

An Embodied Faith

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Theology

“And the Word of God became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.” (John 1:14, Message.) I like to picture Jesus standing on the sidewalk, holding a cardboard box of his belongings, and thinking, “what in heaven’s name am I getting myself into?” Jesus coming to live among us is one of most beautiful realities of our faith. The root of Christian theology is the incarnation of God. That God becomes a body.

There is an interaction recorded in John’s gospel that is often reduced to moral critique of doubting. Yet, the physicality of the exchange is beautiful, and important. Thomas is grieving Jesus’ death, despite claims of the risen Lord. Thomas wants not an idea, but an encounter—he needs to see the body of Christ. When Jesus comes he says to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.” Thomas exclaims, “My Lord, and my God!” This is a statement of faith, but it is more than that. It is an encounter with the holy, terrifying mystery of an Incarnate God-- a God who is wounded, who is changed by and whose body forever bears the mark of encounter with humanity. Jesus is a physical body, scarred by his vulnerability and love.

Throughout the scriptures, the followers of Jesus also come to be referred to as the body of Christ. We are not called the spirit of Christ, but the body. In I Corinthians Paul writes, “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? ... Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit...?” (I Cor 6:15 -19, ESV). This is crucial. To follow an embodied God, we must incarnate our faith; we must embody it in the flesh. *We are called to be bodies and this is a radical calling that affects our entire posture before God.*

The thing about bodies is that they can’t be purified into an abstract, holy idea. Bodies can be gross—we sweat, we smell, we vomit, we poop. The body is not pretty all the time, the body ages, the body bleeds, the body wrinkles and weathers. The body carries wounds that do not heal without scars. To be present to our selves as bodies is to locate our own fragility, it is a posture of radical vulnerability and humility. It is a call to move past shame, a call to openness, a call to learning what it means to be a body and embracing this. *That Jesus is the Word of God in a body means that our relationship as Christians is to Truth as a person.* God’s incarnation changes the revelation of God because Jesus acts out the love of God in ways that surprise, shock, and sometimes outrage the people he interacts with. The incarnation of Jesus sets the precedent for revelation to continue, for our experiences to be a valid way we encounter the living God. Jesus’ bodily existence creates a model with tremendous space for the Holy Spirit to work through our bodily, lived experience.

The Church

Tragically, the history of the church is one of nurturing a dysfunctional relationship with our bodies. Though today, the doctrine of dualism is viewed as flawed, most of the church still acts out this dualistic identity that at it’s worst has misguided followers into hatred, fear, harm, and separation from our own bodies. We are not taught to love our

bodies in church and the churches silence infers a silence of God. Until we change this dysfunctional relationship we have to our bodies and the bodies of others we cannot act as the church of God-in-Christ. We cannot embody peace. For the church to be the body of Christ, we must recognize and reconcile ourselves to this: “I am a body.”

James Allison, the Catholic theologian, describes society’s scape-goating and expulsion of “the other” as a way we maintain the very fabric of our own society and identity. Our ability to blame “the other”, to objectify and commit violence against each other *is a symptom of disconnection from our physical existence*. The challenge for the Christian church is to create new models, models by which we remember how to incarnate ourselves and embody our faith. As Krista Tippet says, “I have not seen anyone who became more aware of their body in its fragility and grace without also becoming more compassionate to all of life.” I would like to suggest that attention to the body as an integral part of our identity, that attention to our lived experiences as a body is an act of Christian worship, of revelation of God, and a way of forging peace.

Acknowledgment

I believe the dysfunctional relationship we have to our own bodies and the bodies of others is obvious and invasive. We disinherit our humanity when we do not acknowledge the body.

Last week, after I’d finished this speech, I was nagged by a feeling of incompleteness. This is what I realized; it is easy for me to talk about the body and body practices without talking about the LGBT community. It is easy to talk about these ideas in a non-threatening way because my sexual identity grants me power, privilege, and access in the church. Yet, while I can worship freely, people who are dear to me are excluded—though they follow Jesus they are told that their identity separates them from God. I don’t want to speak for the LGBT community; but I do want to speak for my friends whose voice is often ignored in our churches. The church’s fear and silence around sexuality, its exclusion and discrimination against homosexuals, is a failure to encounter Jesus. I will leave it to the theologians to duke out the meaning of passages in Leviticus and Romans. I believe The Word becoming flesh means Jesus is the one we *read*—his actions, his radical love, his experiences—are our model.

But while the hierarchy continues to discuss these theological issues these are the bodies of my friends. These are living, breathing, human bodies being pushed to a point of self-hatred, of suicide, pushed to choose between being able to fully participate in the body of Christ and sacrificing their integrity to themselves, pushed to hide their identities. The church’s stance of “loving, but not affirming” is not true peace. It is inadequate, trite, and selfish to ignore this matter of life and death both spiritually and physically while we live with our own dominant sexual identities. In 2009, 100 Mennonite pastors and lay ministers called for the denomination to extend full welcome to gay and lesbian people and invited the church to confess its exclusion (Berger & Choi, 2009)—yet the divisiveness of these ideas continues to wall off the dialogue from the actual lived experiences of the LGBT community.

I believe it would be like Jesus to weep with my friends as they experience the weight of their humanity being demonized, of being subjugated, hated, victimized, and bearing scarlet letters branded into their chests. I think my friend Matt is right when he says, "How many times must I pray to God to "cure" me before I realize that maybe He is saying "There is nothing to cure, I love you for you!"

We forget that our humanity is grounded in our bodies and in so doing we are capable of forgetting what it means to be human. A brother becomes capable of breaking his fist against the face of his brother when he finds out he is gay. My friend Matt listens in fear while his coworkers discuss how they would harm homosexuals. Later telling me, "I don't feel safe and I am terrified of not being able to put up this facade for my time here. I'm trying to hold on as long as I can... I just feel like my life has ran out of options." My friend Aaron has "seen, felt, and executed so much hatred that [he] is losing sight of the good."

Freedom in spirituality and in relation to God cannot be separated from awareness and acceptance of the body because the embodiment of Christ and our possession of our identity as a body is a way we learn to be human with one another. We cannot see an "other" as valuable without valuing their body, their physical existence. There is hope. One of my dearest friends cried while recounting to me worshiping in an open and affirming church saying, "for the first time in 10 years I was able to worship to God openly, not having to hid parts of myself. I felt shameless in the presence of God."

Embodiment

God who "made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness" (Philippians 2:6-9) invites us to be members of his body. We are invited to restoring humanity to others through recognizing our bodily existence, through cherishing our own and other's bodies and sexuality. It is our calling to be bodies, to renounce our past silence and affirm the body as the creation of God and the very center of our interaction with and experience of God and others. We are called to recognize that, as Rowan Williams says, "our identity is being made in relations of bodies...[that] we belong with and to each other."

An embodiment of this invitation means to inherit the life of the incarnate God in our own bodies in vulnerability and humility. It is a faith that follows the risen lamb that was slain, that is led by the Holy Dove with a broken wing. This is a messy, broken, present love—love carried out in a body. Being the body of Christ means allowing the model of the incarnation to challenge us radically to an embodied faith—a faith that is practiced and worked out through our lived experiences. An embodied faith must wrestle with what the body of Christ means, with revelation that continues from our experiences. A Christian peace stance must not settle for the false peace and easy exclusion and oppression that stems from our dysfunctional relations to bodies. It is a faith that wrestles with what the incarnation of the Word of God means and the role of the body in our theology-- a faith that approaches each person barefoot, encountering holy ground.

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