

Here are some signs that just didn't read right: "Toilet out of order, please use floor below." In a laundromat: "Automatic washing machines: Please remove all your clothes when the light goes out." In an office: "Would the person who took the step ladder yesterday please bring it back or further steps will be taken." And finally, also in an office: "After tea break, staff should empty teapot and stand upside down on the draining board."

The Bible is the story of God's blatant and ferocious love affair with us, and the mistake church-goers have continually made is to take that book and turn it into a dry, oppressive handbook of moral purity and rules about righteousness and piety. And in the process, we have wounded our souls.

That was the whole problem with the Pharisees. They had taken the whole story of God and reduced it to laws. Why did they do it? For the same reasons that we do it. For some reason, we find it almost impossible to bear that God has loved us so much. We find it impossible to perceive and to accept the incredibly outrageous gift, the unconditional gift – the grace-filled unconditional gift of redemption. We can't stand that it comes with no prerequisites, no conditions, and no qualifiers. It offends us and it threatens us. And so, in order to gain some mastery or control over God and salvation, we begin to attach conditions; we begin to have moral prerequisites, rules and standards, and it wounds us to the very depths of our souls. The gift of God's love is unconditional, and the absence or presence of our moral purity is irrelevant, and we can't stand that. We think it is just too good to be true! It is so disorienting and so frightening that we choose to sanctify a mistake so that for the common person on the street, if we ask them what Christianity is about, they will tell us it is about morality and good behavior, not about God's love affair with us. That's how most of us have it inside of us, too. I've said this many times -- there is NOTHING we can do to make God love us LESS, and there is NOTHING we can do to make God love us MORE! And this drives us crazy!

For countless thousands of people, the Good News then comes to them not as good news but as bad news – oppressive, tyrannical, moralistic – and it wounds them to the soul. When we reduce our biblical heritage to a moral handbook, we trivialize God, and we degrade the life, passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He did not die to enslave us to another set of rules and moral purity projects. They already had all of that with the Pharisees and the temple priests. Jesus died to set us free. And this drove the Pharisees crackers. They took what was God's incredible gift and made everybody pay, and pay, and pay.

In our own efforts to save ourselves, in our efforts to maintain some control over grace, thereby putting conditions on God's gift, we come up with rules and standards of moral purity, and we inflict them on OTHERS. We take THEIR moral and spiritual inventory, making ourselves judge, jury, and jailer. We intrude, and we invade the most sacred places of other people's lives and make horrible judgments about their worthiness or lack of worthiness. We wound people in the name of our righteousness and in the name of God. We go into people's lives where we have no right to go.

But even more wounding is what we do to ourselves. In our belief, in our insistence that we must somehow save ourselves by making ourselves worthy or pure, we split ourselves; we cut ourselves right down the middle.

If there is any one thing that people come to me about it's about the war going on inside: the self-hatred, the self-loathing, the shame, the self-alienation, the fear of themselves because they are split. They have learned to be split – wounded to the core – split between good thoughts and bad thoughts, good feelings and bad feelings, good fantasies and bad fantasies, and good impulses and bad impulses; and they go to war.

They go to war with themselves. I have not met a human being yet, including myself, who has not been caught up in this horrible war of self-hatred and self-alienation all provoked and stimulated by our desire to save ourselves by making ourselves morally pure. All stimulated and provoked by the fear of receiving God's wonderful gift.

At the deepest point of that split, at the deepest point in the soul, is the split between spirit and body, between spirituality and human sexuality.

Every major Christian church in our country is wrestling with the issues of human sexuality, and so we should, because it is the place where we are most wounded – personally, collectively, and as a culture. In spite of the fact that our scripture proclaims that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us”; in spite of the fact that God declared the human body to be the temple wherein He dwells; in spite of the fact that Jesus referred to Himself as the bridegroom seeking His beloved; and in spite of the fact that all of the mystics have had to use explicitly sexual metaphors to describe their relationship with God. In spite of all that, we still put our sexuality on the top of morality's ten most-wanted list. We still see sexuality as suspicious, as offensive, as inherently spiritually impure. It is a horrendous split, a profound wound, to be alienated from our own bodies.

What we know about human sexuality is that at the heart of every sexual arousal is the desire for God – the desire and the longing for God. I didn't make this up – St. Augustine, one of the great doctors of the Church of the West, said in the fourth century: “The man who knocks on a brothel door is seeking GOD!” And Augustine, who was no virginal innocent, knew of which he spoke. He had a woman in every port and several illegitimate children. But once he fell in love with God, he became a Bishop and doctor of the faith – and he said some of the most profound words about spirituality of all time: “Our hearts were made for you, O God, and so they are restless, and they will not rest – until they rest in you.”

The experience of God excites us – we know that in our very bodies as God has made us and created us, in our desire and attraction for our beloved, we experience a foretaste of God's desire and attraction and love for us. Our bodies teach us how it is that God loves us. We know that people often speak about the mystery of human sexuality, the mystery that takes us to our very depths, as being the most profound encounter with their spirituality that they have ever had. That's what true love does. But it will never be found hopping from bed to bed. It WILL be found in long-term commitment, sacrifice for the sake of others, and trying to give more than we receive. It WILL be found in loving like Christ loved, which was all the way to the cross.

Our sexuality is a sacrament and a place of revelation. To be split off, to be alienated, to be hostile in the name of God from our own body and our own sexuality is actually to be cut off from God and alienated from God. Sexuality without spirituality becomes dead. It becomes promiscuous. It becomes soul-deadening.

Am I advocating sexual license? Certainly not! Am I advocating an abandonment of the Bible? Certainly not! We abandoned the Bible a long time ago when we made it into a moral handbook. I am advocating that we stop wounding other people and ourselves in the name of God. I am advocating that we stop acting like the Pharisees.

And its place, I am advocating God and God's outrageous gift, grace, a gift beyond comprehension – God's desire to be one with each of us regardless of our worthiness or purity. I am advocating the WHOLE Bible – all of it, not just select passages. The book that tells the story of God's love affair with us. (This entire section adapted from Michael Dwinell, BEING PRIEST TO ONE ANOTHER, p. 36-41)

And so my second point – the problem of all of this hypocrisy, the big sin of the Pharisees. Stuart Berger was a former health columnist for the New York Post for a number of years. Berger was also the author of best-selling diet and health books, such as FOREVER YOUNG: 20 years younger in 20 weeks and Dr. Berger's IMMUNE POWER DIET. Imagine the surprise of Dr. Berger's fans when, in 1994, he died at the young age of 40! People were further surprised to read that he weighed 365 pounds at the time of his death! (DYNAMIC PREACHING, Oct-Dec 2002). What a hypocrite we say!

But the truth is that all of us are hypocrites. We play games with ourselves and others, refuse to look issues straight in the face, and avoid the obvious steps we know we should take. It is a painful truth which needs to be confronted. But it is a basic part of being human. The sin isn't the big deal. It's our attempts to cover it, deny it, and refuse to deal with it. When we sin, we should not try to rationalize it away. Jesus had compassion on all manner of sinful and troubled people. The only group He had trouble with was the hypocrites. The Pharisees. Hypocrites never disclose their true identity. Their world is legal and judgmental. Fulfilling obligations gives them security. The obligations become more important than people. Troubled people, the poor, minorities, as well as creative ideas and new ways of doing things, threaten them. Though they do not recognize it, they are in fact full of fear. But they do not believe or acknowledge that they are troubled. They cannot receive forgiveness or be healed because they are unaware of any need for forgiveness or healing; they cannot express compassion because compassion would admit that the world is not as they insist it should be. There is some of that hypocrisy in all of us, and it disturbs our prayer.

But if we sit and listen to God, God will heal us – and our disorder. When we acknowledge our ordinary state and our struggles, God is able to shine His grace into the dark recesses of our hearts and heal us with His great light. (Adapted from Sean Caulfield, THE GOD OF ORDINARY PEOPLE, p. 18)

Which leads me to my third point, integrity, the cure of hypocrisy. A few years ago, Ryne Sandberg walked away from his \$7 million a year contract with the Chicago Cubs because he didn't think he was earning it. He said "I'm certainly not the type of person who can ask the Cubs organization and the Cubs fans to pay my salary when I am not happy with my mental approach and performance. Therefore, I am here to announce my retirement immediately." It takes a lot of integrity to kiss off \$7 million dollars.

Integrity is one of those traits rather tough to define but very easy to recognize. A person of integrity is honest, without guile, who outwardly shows in word and deed that they are who they claim to be: a person of sincerity, truth, principle, character, and reliability, whose word can be trusted, and who inspires respect in others, and is compassionate with the struggles and faults of others.

A story to conclude. On April 28, 1997, armed Hutu militiamen attacked the major seminary in Burundi, forcing all 34 resident seminarians to the courtyard in front of their chapel, where the leader of the invaders demanded that the seminarians divide themselves into Hutu and Tutsi groups. The seminarians refused, huddling together instead of declaring themselves members of any one tribe. The commandant insisted again, ordering his cutthroats to aim their rifles at the united group of students, threatening to open fire if the men did not obey his command to divide into 2 ethnic groups. The seminarians remained united, defiant of the threat. The commandant ordered his men to open fire, mercilessly cutting down in cold blood those 34 young African men who wanted nothing more in life than to be ordained as priests.

They were courageous, no doubt. They were martyrs, absolutely, teaching the power of love, knowing that if they divided into groups they would seal the fate of their Tutsi brothers. But they also proclaim the virtue of integrity. Their exterior stance of fortitude, their claim of brotherhood, and their common desire to love one another even to laying down their lives, mirror what they believed inside. There was no division

between what they claimed to believe and how they acted, no danger of hypocrisy in showing that their allegiance was to the King of Kings, not to the armies of this world. That's integrity. So may it be for you and for me. Amen. (Archbishop Timothy Dolan, PRIESTS FOR THE THIRD MILLENNIUM, p. 99-100)

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