature, we do to holiness. Christians of good conscience vary in their opinions about war, about the necessity of war. But war must never be seen as great sport, a glorious contest, like an important bowl game during football season. Our spirits must grieve, for bodies are God's temple and when they are destroyed it is tragic. No matter the reasons, we MUST remain aware of the tragedy, or we will find it too easy to kill.

Sometimes it may seem to us that the church has called us to LEAVE our bodies. "Leave them behind, they are dirty, filthy things," it may have seemed to say. But that attitude leads us to a cavalier acceptance of sin. That attitude leads us to more litter on the earth, more homeless curled up in alleys, more unwed pregnant girls, more battered children.

Paul tells us that's NOT Christ's message. Paul tells us, "Don't even TRY to leave your bodies behind, or to rise above them to be pure. We CAN'T! We are embodied people. That's how God made us. Our bodies are a GIFT from God, who pronounced them GOOD. They were bought with a great price. We are called not to leave them behind, but to glorify God in them, until we leave this world and receive the resurrected yet spiritual bodies God has for our eternity.

Paul says, "Look around. See holiness. Reach out. Touch holiness. Honor and respect all holiness." May the Spirit that lives within each one of us teach and guide us now and forevermore. Amen.