

Practicing Our Faith Sermon Series
#2 – Honoring the Body
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Today, we're continuing our Lenten sermon series on "Practicing Our Faith," in which we're learning about different ways we can grow in our faithfulness and service to God and to each other through practicing aspects of what it means to be a follower of Christ. Today, we're talking about the practice of honoring the body.

Does that make you feel a little nervous? "We're talking about the body in worship? What if there's a wardrobe malfunction? What if Kory says the word 'uvula'?" When we start talking about our bodies, there's a physical reaction of curling up and covering up, as if we are somehow ashamed of our bodies. And we most likely are, because our culture has taught us to be ashamed of them, especially if they are less than perfect.

That's a far cry from what we read about bodies in scripture. You may think the Bible is only a spiritual, sacred text, too sophisticated and ethereal to talk about the body, but to be honest, the Bible is an earthy, fleshy text, and the role of the body is prevalent throughout it.

It starts in the first chapters of Genesis, where God scoops up a handful of clay, breathes life into it, and makes the first human. The story says God makes humankind in God's image, meaning we are God-bearers, and we're told that Adam and Eve were naked, but were not ashamed. Historically, the church has put so much emphasis on the original sin of Adam and Eve, which occurs in chapter 3, that we forget the original glory of God's creation, including the human body, in chapters 1 and 2. From the beginning, the body was a part of creation that God called "very good."

After God tried all kinds of ways to get us stubborn, stiff-necked people to pay attention and embody God's love and grace, and after we continually let God down, God finally took the drastic measure of becoming a body in the form of Jesus. Jesus was God incarnate, a word which literally means "into flesh." As the human embodiment of God, Jesus built his ministry on his relationship to other bodies – healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, releasing demons, raising the dead, feeding the hungry, blessing the children. Jesus' lived a body-to-body ministry.

And we can't forget the powerful symbolism of Jesus' own body. On a tense night in an upper room, Jesus took an ordinary loaf of bread, tore it in half, and said, "This is my body," transforming our understanding of what it means to break bread together. That body was then beaten, bruised, broken, pierced, and ultimately crucified, enduring more than any human body can take.

But we know that's not the end of the story. Just as the bread was broken in order to make us whole, God took Jesus' broken body and breathed life back into it, and Jesus came back to life, in spirit and in body. This is important to our understanding of the value of bodies. Jesus wasn't a ghost; he had Thomas touch his pierced hands, he ate fish sticks with the disciples on the beach. Jesus was resurrected in the body because our bodies matter. They are who we are.

Paul interprets the value of the body when he tells the Corinthians, who are abusing their bodies with too much food and sex, that their bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. That really changes the way we think about ourselves, doesn't it? Doesn't matter if we're shaped like the spire of a church or the Taj Mahal, our bodies are nothing less than temples where

God's Holy Spirit resides. Try using that next time you're going through airport security. "Careful with that wand! This is a temple you're dealing with."

Somewhere along the line, the human body, a creation of God, lost its inherent value, becoming something to cover up and hide. The early Greco-Roman culture believed that the flesh was all bad and the spirit was all good, and so anything that brought pleasure to the body was meant to be strictly avoided. We became ashamed of ourselves, so much so that some folks go to great lengths to nip, tuck, trim down and puff up themselves to achieve the ideal body, as if such a thing even exists. We forget that we are made in God's image and, instead of looking at ourselves in all our nakedness and vulnerability and seeing God, we see wrinkles, blemishes, too much here, not enough here. We see a reason to be ashamed.

An example of this comes from my favorite all-time comedy show, "Arrested Development." There's a character on that show named Dr. Tobias Funke who suffers from a crippling psychological disorder that affects every aspect of his life. Tobias is what is called a never-nude, meaning that he is never, ever naked. He's shown taking a shower and lying in bed with his wife wearing his always-present cut-off denim shorts. It's a funny way of making a serious point – we are ashamed of ourselves.

In modern times, the body has been more seriously devalued. The prevalence of sexual harassment charges and human trafficking show that we see bodies as commodities to be used, abused, traded, and discarded. We see bodies of immigrant children washed up on foreign shores and the bodies of high school students gunned down in schools. We look at bodies of different colors and hear voices with different accents and forget that they are made in God's image, just as we are. We have become experts at dishonoring our bodies, which means we are dishonoring God's body, too.

Church is one of the few places where we can come to hear a different story and experience a different understanding of the body. Think about all the ways our bodies are involved in worship. We stand and sit, we sing and pray, we shake hands and hug and pass trays to each other. I love watching the choir embody the anthem, or people smile when they sing the familiar line of a hymn, or the care with which the deacons pass the trays. And, of course, we break bread and pour a cup and take it into our bodies, transforming us into the body of Christ once again. That powerful act not only re-enlivens our bodies, it reminds us we are connected to every body, those sitting beside us, those sleeping under bridges, and those being tortured in refugee camps. In worship we aren't just any body; we're Jesus' body. We're God incarnate, called to take care of the body, ours and Christ's.

So how can we reclaim the value of our bodies in a world and culture that sends us the contradictory message that we should be trying to achieve the ideal body while completely discarding the value of real flesh-and-blood bodies? It starts by regrounding ourselves in scripture, reciting to ourselves the words of Psalm 139, that we are fearfully and wonderfully made by our God, and that, where we see imperfection, God sees infinite value.

This point is made beautifully by Stephanie Paulsell in her writings about honoring the body. She tells the story of Kate, who had a face full of acne a horribly embarrassing condition for a teenager. One day, Kate's anguish over her appearance made her not even want to leave the house. Seeing how distressed she was, Kate's father asked if he could teach her a new way to wash her face that might help her condition. Leading her to the bathroom, he leaned over the sink and splashed water over his face, telling her "On the first splash, say, 'In the name of the Father.' On the second splash, say, 'In the name of the Son.' And on the third splash, say, 'In

the name of the Holy Spirit.' Then look in the mirror and remember that you are a child of God, full of grace and beauty."

Bathing is one of the primary ways we can recapture the value of our bodies. It is in our nakedness where our sacredness and vulnerability meet. Stripped of all pretenses and coverings, we appear to ourselves just as God made us, even if it's with a few more pounds or wrinkles. One of the most powerful moments of scripture is when Jesus bends his knee to wash the disciples' feet, an act of radical humility and extreme servitude that evokes the cleansing power of baptism. Each time we bathe ourselves, we are rebaptized into the inescapable truth that we are loved just as we are.

Another way we can honor our bodies is through the power of touch. We know from scripture that touch was a powerful healing agent for Jesus. It still is today, because a timely hug or pat on the shoulder can remind us we're not alone, even during the most difficult time. Not everyone likes to hug, and I certainly respect that, but I also know that a hug on Sunday morning may be the only meaningful touch some people get all week. I always make sure to hold someone's hand when I'm praying for them in the hospital. At a time when their bodies are being poked and prodded against their wills, the power of skin-to-skin contact cannot be put into words.

I experienced this myself in a completely unexpected way. On occasion, I like to walk down to my local Catholic church on Friday to worship at the 5:30 p.m. mass. Since I work on Sunday mornings, I need my own worship time, and I've found it there. When it comes time for communion, I don't partake of the bread and the cup. First of all, I'm not Catholic, and I want to honor their tradition. But more importantly to me, I'd rather share that sacred meal with my own church family. Instead, when the time comes, I go forward, cross my arms over my chest, and received a blessing from Father Danny, the priest. And I get something no one else in that church gets – he touches his thumb to my forehead, makes the sign of the cross, and pronounces a blessing. And each time, I can feel the divine electricity when that happens. That touch is a blessing to me far beyond what any words can convey.

This body is what we've got. We can try to change it, manipulate it, put in bionic knees or take out annoying cataracts, but this is it. It's easy for us to take it for granted. After all, we've been looking at it our whole lives. But what would it mean for us to really honor it? Instead of hurrying through our bodily tasks for the day – bathing, dressing, brushing, freshening, tending, touching – what if we prayed through each one, giving thanks to God for what our bodies have done and for what our bodies can still do? God said, "Let us make humankind in our own image." We have been created in nothing less than the image of God. Never take for granted that you were fearfully and wonderfully made.