

### THE SPIRITUAL CONTAGION

--At one time or another, virtually every one of us here has stood before this congregation and taken certain vows and made certain promises regarding the nature and quality of our membership within this body.

No doubt, that was a day of excitement and joy and pride for us. We meant what we said about opposing the works of evil, and about embracing the path to spiritual freedom in Christ. We were serious, in particular, about being an active, participating, contributing member of this congregation; and in general, about bearing the sort of fruit that is representative of true disciples, through our acts of love.

Just as was read this morning, in the rather long and somewhat rambling discourse from John's gospel, we hear something of that identity in Christ.

“[O God],” Jesus prays, “I have made Your name known to those You gave me from the world. They were Yours, and You gave them to me” (17.6). In short, we belong to Jesus.

It doesn't stop there, however, for we also clearly hear our call to ministry in the world, Jesus' adding, “As You, [God], have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (17.18). As Christ's, we belong to the world.

--And what a world it is, too!

The one that's here at the moment is quite the unhealthy mess, typified by an incurably aggressive Russia, an intractable North Korea, and a duplicitous China, to say nothing of the omnipresent scourge of Isis and its cousins, which always seems to metastasize into some new deadly form. And, lest I offer too-lopsided a view here, this already-twisted world situation is merely complicated by the paralyzing polarization in Washington, D.C. (which no doubt we have been following in the news of recent days). Sometimes it is hard to believe that we are what we have always imagined ourselves to be--you know, America-the-stable, America-the-dependable, America-the-large-hearted.

And as if all this were not enough, present political conditions merely scratch the surface of the other shadowy, sad aspects to our common existence--of inexcusable hunger and poverty and intolerance, of inexplicable racism and homophobia and the exploitation of human beings in a truly stunning variety of ways.

Now, I'm no medical doctor, and I don't play one on TV, either, but I'm of the firm opinion that the world is quite ill. It is clearly at odds with the much more wholesome one which, everywhere, we hear God encouraging.

--All that depressing stuff said, let me hasten to add that there is good news, very good news of a cure. The good news is that God intends to do something about all this unhealthy mess . . . which brings us back to us, to us as individuals, to thoughts with which we began this morning, of us as parts of this community of faith. The world may be ailing, but (hold on to your socks!) we are to be the remedy. That's right! We sitting here are united by a being called-together from the world in response to God, and by a being called-together to go back into the world in constructive, healing service.

We cannot see the entire plan, but, as far as we can see, it appears that God intends to fight the world's illness through letting loose a different type of contagion. We probably have never thought about ourselves in this way before, but we are to be a sort of positive infection powerfully sweeping our nation and our world. As the

people of Christ, we are to be a kind of benevolent virus at work in a world which evidences far too many symptoms of malady. If there is to be real hope for our world, then we must, with intentionality and diligence, join one another in being this beneficial spiritual contagion.

If we will behave in the world in new and different ways, we will be active agents that can change everything. The Body can make this difference only if its individual members are functioning as they ought, everywhere spreading the germs of a new way of being with one another. If we are faithful in carrying out those vows, those promises, made, maybe many years ago, in front of one pastor or another, then nothing less than this will do. Frankly, it makes no difference for us to belong to Christ and for Christ to belong to us, if that belonging makes no real difference in the world.

--As the people of God, we are the antibodies at work against the "dis-eases" of our time. In the end, then, it all comes down to how well each of us is performing this infectious role.

What a palpable difference we would contagiously make if we were to bring . . .  
to the weakest and neediest among us, confident encouragement and support;  
to the most inconsiderate among us, a willingness to share their burdens;  
to the most indifferent of our acquaintances, our enthusiasm for the Life which  
has found us here;  
to the mean-spirited, our forgiveness and compassion;  
to the newcomer and the stranger, the embrace of our hospitality;  
to the selfish and unresponsive, the genuine zeal of our generosity;  
to the burned-out or jaded, our energy and grounding in Spirit.

If we were different, the world could not remain the same, and this epidemic of selfish foolishness and self-defeating recklessness could productively be ended.

--Yes, the challenge of being the world's positive contagion demands our best! Given its importance, it deserves nothing less than our best. There is a great deal at stake here--if we are to leave to the next generations a world that is healthy, indeed a world that is habitable. As this year's flu vaccine plainly demonstrates, an effectiveness of a pitiful 10% or 20% is not good enough to protect us against the fever and aches of the world's continuing injustice and insanity.

Take a look around outside these walls. The world is desperately, hopelessly ill, and, as individuals and as the church, as God's active agents for a new world, we are called to be the remedy.

The only thing that remains for us is simply to behave that way. Now, that's not asking for too much . . . is it?