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Dirt and Life

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Dirt and Life

Dirt has a bad name in our culture. Soil might be a more acceptable word, though there are almost as many ads for getting soil out of clothes as there are for cleaning whatever is dirty. We tend to associate dirt with germs and illness. We were told, "Cleanliness is next to godliness." And, a moral corollary for living is that we should never be involved in anything "dirty."

Dirt is necessary for life. We not only need soil for growing food, but without some exposure to the ordinary germs that exist in normal dirt and dust, we would have no immunities to the wide range of sicknesses that are present around us every day. From another perspective, rightness of life is not the prerogative of those who never encounter anything immoral or contrary to their values. We become good persons by making choices in the midst of conflict and of confrontation with forces that challenge our beliefs and values.

We use "dirty" in an applied sense when we speak, for example, of athletes who cheat, politicians who tell lies, and media organizations that claim to be providing news while promoting a prejudiced view about individuals, races, and religions. Those who seek to make decisions based on their experience of God will do so while being exposed at times to such dirt. We build up immunities by bringing the opinions of others to an honesty test in our hearts, where we consult God in determining the difference between the dirt of anger, or fear, or the desire for power, and the love for which we are created. Turning away from this kind of dirt is accompanied by an experience of inner peace.

The life that God gives us as gift is not centered on the avoidance of getting soiled, but on our attempts to make a positive contribution to our world. We work and play, and need to wash up afterwards. We interact with people and things, and need to reflect and pray about what was appropriate for us and what was not. Through our use of material creation and the quality of our relationships, we are called to become more closely conformed to the image and likeness of God; dirt and germs do not in themselves interfere with our decisions to do what we know to be right. As Jesus once taught, it is what comes out of our hearts that can really make us unclean.

If we engage in thoughts and actions that are contrary to our purpose in life, it is not soap that can cleanse us, but an honest and direct turning towards God who loves us. Through our perhaps embarrassed

acceptance of this love, we can be washed of any and every kind of dirt that affects our spirits. In this life, most of us contract "diseases" at times from the germs of hatred, projected anger, denial, and many others that are in the culture about us. If we recognize thoughts, attitudes, or actions as being "sick," we should strive not to infect others, and go immediately to the Healer of our souls. Our willingness to change draws in the love of God that enables us to become well again.

While we do not want to get dirty, we will never fulfill the basic commandment of loving God and our neighbor without taking the risk of sometimes seeking love in the wrong places or projecting our needs onto others. Rather than remain within a wholly protected environment, where a germ of selfishness might one day enter and kill us, we are urged by our Creator to love others in the messiness of the world as it is. This Jesus did, and this Jesus enables us to do, if we keep his company.

God did not make a mistake: we either live in a place where dirt is always present, or we do not have a life.