

Body Wisdom

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The Community Church of Sebastopol
January 15, 2012

Corinthians 6:12-20

Author and teacher Barbara Brown Taylor shares this story: “Once when I was a guest preacher at a church in Alabama, I decided to take a look around the sanctuary before the service began. It was a grand old Episcopal church with Tiffany-style stained-glass windows and, over the altar, a striking mural of Jesus emerging from his tomb. Since I was a good forty-five minutes early, I had the place to myself, except for a member of the altar guild who was there polishing the communion silver.

“Once I had adjusted the height of the podium and the angle of the microphone, I walked up behind the altar so I could see that mural up close. It was a real masterpiece. Above my head, Jesus was stepping out of the tomb looking as limber as a ballet dancer with his arms raised in blessing. Roman soldiers slumped in sleep on either side of the tomb with Easter lilies blooming under their noses. Except for a white cloth around his waist, Jesus was naked. His skin was the color of a pink rose, his limbs flooded with light.

“The painting was so realistic that I leaned in for a little closer look. I could not remember having ever seen so much of Jesus’ skin before, especially in church. I felt protective of him, all exposed like that in such a public place. But I could see the artist’s point. Even in Jesus’ most transcendent moment, the moment that set him apart from the rest of humankind, he remained recognizable as one of us. He came back wearing skin.... But something was missing in this painting and I could not think what it was. The wounds in his feet, his hands, and his side were clear, but not gory. His upraised arms looked thin, but strong. But it was then, staring at his underarms, I realized with a start why Jesus looked so ethereal. He had no body hair.”

The woman who had been polishing the silver was watching me through an open door. She smiled and said, “It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

“It surely is,” I said, ‘but did you ever notice that Jesus has no body hair? He has the underarms of a six-year-old. His chest is as smooth as a peach.’

“The smile froze on the woman’s face. ‘I can’t believe you’re saying this to me,’ she said. ‘I just can’t believe you’re saying this to me.’”

Well, it’s not hard to understand that poor woman’s shock and surprise. I mean, really, how often do we discuss Jesus’ body hair – or lack of it – in church, or anywhere else for that matter? You come to church for a spiritual experience, right? So much of our lives are consumed with physical matters, worldly matters, carnal bodily matters. Just look at all the effort it took just to get here today. But you finally get to church, you get away from all of that for a while, and get spiritual. And then the minister stands up, opens his mouth, and starts talking about Jesus and underarms and hair. Come on, Gene. What’s going on?

Well, in my defense I could say I’m just following the example of Paul...and Jesus himself, for that matter. Now I understand that Christianity is often seen as a faith that is rather uncomfortable with matters of the flesh, even viewing such matters as rather dirty or evil or embarrassing. What’s the old joke...a Puritan is a person who is afraid that somebody, somewhere, is having a good time. And how many good jokes are there about Baptists and sex and dancing?

But that really is a distortion of our faith. For the fact of the matter is ours is a tradition that really honors flesh and blood. Try to find another religious faith that actually speaks of the Word becoming flesh – the divine, the holy, the sacred actually sharing in the muck and mire, the joy and sorrow, of our fleshy, daily life. I mean, isn’t that what we just celebrated at Christmas – the Creator of heaven and earth choosing to get physical? Ours is a faith for which matter matters.

And so, turning to our text, what does Paul tell us? Your body – your flesh and blood body with all its beauty, with all its lumps and sags – this body “is a temple of the holy spirit.” A writer recalls, as a little girl, sitting with her best friend in church and hearing the minister preach on this text from I Corinthians 6. He told the congregation each of them was a temple of the Holy Spirit. And because of that they ought never to use their bodies in such a way as to defile that temple of the Lord. The little girls actually thought this was kind of funny. And so, from that day on, they began referring to each other as Temple 1 and Temple 2.

Not a bad idea when you think of it. – each of us, in our bodies, a temple of the Lord, Temple One, Temple Two, Temple Three, Temple Four. I once heard it said that whenever Paul preached, he ruined sex in that town for ten or twelve years. There seems to be this conception that Paul was...well, squeamish, even negative about carnal, fleshy, physical matters. But is that true? Is that true? “The body is meant not for fornication but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body...” Fornication...what a great biblical word. Fornication – you don’t know exactly what it means, but you know, just from the sound of it, that it must be something bad, and Paul sure is against it.

But why? Is it because it’s immoral...good people like us don’t do things like that? Well, not really. Paul doesn’t say that. Rather he makes the astounding claim that our bodies are actually a part of Christ’s body. Our bodies are a gift from God and are the focus of our union with Christ on earth. You thought

Christianity was just about the soul? Paul says, think again. “Our bodies are members of Christ.” Paul actually has a rather high view – you might say a high theology – of the body, of human sexuality. Why is fornication wrong? Because human sexuality involves both a physical and a spiritual union. It involves being with another so intimately that your body and the other’s body become one; it is a deeply transforming, life-changing experience. It is, says Paul, one way we actually glorify God with our bodies. So to treat sex as some kind of momentary, casual pleasure with no lasting significance, is not only to degrade each other, but is in fact a degradation of our unity with Christ himself. So one could argue that Paul actually has a higher, healthier view of sex and sexuality than our sex-obsessed culture. For again, he invites us to see our bodies as gifts of God, temples of the spirit, to be used to God’s glory. But it even goes further than simply sexuality.

A pastor shares this story: “The first time I ever heard the medical term anorexia nervosa was when a young woman in my congregation was struck down by this terrible affliction, this wasting away of the body, this self-induced, self-starvation. I stood by her bedside as a doctor treated her, attempting to get nourishment into her wasted body, even restraining her as fluids were given to her by force. It was one of the most horrifying things I had ever witnessed – self-starvation in a land of plenty.

“Leaving the room, the doctor turned to me and said, ‘What sort of culture do we have where young women get the message that they’re only beautiful if they starve themselves to death, if they waste away into nothing and physically disappear...that they must sacrifice themselves on the altar of a god of leanness?’” And consider the advertising industry, the kinds of messages we and our children receive about sex and flesh and the body every day? I have to wonder—is Paul the one who has a problem here?

Our faith, you see, speaks an alternative word, has a different thing to say about our bodies, this flesh – all of it. Read Paul again. He encourages a view of our bodies as, well, I guess you could say responsibilities given to us by God, as glorious works of God to be enjoyed, preserved, cared for, used, again, to God’s glory. It is clear God speaks the language of flesh, and God loves flesh and blood no matter what shape it’s in.

In fact, and I think I’ve shared this with you before, Barbara Brown Taylor speaks of praying naked in front of a mirror. You just never know what kind of spiritual advice you’re going to get around here on a Sunday morning! Naked in front of a mirror. In her words, “Whether you are sick or well, lovely or irregular, there comes a time when it is vitally important for your spiritual health to drop your clothes, look in the mirror, and say, ‘Here I am. This is the body-like-no-other that my life has shaped. I live here. This is my soul’s address.’ After you’ve looked around, you may decide there is a lot to be thankful for, all things considered...When I do this, I generally decide it is time to do a better job of wearing my skin with gratitude instead of loathing. No matter what I think of my body, I can still offer it to God to go on being useful to the world in ways both sublime and ridiculous...What we miss, in our and our culture’s physical dis-ease, is that our bodies remain God’s best way of getting through to us.”

And just one final word about this flesh, this daily physical/spiritual practice of incarnation. And that is that it is just about impossible for me to show reverence for my body without showing increasing reverence for your bodies. My body is what connects me to you and to everyone. The wearing of skin is not a solitary practice...It’s what we most have in common with each other. Says one author, “However differently you and I may conceive the world, God, or one another, physical reality is something we generally can agree upon. When the temperature drops below 32 degrees, I am as cold as whoever happens to be standing next to me. When I see someone run into a piece of furniture, catching their knee on a corner, my own knee hurts in exactly the same place. When I’m sitting next to someone in a meeting and our stomachs growl at the same time, we both shift in our seats, unable to ignore a connection more fundamental even than knowing each other’s names.”

And make no mistake about it, Jesus, the one in whose body so many of our intellectual doctrines become flesh, was very clear on the importance of our embodied life together. He calls us to honor the bodies of our neighbors even as we honor our own. Think of all the bodies he touched, many of those the world considered untouchable. He never shied away from encountering the world of flesh, again even those whose flesh was discounted by everyone else. And I think of the bread and the cup, of feet being washed, of hands laid on heads. With all the theological and conceptual truths in the universe at his disposal, look what he left us with – concrete things to do, specific ways of being together in our bodies, things that go on teaching us, things to get our hands on, things that require us to get close to one another. Imagine that...God trusted, and still trusts, flesh and blood – daily, everyday matter - to bring the divine love to earth.

After his tragic death at the hands of the Nazis just before the end of World War II, someone said of the martyred theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “He laughed a lot, and he knew how to cry. He enjoyed good food, and loved to share it. He was alive in every pore of his body, but was sensitive to the pain of others. He loved this world and he loved God.” Not a bad epitaph, and really, not a bad summary of our text for this morning. For again, in the words of the poet, “Good is the body, for good and for God, good is the flesh the word has become.”