

Radical Love

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June 23, 2019

Early in my chaplain training in a hospital outside Chicago, I was called to the room of a young man, probably 25 or 26 years old, who had just received the news that he had cancer. He spoke very little English, and I, little Spanish – his first language. I entered the room to find him sitting in a chair and just staring into space. I took a seat beside him, and learned that he was waiting for his parents and just wanted someone to sit with him. We sat together for an hour – clearly speaking little. In my rudimentary way, I let him know that our oldest son was his age, and that my heart hurt for him. We both shed tears as I held his hand.

It was one of the most meaningful moments that summer. A recognition of the fact that we need not speak the same language, come from the same country, practice the same religion or love the same people to connect on a deep level. We found a bond not with our minds, but through our shared connection of being human, body and soul.

Human beings are necessarily embodied.

Our bodies are intricate and beautiful and wise, born to dance, create, sing, work, but also inconvenient and demanding. They require food, and hydration and rest. Parts often need replacing, our skin gets rashes, we get injured. Bodies produce embarrassing noises and odors. Some of us worry constantly about width of our thighs, the color and thickness of our hair, or even if we have hair, our height. We fret over our athletic and artistic abilities. Ultimately, our bodies get old, they break down.

There is a huge industry to help us achieve the bodies we desire – skin care, make up, plastic surgery – helping us move, cover, shift and tuck what feels problematic. We Americans have a hard time figuring out just how we feel about our bodies. We chase diet fads, get too little sleep, deny ourselves small pleasures, or over-indulge on fast food and alcohol.

The imagery in Psalm 139 that Lily read offers a radically opposing view of the societal norms that have so long dictated how bodies matter and whose bodies matter. God reminds us that all bodies are knit together by God, all bodies fearfully and wonderfully made because God made bodies. We can ignore God, but God will never ignore humanity.

Jesus shows and tells us that loving self and others always means to love and respect bodies, because all bodies belong to God.

Loving and respecting physical bodies – ours and others -- is a profound form of resistance today as it has been throughout history. The power of loving bodies that has been forgotten, enslaved, or oppressed is a political, spiritual, religious and Jesus-formed way of life. Every time a person risks leaving water in the desert at our border, or makes a stand for transgender rights, every time we put food in a backpack or donate to VEAP, every time we vote, protest to call our representative, we chip away at the power of those who attempt to convince the world that only certain bodies matter to God.

Traditionally, Christians have been influenced by the NT writers who reflect the influence of Greek philosophy that elevates the spirit and degrades the human body. As though they are completely separate.

Our spirit is embedded in our bodies. Barbara Brown Taylor says that “our souls are tucked away in this marvelous luggage and every spiritual practice begins with the body” (*An Altar in the World*, pg. 40). We do not flee our body until death, when we receive a heavenly body. So, as the psalmist says, no matter where we go, God is there. Like Hannah said, you look in the mirror, and there is the divine.

In her book, *An Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor tackles the subject of the embodiment of the spiritual practices. She talks about that urge to not look at ourselves, particularly as we age, or are changed by surgery or disease. But that as Christians, those who really do believe that God loves flesh and blood, no matter what kind of shape it’s in, we can only avoid ourselves for so

long. So, she says, “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” (*An Altar in the World*, pg. 38).

Nadia Bolz Weber writes that we must, “...remind each other that every human body is the same in form as the one taken on by God in the incarnation”

(<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2012/01/sermon-on-psalm-139-and-the-spirituality-of-having-a-human-body/> “Sermon on Psalm 139 and the Spirituality of Having a Human Body).

I think that problems in our world stem from the idea that the body isn’t holy. Our misguided notions of our own bodies may prevent us from compassionately accepting the bodies and lives of others. So, the more we love and respect our own bodies, the more we can love and respect the bodies of others.

As the physical manifestation of God, Jesus ministered to bodies. He fed people, he spit into his hands, touched the untouchable and healed them, he drank wine, he hugged children. And on his final night with his disciples, when he could have done anything, Jesus chose to wash dirty, tired, stinky feet. He said, “Do what I do.” When Jesus appeared as the resurrected Christ, he was revealed in the breaking of bread, in the grilling of fish, and the touching of hands.

We practice two sacraments in the Presbyterian church. “Sacred moments”—the ones Jesus told us to do. Physical embodiments of spiritual truths. Today we used water, the source from which all life grew, and the substance humans cannot live without, as a physical AND spiritual reminder that God loves Mia, that she belongs to God and to her parents and all of us. And it reminds us that we, too, are loved with a love beyond our imagining. In two weeks we will again come to the table, not for mind melding, but for the earth-bound practice

of tasting bread from the earth, and sweet grape from the vine in order to sustain our physical bodies with Christ's presence.

I will close with the poem by Irenaus called Capable Flesh. He says it all.

Irenaus (c. 125–c. 210)

Capable Flesh

The tender flesh itself
will be found one day
— quite surprisingly —
to be capable of receiving,
and yes, full
capable of embracing
the searing energies of God.
Go figure. Fear not.
For even at its beginning
the humble clay received
God's art, whereby
one part became the eye,
another the ear, and yet
another this impetuous hand.
Therefore, the flesh
is not to be excluded
from the wisdom and the power
that now and ever animates
all things. God's life-giving
agency is made perfect,
we are told, in weakness —
made perfect in the flesh.

Adapted and translated by Scott Cairns, *Love's Immensity; Mystics on the Endless Life* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2007, pp. 5–6.)

May it be so. AMEN