

Text: I Corinthians 6: 12-20
Title: A Somatic Spirituality
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I was at a retreat in the hard scramble hills of Texas. The food was tasty, the running trails were challenging, and the conversation with friends was lively. The retreat included small group meetings, large group worship, and times of prayerful introspection. Toward the end of the retreat we were sent off on our own. I don't remember the particular purpose or instructions, but I know we were supposed to do some manner of personal reflection and then meet with other retreat participants to share.....

I don't remember if I took a nap, sat in the sun, or read a book. I don't remember how I assessed my own spiritual landscape, but I do remember what happened next. I do remember when we had to share.....

I was sitting on a picnic table when a woman in her fifties ~ dowdy, divorced, a little lonely, a little odd ~ asked if she could sit down and share her experience of reflection. I welcomed her company and indicated that I would be honored to listen. She said:

I went back to my room where there is a full length mirror and I took off all my clothes and I examined my life and my body there ~ naked before God. I took time. I looked carefully. I assessed everything. I feel good about what I saw. I feel good about my body.

Uhm..... gack, clutch, cough, pause.....

I am sure she said something more than that, but that is all that I remember.

I have no idea what I said in response.

I couldn't get past feeling uncomfortable, unprepared, unsure.

I was squirmy and squeamish and a little creeped-out.

This was more sharing than I was familiar with....

Admittedly it is a little odd, but my uneasiness probably says more about my insecurity than it does about her quirkiness. It is hard to talk about our bodies.

In a world of idolized and airbrushed bodies it is hard to talk our bodies.

In a culture that obsesses over and denigrates bodies,

in an age of obesity and eating disorders,

in the toxic stew of distorted, hypersexual, shallow, twisted notions about our bodies ~ it is hard to talk about our bodies .

The Apostle Paul talks about our bodies. In a letter to a first century church he takes up a twenty first century question about how we understand our bodies.

A little context:

Corinth was a colorful, complex, cosmopolitan, commercial center at a strategically placed crossroads. It was the nexus of a major east-west trade route. It was a multi-cultural goulash full of all sorts of people from all over the New Testament world. Some historians have hung on Corinth a reputation for naughtiness, excess, and immorality run amuck. It is often noted that a

Greek playwright coined the verb *korinthiazesthai* as shorthand for “to fornicate.” But, chances are that Corinth was no better or no worse than any other sea port or center of commerce. It was full of people and their bodies....

The Corinthian church, like every other first century church, was struggling with what it meant to be followers of Jesus Christ. Their particular issues were not what it meant to be first Jewish and now Christian, they were wrestling with what it meant to follow Christ with regard to freedom, individualism, community responsibility, leadership, authority, etc. Their issues were not strictly theological; their issues were practical and embodied.

Now, our particular text this morning is, and I quote, “widely acknowledged to be one of the most difficult passages in Paul’s letters. Commentators have described the unit as ‘disjointed,’ ‘obscure,’ ‘unfinished,’ ‘imprecise,’ ‘extravagant,’ and even ‘incoherent.’” And, it is hard to decipher the details of the particular issue and how Paul constructs an argument, but the underlying question is about our bodies:

- Are we free to do what we want with our bodies?
- Are our bodies our own?
- Are our bodies transient and therefore trivial?
- Are our bodies simply containers for the spiritual and the eternal?
- What is the essential nature of our bodies?
- And, how therefore should we care for our bodies?

Paul was probably writing in response to a philosophical dualism that saw soul/spirit/intellect as good and eternal, and the body/physical world as transitory and troubled. Given that framework, the body didn’t matter much and it was easy to appropriate a broad expression of sexual freedom. Because, if my body doesn’t matter much, if it is just a passing shell, and if I am the captain of my own ship, then I am free to do what I want when I want, then the satisfaction of the body ~ sexually or gastronomically ~ is incidental, my business, no biggie. To quote those renowned theologians the Isley Brothers, “It’s your thing, do what you wanna do. I can’t tell you, who to sock it to.”

The specific issue here may have been prostitution. Which by the way the root word for in Greek is *porneia* ~ from which we get pornography. And, while it is unclear exactly what was happening if Corinthian men were frequenting prostitutes they were not asserting some unheard-of freedom; they were doing what was the norm of the day. So, Paul engages this problem with a sort of rhetorical banter. He quotes familiar slogans and then offers a counter punch.

- You say, “I have the right to do anything.”
- But, I say...
- You say, “Food for the stomach....”
- But, I say...

What’s interesting is that Paul’s response is not to attack freedom, or denigrate the body, or wag a finger in judgment, or chastise with threats of punishment. Rather, Paul’s response is to locate the body in the good of God’s creation. That is the grounding here.

The body is good.
Your body is good.
Your body is so good that God will resurrect it as Jesus was resurrected.

A life time ago, while teaching a high school class, I said something about the “resurrection of the body” when suddenly a boy in the front row snapped up straight and blurted out, “We believe what!?!” Quizzical bewilderment clouded his face and in the space of a few seconds he dredged up twelve years of Christian schooling and rifled through every Bible file he could recover.

This was the first he had ever heard of such nonsense. He wasn’t a dolt or dullard; he was a solid-middle-of-the-roader who had been through every manner of camp, convention and catechism. He’d sat through sermons and Sunday school every-week-of-every-year of his life, and yet somewhere along the way he missed the part about the resurrection of the body.

I reminded him that Christians all throughout history and all over the world confess it every time they say the Apostles’ Creed: “I believe in a holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and”

He said, “Yeah, that’s just about Jesus. We’re not resurrected! Our souls go to heaven.”

But, that’s not what Paul writes to the Corinthians. Paul writes, “

The body is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord and the Lord for the body. By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also....

As Richard B. Hays puts it:

The body is not simply a husk to be cast off in the next life; the gospel proclaims that we are to be redeemed body, soul, and spirit. Salvation can never be understood as escape from the physical world or as the flight of the soul to heaven. Rather the resurrection of the body is an integral element of the Christian story. Those who live within that story, then, should understand that what they do with their bodies in the present time is a matter of urgent concern.

Now, that might seem a long way away from an awkward moment at a retreat with a naked lady, but a biblical anthropology is grounded in the goodness of the body ~ young bodies, old bodies, smooth cheeked babies and the wrinkles and folds of age, muscled bodies and soft bodies, big bodies, small bodies, pregnant bodies and dying bodies....

For God so loved our bodies that he was embodied in Christ.

For God so loved our bodies that he emptied himself into birth and acne and thirst and sleep and erections and flues and blisters and sore muscles.

For God so loved our bodies that he died a brutal death.

For God so loved our bodies that he rose from the dead.

And that means that our bodies ~ in all their beauty and their brokenness ~ do not belong to us but belong to God. A biblical vision of the body, therefore, is seen through the incarnation and resurrection. Young or old, married or single, gay or straight, your body belongs to God....

so don't hook up with a prostitute,
so don't abuse it with food,
so don't cheapen it with all sorts of partners,
so don't loathe it or worship it,
so don't degrade it through pornography,
so don't objectify it...

The don'ts come easy. Don't they? It is easy to tick off a list of don't do this and don't do that. You would think rigid-rule-bound Paul would do same, he had a whole testament and tradition of laws and commandments, but he doesn't.

In this text there is only one line: "Flee from sexual immorality." And, the word for "flee" is the word most often associated with Joseph's escape from Potiphar's amorous wife. Run! Run from that which would ensnare, enslave, degrade....

Easy to say.
Harder to do.

In some ways you could boil this morning's text down to the first line and the last line.

*You say, "I have the right to do anything...."
But I say, "Honor God with your body."*

Dear friends, ours is a somatic spirituality. We experience God in our bodies.

Our faith is not a flight from that which is sensual, physical, earthy, or even sexual.

Our faith is not a disembodied mystical escape.

Our faith is not a rational intellectual exercise ~ although sometimes it feels that way.

Our faith is an affirmation of the goodness of creation ~ of the goodness of our bodies.

If you hear anything this morning may you hear deep-deep-deep down that our bodies are good. God created, God loved, God incarnated, God resurrected, God redeemed....

Brian Wren puts it in a hymn this way:

*Good is the flesh that the Word has become,
good is the birthing, the milk in the breast,
good is the feeding, caressing and rest,
good is the body for knowing the world,
Good is the flesh the Word has become.*

*Good is the body for knowing the world,
sensing the sunlight, the tug of the ground,
feeling, perceiving, within and around,*

*good is the body from cradle to grave,
Good is the flesh that the Word has become.*

*Good is the body from cradle to grave,
growing and ageing, arousing, impaired,
happy in clothing or lovingly bared,
good is the pleasure of God in our flesh.
Good is the flesh the Word has become.*

*Good is the pleasure of God in our flesh,
longing in all, as in Jesus, to dwell,
glad of embracing, and tasting, and smell,
good is the body, for good and for God,
Good is the flesh that the Word has become.*

Amen.