

Body Beautiful

Prepare our hearts, O God, to accept your Word. Silence in us any voices but your own, so that we may hear your Word and also do it; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

This morning we continue our summer series based inspired by the book, *This Here Flesh*, by Cole Arthur Riley. Today we'll think theologically about the body. Listen now to how God is speaking to you through these verses of Psalm 139.

Psalm 139: 1-18

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.

You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.

Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.

You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.

Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.

If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,” even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.

For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.

My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.

How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!

I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you. AMEN

I was recently riveted by an interview on NPR with pediatric neurosurgeon, Jay Wellons, as he spoke with passion, wonder, and grace, about his work with young patients. Dr. Jay, as he is known, shared his experiences of operating on brains and spinal cords, and treating young people with brain hemorrhages, childhood glioblastomas. It was clear through his tone and words that he cares deeply and respectfully for his young patients and their families.

He poignantly explained how he and his team can operate on a fetus' spine, in utero, to address Spina Bifida, a condition where the spinal cord does not form normally.

It's a marvel! Using micro-instruments and magnifying lenses called loops, he can operate on a spine as small as three grains of rice lined up end to end. And the outcomes are remarkable.

Indeed, we are fearfully and wonderfully made. All of us.

Human beings are necessarily embodied. Our bodies are not just a resting place for our brains, but how we move through and experience the world. We are just as much in our fingertips as we are our thoughts about them! (Hillary McBride on *We Can Do Hard Things* podcast with Glennon Doyle)

Our bodies are strong, intricate, beautiful and wise. We are born to dance, create, sing, work, and play. And bodies are also vulnerable, fragile, inconvenient, and demanding. Bodies have needs and desires. All bodies. We require food, hydration and rest. Bodies are worth treasuring.

Body parts sometimes need replacing, our skin gets rashes, we get injured or get sick. 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 sometimes feel shame or obsess over perfectly normal body parts and functions. For us all, ultimately, our bodies get old, they break down.

The psalmist offers us a theological and poetic lens through which to view the body that disrupts the norm of white dominant culture that has long dictated whose bodies are beautiful and whose bodies matter, whose bodies have access and voice in our world. The Bible reminds us that God knit all bodies together – so all bodies are holy. Every human has a right to agency and communion with the divine. There is no place to go where God is not present and at work in and through humanity. Ours is an incarnational faith. In Jesus, God chose to become a vulnerable body through the body of a young woman. Cole Arthur Riley writes, “For me, the story of God becoming body is only matched by God’s submission to the body of a woman. That the creator of the cosmos would choose to rely on an embodied creation. To be grown, fed, delivered – God put faith in a body. in Mary’s muscles and hormones, bowels and breasts. And when Christ’s body is broken and blood shed, we should hold in mystery that first a woman’s body was broken, her blood shed, in order to deliver the hope of the world into the world.” (*This Here Flesh*, pg. 57)

Jesus shows and tells us that loving self and others means to love and respect bodies, because all bodies belong to God. Riley says that to know your own body is an act of spiritual care and protection. To know the body of another is spiritual union and conciliation. Extending welcome to all bodies, particularly the bodies that the world discards and demeans, is to be a people of liberation. We will all be whole because liberation involves all of us.

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

Throughout the world and here at home there are those who have endured trauma simply for living in their skin, or because of the way they look or move or talk. We experience bodies differently depending on the power the culture and world confers on them. Bodies that are considered expendable are vulnerable to colonization and exploitation, which incurs trauma. And that trauma lives in the body and is passed down through the generations. And it can change a body.

And in a world that has colonized and disregarded so many bodies through the sins of racism, misogyny, homophobia, xenophobia, transphobia, ableism, it means that all our bodies are affected.

I hope and think that our faith tradition is coming to terms with the philosophy that elevates the spirit and degrades and dismisses the human body. As though they are completely separate. Body and spirit are intimately connected. Riley writes, “When we neglect the physical, it inevitably suffocates the image of a God who ate, slept, cried, bled, grew, and healed.”

We need a faith that is holistic. We often say that at the Presbyterian Church, we don’t check our brains at the door. I hope we do the same for bodies. We seek to live a faith that is embodied, that moves with hands and feet and words and action. To be people that have the courage to feel the pain of others and act with empathy rather than turn and walk away.

As the physical manifestation of God, Jesus ministered to bodies. He fed people, he spit into his hands and made a blind man see. Jesus 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.” Then after washing those road-worn feet, he broke bread and drank wine with them – this is my body. This is my blood.

And when Jesus appeared as the resurrected Christ, he was revealed in bread, in fish, and the touching of hands. It wasn’t a thought experiment, but a real connection with bodies.

As we love and respect our own bodies, we can have empathy for the bodies of others. But insofar as we disconnect from our human bodies, it becomes easier to disconnect from others, to objectify and exploit bodies for the benefit of power and the bottom line. It becomes easier to be numbed by the hungry person on the street, or stand by while politicians seek to control and diminish the bodies of those they don't understand or deem important.

The Psalmist's awe at the human body - vulnerable, resilient and wise, and the confidence that God is always near has struck a tender chord with me this last month. As you know, our daughter Hope had a baby in July and we are so thankful.

What you may not know is that she struggled with high blood pressure and other health concerns all through July and was back in the hospital with post-partum preeclampsia last week. She wasn't feeling right, and listened to her body, took her blood pressure and called the doctor. It was caught in time, but she wasn't able to hold her baby for 24 hours, and her body ached, even as my body ached to hold my child who is so far away. I could feel that yearning physically in my body. I wanted to run from that feeling, but the psalmist's reminder that God is always present, the prayers from friends, allowed me to feel all the hard feelings and breathe in the Spirit. We are grateful for access to health care and medicine, and hope and pray that the crisis is over.

Indeed, bodies are amazing. Fearfully and wonderfully made. All beloved. All in need of nurture and tending.

How appropriate that today we will meet at Christ's table of grace to celebrate the sacrament of communion. This table offers us physical and spiritual nourishment. Just as he invited his first disciples, Jesus invites us here, saying, take, eat, this is my body. Cole Arthur Riley says, "I love that we don't bow to the bread, we eat it – the body of God entering our bodies. And I think God's is supposed to taste good."

May it be so. AMEN

Sources

Riley, Cole Arthur. *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories that Make Us*. Random House, NY, 2022.

Interview of Dr. John (Jay) Wellons on NPR's *Fresh Air*, July 28, 2023.

(I listened on a podcast and this may have been an older interview.)

Podcast, "We Can Do Hard Things – How to Follow the Wisdom of Your Body," interview with Dr. Hillary McBride, May 8, 2023.