

[BLANK][PRAYER] Well, do I have your attention? As you might be aware, people drive down our part of Main Street pretty quickly, in spite of the speed limit signs, but I've never seen so many cars on Main Street going so slowly as they were this week, and it seems to me that they were going mighty slow in front of our board sign. I hope that's a good thing. I hope that people see that we are a church that's not afraid to take on tough topics in the light of God's loving and redeeming grace.

When I was deciding what to talk about in my message today, I saw that the Song of Solomon was in our lectionary, and, so, let me just make this clear - I did not go looking for this topic, this topic is offered for us to talk about this week by God's church. I hope it's clear also that this is a family safe talk, perhaps the beginning of a talk that some of our parents will be having with their children for a long time to come. And the talk that I hope that we are all going to prepare for from this message is a talk with God, with ourselves, and with those who we love, about reclaiming the living presence of God's love for us, as God's creations, in how we touch intimately.

To touch someone, skin to skin, is to be human. Touch is not just natural: it is essential. Even inside a mother, a baby is already touching, and it is the moment of birth that defines our ability to touch and be touched freely. From the moment we are born, we are creatures who can, and must, touch. Studies have shown that up to a third of children, placed in orphanages in poor countries, will die at an early age, not because they lacked food, or water, shelter, or medical attention, but because they were not touched, except for those essentials. Without a loving touch, they perished. Young children of families seeking refuge in our nation, who were separated from their parents for weeks, showed signs of trauma as the result of not being touched lovingly by their parents. We must touch with love to live, and to thrive.

[HANDS] It is not too hard to hold the hand of a newborn child and understand that we are amazingly and wonderfully made by a loving God. When our son Christopher was born, his newborn hand gripped my finger as strong as could be. It was a miracle of emotional and spiritual intimacy. It reflected perfectly the miracle of Creation from God's point of view. We are a part of God's act of creation through the intimacy that creates babies. The joy that we are meant to feel in such a moment is joy that can only come from a God who wants to touch us in love, and who wants us to touch one another in the image of God's love. [BLANK]

It is from this fundamental perspective of being loved and loving creations of God, who need the touch of love, that we approach the Song of Solomon today, the most sensuous book in the Bible - by a long shot! The Song of Solomon is also called the Song of Songs, or the Canticle of Love, depending on which Bible you pick up. However it's been labeled, it plays a very important role in Jewish culture. It is the first of the five books of the Hebrew Bible that are spoken out loud on important Jewish holy days. The Song of Solomon is sung during the Jewish passover celebration, the celebration of the deliverance of the Jewish people from slavery in Israel.

The Song of Solomon, then, is meant to celebrate our liberation from

oppression with joy, joy as deep and as fulfilling as the deepest touch that two people can share. And this liberating joy is celebrated by comparing the one who we love to touch to the finest and most beautiful creatures in God's creation. It is a physical joy, and yet, as Jewish tradition reminds us, there can't be a physical joy without spiritual joy, joy that liberates us from human power that is meant to hurt us, and enslave us. God's power among us allows us to experience joyful, innocent love as God's loved children again, returning to God's care.

This is where we start to have problems that we need to talk about. Where is God in our lives of touch? Where is the living God when we touch another, and how are we teaching our children to ask this question, and to share that question with trusted adults? The oppression that the Israelites were experiencing under Pharaoh - hurt, abuse of power, and enslavement - are the signs that we need to be aware of, in our lives, and our children's lives, to help us be aware of when touch is not Godly touch.

Unfortunately, this kind of oppression defines a lot human touching. Hurt through physical intimacy is everywhere. Sometimes it's even celebrated. Bulletin boards of Wesleyan University and other colleges might shock you, as posters invite young adults to seek out hurtful relationships. Abuse of power, by people in business, school, and, yes, certainly churches, as well as in marriages and other relationships, turns the innocence of touch into a tool of oppression, turning shouts of joy into shameful silences. Popular movies and books, and Internet sites, celebrate enslavement through touch as if it were cool, and trendy. It might be trendy, but it is not cool.

We, as Christians, must carry some of the blame for this culture of oppression and death that is turning the joy of touching into a nightmare of oppression and despair. Through history, some Christians have put our spirituality on one end of our lives, and our physical life on the other end. Apparently the two were not supposed to meet. While it is true that a spiritual Christian life transforms our lives, it does not eliminate life: it changes it, and makes it something bigger, better, and more joyful, not less joyful. Christian living changes what we thirst for, what we long for, but it does not eliminate thirsting and longing.

My dear friends in Christian faith, God did not create us to be at war with Creation. To be a creation of God is amazing, and wonderful, and should be joyful whenever possible. Our time in Creation doesn't last long, and we should rejoice in it as if we were in the garden of Eden, loving our innocent and perfect connection with one another, and seeing the loving reflection of all of God's creation in our most intimate relationships. We should care for one another in our relationships of touch as if we were caring for the garden of Eden, with stewardship over how we treat God's creations, tending to them with love as God gave us, and our partners, our very lives in love, taking everything that God has given us to find delight in, but resisting a reach for that apple of willful oppression that can turn the whole thing sour so very quickly.

In other words, when you put that "Do Not Disturb" sign on your door for your most intimate moments, don't think that you disinvited God from the room! Our faith life is meant to prepare us for those moments, to help us to be in touch with God in those

moments, and to help us to process those moments, when things don't feel right, one way or another. If we don't feel right about how we've been touched, or how we've touched someone, God wants to hear from us. God was there, and saw it, so it's not going to be news to God.

God knows that you might wonder why God didn't do something when the touching went wrong, and God is there to help you on the journey of love, to and through the cross of Jesus, that holds God's answer to that question. God's very Son, Jesus Christ, was touched in the worst ways possible, and God rose up from those horrible moments, so what we could have confidence that our suffering is never ignored, has always been felt by God, and that God is always ready to guide us to healing, hope, and justice, even when the touching goes wrong.

We know this, because God also gives us God's Holy Spirit to live in, through faith, so that we can speak the truth to one another with love, as Jesus did. The full armor of God is available to us for those conversations, and it takes a faith life, and faith groups, as well as trusted private counselors, to help us to practice the spiritual strength we need for having those conversations.

We need to talk. We need to talk about sex. But, first and foremost, we need to talk about faith, with ourselves and our families, so that when we talk about it, our willingness to walk the talk of faith will give us, and our loved ones, the courage, and the strength, and the words, to express where the gap is between healthy, holy touching, and touching that's not reflecting the joy of being a creation of God.

Touching is important. Touching is essential. Touching is given to us by God. May God's gift of touch in our lives reflect the joy that God has for you as God's creations, and may God guide you and your loved ones into holy conversations about how best to touch one another in the image of our loving God. Amen.