Sunday, October 16, 1983
**RELIGION CAN BE HAZARDOUS TO YOUR HEALTH**
Luke 6:6-9

Most of us have seen the printing on the side of a package of cigarettes which states, "Warning: The Surgeon General has determined that smoking can be dangerous to your health." Because we are aware of the evidence that supports this statement, we are not surprised by the warning.

However, recently I came across another warning which did surprise me at first. In a book I was reading, the author said, "Beware: religion can be hazardous to your health." For example, the impending death of someone we love raised the most urgent issues about good and evil, reward and punishment. Our religion may provide us with a spiritual philosophy that helps us make some sense out of death and life. But on the other hand, our religion can also be hazardous to our health if we believe it's because we haven't prayed hard enough or in the correct way and we believe that's why our loved one has died.

The more I thought about the statement, "Religion can be hazardous to your health," the more I realized that it is a proper warning.

In his book, When Bad Things Happen to Good People, Harold Kushner tells about his experience as a young rabbi, when he was called by a family to try to help them through an unexpected and almost unbearable tragedy. This middle-aged couple had one daughter, a bright 19-year-old woman who was in her freshman year at an out-of-state college. One morning at breakfast, they received a phone call from the university infirmary. "We have some bad news for you. Your daughter collapses while walking to lass this morning. It seems a blood vessel burst in her brain. She died before we could do anything for her. We're terribly sorry."

Stunned, the parents asked a neighbor to come in to help them decide what steps to take next. The neighbor notified the synagogue, "and I went over to see them that same day. I entered their home, feeling every inadequate, not knowing any words that could ease their pain. I anticipated anger, shock, grief, but I didn't expect to hear the first words they said to me, 'You know, Rabbi, we didn't fast last Yom Kippur.'"

Why did they say that? Why did they assume that they were somehow responsible for this action because they had not prayed in the right way or observed a certain religious festival in the correct manner? Who taught them to believe in a God who would strike down a young woman without warning as punishment for someone else's religious infraction? Indeed, that kind of religion can be hazardous to one's health.

Recently there was a news item about a young girl who had cancer, but her parents refused treatment for her because of their religious belief. They said that God would hear her directly if she was supposed to be made well. Finally, since the girl was a minor, the court stepped in, and treatment was allowed. The parents' religion was a hazard to their daughter's health.

There are people whose religious faith does not allow them to have blood transfusions when needed. Here, too, religion is hazardous to one's health. Or take the followers of Jim Jones, when he ordered them to drink poison and commit suicide. Religion was a hazard to their health.

In the story read this morning as the scripture reading from Luke's Gospel, we also find a case where religion could've been hazardous to someone's health, but Jesus would not let it. Jesus had entered the synagogue and was teaching, as was his custom. A man was present whose right hand was withered. According to the religion of the Scribes and Pharisees, this man could not be healed because it was the Sabbath, and healing was considered work; a truly religious person was not to do any work of any kind on the Sabbath, even that kind of work which would benefit another person.

Jesus knew they were watching him to see whether or not he would heal the man. So, he asked them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or destroy it?" Then Jesus took the man and healed him.

Our religion, if wrongly used, can be hazardous to our health, not only in physical ways, but in many other ways, as well. If we define health as the overall well-being of an individual or society, then there are many ways in which religion can be hazardous to our health.

Sometime religion swells too much on making people feel guilty so that it becomes unhealthy.

When Rabbi Kushner tried to comfort the parents who had lost their only child at age 19 without any warning, he found that, even thought the parents were not deeply religious people, they reverted back to the basic belief that God directly punishes people for not being as religious as they should be. There they sat, feeling that their daughter's death had been their fault: had they been less selfish and less lazy about their religious duties, she might still be alive. Worse still, there they sat angry at God, but afraid to admit their anger, for fear that God might punish them again. Life had hurt them, and religion could not comfort them. Religion was making them feel worse. It was hazardous to their health.

The idea that God directly reaches out and causes tragedy and suffering in people's lives is a neat and too simple answer to the problem of evil, and it has serious limitations. It creates guilt, even when there is no basis for guilt. It makes people hate God, even as it makes them hate themselves. And most disturbing of all, it does not fit the facts and is bad theology. Religion can be hazardous to our health.

In a book on Western Spirituality edited by Matthew Fox, the point is made over and over again that in our Western expression of the Christian faith, too much emphasis has been put on the fall/redemption motif, which is a negative emphasis, rather than on the "creation spirituality motif." The creation spirituality motif sees life as a blessing and reminds us that we are made in God's image, whereas the fall/redemption motif emphasizes how corrupt and fallen we human beings are. Fox maintains that when religion continually stresses human sin while neglecting human goodness, it can be hazardous to our health.

Religion causes some people to become excessively self-righteous and overly zealous to protect the faith. Then it is hazardous to one's health and to the health of the community, as well.

Religion causes others to be severely judgmental. And religion often takes the fun out of life. People who consider themselves religious become overly serious, sour, and forget how to laugh and relax. Religion leads some to become stingy, narrow, prejudiced individuals, and, instead of allowing religion to question their assumptions, some use religion to support their prejudice and false judgments about others.

There are times, too, when religion has encouraged private conversions while neglecting public justice, and thus is hazardous to the health of a society. Look at how religion often divides people instead of bringing them closer together into a greater harmony — pitting the so-called religious people against the irreligious or the "correct' believers against the heretics. And it has not often been healthy for the heretics, as they have been burned at the stake and put on the rack.

But, unlike cigarettes, religion need not be hazardous to your health or mine. It can instead - and it meant to - be health-giving. The true meaning of the word salvation is health or well-being. That's why St. Paul wrote, "The fruit (of the effect) of true religion is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." That's why Jesus said, "I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly."

Thus, religion can lead us to humility and to become forgiving, accepting, non-judgmental, loving persons. Our Christian faith can lead us to becoming joyful, happy, open, giving human beings who are not afraid of change, not afraid of risk, and not afraid of the future.

If you want your Christian faith to be health-giving, instead of hazardous to your health, here are some basics to remember:

1. "God don't make no junk!" as the youngster put it in his own words. God created the world and each one of us as good. We are made in God's image, and that means that god's Spirit dwells within us, and it means that there is no separation between body and spirit.

2. God's love is continually and freely given to all who accept it. It cannot be bought or earned. This means that God loves you and God loves me. Each human being on earth is equally loved by God. This is another way of saying that we each have equal value in God's economy. The criminal on death row, the patient in the mental hospital, the starving beggar on the street, the rich, the poor - all are loved by God.

3. God doesn't give up on us — ever! Our humanness belongs to the goodness of the creation... and God through Christ takes part in our sufferings, our guilt, our pain, our joy, our happiness. God's love is never contingent on what we strive to do. God gives us what is needed to heal the disorders of the human spirit and to initiate new possibilities for every human life and for the world as a whole.

4. God created us as interdependent creature, and we are meant to live in peace and harmony with one another. God's creation is one. This is another way of saying that deep down, we need each other. We are connected with each other and meant to be. Life without friendship, life without human relationships, is like the sky without the sun. We are meant to live in community. Because God loves us, we are to love each other. St. John reminds us that "if we say we love God and hate another human being, we are liars."

5. God always seeks the good within us. Our humanities fulfill the intention of God's creation. All we need is to be open to spiritual growth and development. Our lives are filled with growth and change, but through it all God is seeking our overall health and well-being. It is God's will to increase health and harmony among all living beings and in all of creation.

6. God speaks to us in many ways - through silence, through various kinds of prayer, through other people, through art, music, history through life's experiences, through our friends, and through our enemies.

7. No matter what happens to us, God can bring good out of it. As St. Paul said, “All things work together for the good for those who love God.” God never totally abandons us, but rather continually seeks us out. Nothing can separate us from the love of God, not our sinning, our suffering, or our dying; not a cross or a mushroom cloud.

This mean, then, that for our Christian faith to be health-giving instead of a hazard to our health, church congregations like this one need to continue to be places that are inclusive, not exclusive; where sinners are welcome and forgiven; where mistakes are forgiven; where bumbling and fumbling are not condemned and rejected. There is a simple basic test which we can apply to a religious group or movement to see if it is health-giving or a hazard to health. See how the movement treats the outcasts of society: those in trouble, those in need, the losers, the down and out, the persecuted, the poor. The way we treat people is the way we treat God.

Church congregations are to be places where people find compassion and understanding for their weaknesses and where individuals are loved and accepted, no matter who they are or what they have done. Compassions is the world’s richest energy source.

Religion that is health-giving leads us toward wholeness and to seeing the world and creation whole. It draws us out of ourselves into openness, love, and acceptance. Religion that leads into narrowness, exclusiveness, and dogmatism is hazardous to our health and the health of society as a whole.

Our Christian faith is health-giving when congregations become places where one can find inspiration and encouragement and where individuals can experience joy, as well as sorrow. Churches are health-giving if they reach out to people and build their self-esteem and help individuals discover their potential and fulfill it. So many people are lonely. So many people are hurting. So many people are waiting simply for a smile and a word of encouragement and hope. The wounds of this world very much need the healing power of God. We want to be among those who spread and increase this healing power, rather than those who make religion a hazard to health. Amen.