

The story is that back in the early 1900's Church of God pastor George Went Hensley was preaching in backwoods Tennessee. "They will pick up serpents with their hands," he thundered ... at which time some dark-looking toughs stomped down the aisle and emptied a large box right in front of him. The content: rattlesnakes. Not missing a beat, the story goes, he bent down, picked them up and returned them to the container.

He was not bit, he was not harmed. Which started the "The Church of God with Signs Following," and later, "The Original Pentecostal Church of God." It's against some state laws, but to this day occasional snake-handling is part of their prayer service.

No one doubts the intensity of their feeling ... but I wonder doubt that Jesus of Nazareth was thinking of rattlers and copperheads when he gave this teaching. He did signs and wonders, and said his followers would too ... but in general ... he was not really into them. I'll bet the snake talk was about something else. I'll bet he was talking about avoidance.

Avoidance means mentally or physically avoiding something that causes distress.

Understandable. You can't stand someone at work, so you walk around him, or try not to look at her. Or children are stuck in a house with a dad who drinks too much; no one's nerved enough to bring it up. Or a wife is addicted to silly credit card spending that's ruining the family budget, but the husband doesn't want to stir the hornets.

Children going the wrong way, wearing reds or blues. Endemic procrastination. Teenagers doing crazy sexual stuff. These are dangerous toxic venomous things in a person's life ... they are snakes ... and the question is ... will you walk over and deal with them, will you name them, will you bring them up ... or not.

There are excellent reasons not to pick up snakes. They bite. People who don't want problems brought up get mad, sometimes furious at the person who points them out.

But we're told by Jesus sometimes we need to pick snakes up. We may well get bit, but if we're united with him we have special stamina. We won't die. We'll start a process. And sometimes ... you know this ... if snakes in your family, you, your friends, or your parish or town aren't picked up ... they just get bigger ... or they have more snakes.

Jesus is our model. He said to people: You don't love the poor. That's a snake. You're looking for human approval instead of the approval that comes from God. That's a snake. You're more concerned about purity than being merciful, or silly details of law than loving others. Those are snakes. Jesus picked up lots of snakes in his life, he got bit ... bad, but wasn't going to be an enabler. He was going to make things better.

So: Take a break. Look carefully to see if there's a snake. And then, don't flake. Pick it up, for heaven's sake. It may bite. But you won't die; this is no lie. And not coping is no way to cope. God wants you to live in the truth, Ruth! God wants you to get real, Phil! If you're with Jesus, you can.