

Touch good; don't touch evil. All you need to know to get through life are those five words: touch good; don't touch evil. St. Paul writes to the Romans, "**Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good**" (12:9). But what if the evil you are to avoid is in you? What if the evil you are to abhor is not some external thing that is easily avoided like the occasional pothole, or a dark street? What if the evil you are not to touch comes upon you inescapably, is, in fact, so united to you, spread through all your members, that it is like leprosy, where it is nigh impossible to separate the person and the disease? What if it is a deeply ingrained corruption, like an infection, that gives you no relief from the pain day or night, where you are prevented from doing your work and labor, cannot earn a living and instead are reliant entirely upon the mercy of others, where, like the person who has COVID-like symptoms, you are cast out, away from the presence of all healthy people out of their dread of catching the disease?

Those of you who have heard the word "cancer" from your doctor's lips have some sense of the fear and dread the ancient world had for leprosy. Indeed, it was far worse, for there was no known cure, no course of treatment. There was only ostracization from all that you knew, from all whom you loved. Henceforth you would be surrounded only by the disfigured faces and bodies of your fellow lepers, whose countenance constantly reminded you of what was coming.

That is what it means to be a sinner. Far worse than cancer or COVID, far worse even than leprosy, is what dwells in your flesh, what is the source of all kinds of sickness, misery, and finally, death. Not just in this body and life, but before God. What dwells in you from your conception disfigures you from the good creation of your soul and body by God. The sin which arises from your inborn evil wreaks all manner of misery on you and your loved ones. Has any sin you have committed ever turned out well, for the good of yourself and others?

The evil which clung to you did not just separate you from God, it made you dead to Him. "**In the day you eat of it, you shall surely die**" (Gen 2:17) God had warned. Those words were shown to be absolutely true as we see God, the good and gracious Creator, come seeking Adam, and Adam hid. In Adam, in these ten lepers you see the native condition of all humanity. That is what you are. This is what is united to your flesh, and this is what it does. And as Adam was barred from eating of the tree of life, so we are removed from any natural access to any spiritual good. Ours is truly a pitiable condition. We can only touch evil, and can't touch good.

But in today's Gospel we are given the sweetest consolation. Jesus walks about on this earth. He encounters people, every one of whom is afflicted with the same condition as you and I. In today's Gospel He travels along the border between Samaria and Galilee. He meets lepers who are Jews plus one Samaritan. They cry out for mercy because they know their need. They do not have to be convinced of their misery. They need only look at themselves, look around them, and see their deep corruption and serious problem. They see Jesus as the one who can help them. They cry out for what only He can give.

Jesus sends them to the temple. The temple; the place where the God of Israel came to His people, to dwell with them, to forgive their sins through the shedding of blood, to cleanse from impurity through the sprinkling of water and the ashes of a heifer. The temple; the place which God instituted for Israel so He could come and touch His people, the highest good – the touch of God. That is where these lepers, seeing themselves cleansed, could receive that ultimate affirmation from God Himself announced to the world. Where after so many years of not having contact because of the evil sickness in them, they were set free and able to touch all the good gifts of this life. They could kiss their wives, embrace their children, slap their friends on the back, touch the tools with which they worked to serve and provide.

Yet the Samaritan man who is cleansed could not have this. Samaritans were not welcome in the Jerusalem temple. But what he recognizes, what he teaches you to recognize, is not just the inborn evil that is in you, but also where the true temple that makes clean and that saves is found. He shows you the place where God incarnate comes to you to set you free from the corruption of sin through His voice, through His touch. The Samaritan shows you where to be as he does before Jesus what you did in the temple: he praised God with a loud voice. He falls on his face in worship at Jesus' feet. And he gives thanks.

That is what you need. You need only look at yourself, look at the world around you, and you can see the inescapable clutch of evil. This is what you need when you are sick, when you are afflicted, lonely, when you are afraid. This is what you need when you are faced with temptations to sin, and the regret, fear, and guilty conscience when you have given in to sin. It is why children climb into their parents' bed when they have a bad dream at night, they need the consolation of touch. It is what is so wicked about this coronavirus, it has robbed people of what they need: contact. We have members who have not had a human touch since February.

We have seen how the devil has used this against Christians, using fear to get people, pious Christians, to avoid contact with God and with their brothers and sisters in Christ, their true family. And yet these are the very things which through which God comforts, through which He embraces you. What our world simply cannot imagine, what the devil tries to get you to forget, is that the true threat is not physical infirmity. The true threat is not even bodily death. The true threat is living and dying without the touch of Jesus.

Touch good; don't touch evil. That is simply a shorthand way of saying "Go to Jesus, put yourself where Jesus is, and flee what gets in the way of that." Touch good; don't touch evil, means first and foremost to be on the receiving end of Jesus' mercy which He gives with words, human speech that you can read and hear and understand. Mercy which He also gives with His touch. We sang it last week in the refrain of the communion hymn: "Lord, may Thy body and Thy blood be for my soul the highest good." Touch good, go to Jesus. Like the Samaritan, you know where Jesus is to do these things, where He is to forgive, cleanse, and save. Faith that knows and believes this cannot stay away. And it cannot stand what gets in the way of receiving this.

This is why it has been so wonderful, a real blessing from God, that these past months the Sacrament of the Altar has been offered every Sunday. In discussion with the Board of Elders this past week, it was decided by common assent that the Sacrament will continue to be offered each Sunday through this church year. In the Sacrament the touch of Jesus is given to those who see their need for what it gives, and who desire it. I hope that you see the great blessing of this. That it is not about some über Lutheran ideal, or satisfying some legalistic requirement. It is certainly not about forcing or guilt-tripping people into going to communion. It is simply, in yet another wonderful way, making available what Jesus wants to give, allowing faith to drive His Christians to receive the touch of Jesus. I hope, I pray, that we all can see that as a good thing, something worth continuing.

Evil no longer resided in the Samaritan, he had been cleansed. Not just of his leprosy but of his sin and unbelief. It no longer resides in you either. Like the Samaritan, faith drives you to Jesus who saves. Oh sin lingers to be sure. It is at war with your members, but it does not have residence. It does not have sway, does not control you. Because you have been washed. Not with just plain water, but with the water that is included in God's command and combined with God's Word, the Word that puts God's own name and purity on you. You haven't been sprinkled. Not just with the blood of an animal, but with "**the blood of Jesus**" that forgives, that "**cleanses us from all sin**" (1 Jn 1:8). It makes clean. It makes good.

"Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good" (12:9). Today's epistle gives you a pretty good list of the evils to abhor: "**sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.**" We avoid these not just because Paul tells us that "**those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God,**" we avoid them not just because we don't want to go to hell. Christians avoid these things because to a Christian they are abhorrent, they get between us and Jesus, they corrupt what has been made clean. These things are not the things of Jesus. Touch good; don't touch evil. Bask, rather, in the succulent fruit of the Spirit, the things against which there is no law: "**love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control**" (Gal 5:22-23). Those are what you see in Jesus. Those are what He gives to you. Those are what we give to one another.