

“Is this our Body?”

Sermon for Sunday, November 20, 2011 by The Rev. Joe Summers

(Lessons for the day: Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24, Psalm 100, Ephesians 1:15-23, Matthew 25:31-46)

“Consider the lilies, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.” Luke 12:27

“As for me, I know that my redeemer lives and that at the last he will stand upon the earth. After my awakening, he will raise me up; and in my body I shall see God. I myself shall see, and my eyes behold the One who is my friend and not a stranger.”

Job 19:25-27

Is this our Body?

Today I want to talk about how it is in and through our bodies that we come to know salvation, the reign of heaven on earth, or whatever other metaphors we want to use for this experience. For us as bodily creatures this is such very good news we still can't believe it. We still live and act as if our bodies are, at best, irrelevant to knowing and experiencing heaven on earth and, at worst, a barrier. But such views have much more in common with the paganism of ancient Rome than they do with the good news of Jesus Christ.

Is this our Body?

In the ancient Roman world bodies were viewed as a barrier to experiencing God and salvation. Death was often portrayed as something that would free our spirits from the shackles of the body. Sound familiar? It's a message that now often comes to us in and through those who claim to be Christian. For them salvation is something that happened long ago and far away, or it's something that's going to happen in the future; either way it's something that we may participate in, but essentially happens apart from us. You can understand why and how people might come to see their bodies as something apart from themselves, as so much of the loss, suffering, alienation, and shame we experience, we experience in relationship to our bodies. But ultimately, this view of the body, as something apart from who we are, has proved to be terribly harmful.

In contrast, Jesus locates salvation as something that happens in us and through us and significantly happens in and through our bodies. It's an incredibly bold and challenging idea. It turns the dualism that locates heaven up there, something we strive to reach through leaving our bodies and our desires behind, on its head. Salvation is to be known, not through becoming as disembodied as possible, not through cutting our minds or spirits off from our desires, not through pure reason or disembodied spirit, but in and through the muck and glory of being bodily creatures, with bodily needs and bodily desires.

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Who are the lost in today's gospel? They are those who didn't honor/minister to God/Christ in the bodies of the least of their sisters and brothers. They didn't see their sisters and broth-

ers, because all they saw was a criminal, a stranger, an illegal alien, one of the homeless, one of the poor, one who was sick or dying. Notice, how each area is related to a fundamental bodily need: to be fed, to be clothed, to be healed, to be comforted, to not be confined or cut off. Each is also related to something we can do in and through our bodies: feed others, clothe them, heal them, comfort them, free them. Jesus says that, when we minister to such needs, we are ministering to God.

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The arena of salvation is significantly about our loving and being loved--in and through our bodies. Thomas Aquinas said that, if the Spirit was resurrected without the body, what we would experience after death is the void, because it is in and through our bodies that our souls experience everything. That may sound like a silly idea, but it reflects a profound understanding of everything we know about our souls. We know nothing of souls disembodied. What we know is how fundamental our bodies are to the well being of souls.

What is the greatest harm done to our souls? So often it is violence, abuse, or neglect of our bodies.

What is the soul's greatest delight? The Song of Songs says that the best metaphor for it is the sensuous joy and pleasure of being with your beloved.

Jesus suggests spiritual rebirth is as simple as having your tired dirty feet washed lovingly by another, or washing their feet. So many of Jesus' miracles are related to the needs and the joys of the body. Jesus's first great miracle in the gospel of John is making sure a wedding feast doesn't run out of wine, so that the celebration can continue. It's a sign of God's concern for basic human happiness, and how that's often connected to our bodily needs and desires. Towards the end of John's gospel we have the story of the resurrection of Lazarus. Yes those we love, who die, continue to live with us in the communion of the Spirit, but what it must have meant to Lazarus's sisters Mary and Martha and his friends to have him back bodily among them? In between the miracle at Cana and the resurrection of Lazarus, so many miracles are related to the healing of human body/spirits, related to the freeing of human body/spirits, related to the feeding of human body/spirits.

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In the West we've been taught to see the physical as the opposite of the spiritual, and many of us incarnate that dualism to the degree that this may indeed be our experience. But glimmers of the unitive wholeness of the divine peek through. Think of the renewal of our spirits that happens when we are really hungry and tired and someone feeds us a really good meal--a meal lovingly prepared. Think of what an uplift it gives to others when we do that for them. Think of what happens to our spirits when someone gives us a massage, when we have back or neck pain, or the comfort we feel when someone does something as simple as putting a cool, wet cloth on our forehead when we have a fever. Remember the solace of the touch of someone simply putting their hand on our back when we've just awoken from a terrible nightmare. Re-

member what it is to hear the sound of the voice of someone we love--a particular voice that affects us differently than any other voice in the world, or the unique smell of someone that makes us remember how good life is. All this feeding of the soul comes in and through our senses--our bodies.

I think it was Madeline L'Engle who wrote about trying to comfort her child in the middle of the night, when they had had a nightmare, and get back to bed, by telling them God was with them. "Yes", the child cried, but I want someone with a body." That's a clear understanding of what and how we, as embodied creatures, experience being loved. And Jesus says--that is a central part of how we love God and are loved by God.

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On some intellectual level this vision of the body, as central to who we are, makes sense, but in practice most of us live oppositely. We've been programmed, not according to the logic of the Incarnation, the desire of the infinite Spirit to be embodied, to express itself here and now in the physical world, but according to the logic of a dualism that continually calls us out of our bodies.

One of the powerful things that folks in the Practice of Presence group have been learning, is how experience is the doorway to presence. Yet most of us have been programmed to leave the experience of our bodies behind. It's like, as soon as we see another person, or feel something needs to be done, a door slams shut, and we're cut off from our bodies. With that cutting off comes a kind of anguish, an isolation, a loneliness, that we think of as normal, but is core to our experience of the world without God. It makes sense that, if God is to be known in and through our bodies, then this cut-offness is part of our experience of Godlessness. But if we can embrace our body life and our experience of it, if we can learn to relax into and remain in our bodies and be open to the life we know through them, then perhaps we may hear and be comforted by the song of creation and the divine glory that sings in us, in our heart beats, in our breathing, in our body life.

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If true joy is to be known in and through our bodies, here and now, heaven known in and through the joy of fully knowing and loving God and one another, and being known and being loved by God and one another-- this is incredibly good news for those of us who have been forged in the fiery furnace of dualism. But for those of us who have become habituated to leaving our bodies behind without even noticing it, who have been trained to focus on the needs and desires of others, or on our own needs and desires, but not both simultaneously, who have come to experience our bodies as an enemy we need to subjugate-- it's also very challenging news.

In his last night with his friends, Jesus acted out a liturgy, a drama, to help them understand what his teachings were all about. The drama included a festive meal. It included giving them bread and wine, and saying, in the name of God, "this is my body given for you ... do this for the remembrance of me"--do this to reconnect with me. It included Jesus stripping down and

washing his disciples' feet, and then telling them they had to let go of shame, and let themselves be loved in this way. He told them they must let go of their pride and love others in this very basic human way. All of these actions, the mundane actions of daily life, are now revealed as the drama of salvation, the drama by which we come to know God through loving and being loved.

From that meal, Jesus went into a garden asking that his disciples be there with him through this dark night. Sleepy from the meal they had eaten, they could not stay awake. They were not there for him in his hour of terror. Jesus was then arrested, interrogated, beaten, publicly humiliated and tortured, and put to death on a cross.

Each of those scenes of loss, humiliation, suffering, and death are the very image of why we want to flee our bodies, because it is in and through our bodies that we experience this kind of suffering. And yet, if we have the eyes to see it, on that cross Jesus reconciles us to that which we have been ashamed of and terrified by: "It's okay. You can embrace your bodies. You don't need to flee them. I AM here. Come to me. Don't be afraid. Be Reconciled. You can be in harmony with the oneness of things, for you are perfect, just the way you are, as bodily creatures with bodily needs and bodily desires."

On the cross the big lie, that tells us we should hate ourselves, is destroyed. On the cross the judge, the one who condemns us and shames us for being bodily creatures, the one who calls us outside of ourselves, out of our bodies -- dies, disappears. What we are left with is the image of God, in the very midst our very humanity, even in its most weakened and broken state. Embracing God in ourselves and in our experience opens for us the doorway to the resurrected life of the body, the body no longer cast out into the outer darkness but here and now--grace incarnated-- such a blessing-- the very doorway to knowing and being known, loving and being loved.

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One of my favorite metaphors for the reign of God is the Feast of life; another is the image of dancing. One of the glories of us mammals is that we like to play. Playing makes us happy. Dancing is ultimately about playing. Discovering and being reconciled to God, in our bodies, opens the door to the playfulness of the spirit, the dance in which we allow ourselves to love fully and wholly, and let ourselves be loved fully and wholly, in and through our bodies. No longer at war with ourselves, no longer under the dominion of fear, no longer controlled by shame, our body life becomes an expression of desire, an experience of the joy and peace and love that seeks to be embodied, in ourselves and in deeds. Our lives become a dance, an offering of thanks to God through which we and our world are reborn. So...let us sing "Let the sun shine in. Let the sun shine in." (sing)

*Note: The refrain "Is this our body" and "This is our body" are taken from the poem "The Bath" by Gary Snyder.