

THE BODY
I Corinthians 6:12-20

A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on January 15, 2012, on the Second Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria.

Focus Passage

'All things are lawful for me', but not all things are beneficial. 'All things are lawful for me', but I will not be dominated by anything. 'Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food', and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is meant not for fornication but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God raised the Lord and will also raise us by his power.

Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never!

Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, 'The two shall be one flesh.' But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Shun fornication! Every sin that a person commits is outside the body; but the fornicator sins against the body itself.

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

I.

In the Christian faith, there are several key places where Scripture holds up the value of the body.

Listen to some of the Creation passages:

*So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.*

...

God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.

...

...the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.

...

...the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said,

*‘This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh...’*

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.¹

The centrality of the body at Creation.

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Now listen to the Apostle Paul’s affirmation of the resurrection of the body:

*But someone will ask, ‘How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?’
...There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one thing, and that of the earthly is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; indeed, star differs from star in glory.*

So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body....

When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

*‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.’
‘Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death, is your sting?’²*

The resurrection of the body.

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¹ Genesis 1:27, 31; 2:7, 21-25.

² I Corinthians 15:35-55 (excerpts).

Finally, listen to words we have just heard and celebrated in the past few weeks:

*And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger....*³

Creation/resurrection/incarnation...three points of Christian faith in which God ventures forth from God's own self

- To create the world and its creatures, in all their bodily form
- To become incarnate, embodied, in the world, in the person of Jesus Christ
- And both to be raised from the dead – bodily – and to promise resurrection of the body upon our death.

Creation/incarnation/resurrection...three pillars that uphold Christian faith; three pillars under which our faith is formed; three pillars each of which upholds the sacred beauty and centrality of the body.

II.

But unfortunately, in some strands of Christian faith – influenced by Plato and Greek thought – the body is treated with less importance than the spirit or soul.

New Testament scholar Richard Hayes writes:

Even though we recite the...Apostles' Creed that says, "I believe in the resurrection of the body," many Christians imagine [our] future hope in *disembodied* terms. Singing beloved gospel hymns...[we] expect [our] "souls" to "go to heaven" when [we] die. It never occurs to [us] that this is a major modification...of the New Testament...hope for God's redemption of the creation and of our *bodies*....⁴

Hayes is correct: While we may think in terms of our souls "going to heaven...when we die," the promise – from creation to incarnation to resurrection – is more *bodily* than that. The creation of the body, the fact that God became embodied in Jesus Christ, and the resurrection of the body – all point to one central theological and ethical affirmation: *bodies matter*. What we do with our bodies, what we do to the bodies of others, what we allow to be done to bodies – both alive and dead – are of crucial importance to Christian faith.

As Hayes writes: "To misuse the body is to hold the creator in contempt."⁵

³ Luke 2:7.

⁴ Richard B. Hayes, *First Corinthians* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 108.

⁵ Hayes 108.

III.

In our passage for today, the Apostle Paul – he of “resurrection of the body” fame and eloquence – places the body front and center for his ethical exhortation.

... Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.

To think of the body as a temple – or in our parlance, a sanctuary, a holy place – is to think of the body as the place where God resides. To do so is to call us to the utmost respect for the body at the core of all our ethical decisions and actions.

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There are many implications that we can draw from the centrality of the body. Today I will focus on three. They are not necessarily the most important three, nor is their order significant in any way other than homiletically. But perhaps they will get us started in bringing the theological doctrines of creation, incarnation and resurrection to life in the ethics we seek to practice today.

(a)

The first place to address the body is the place Paul begins in our text. It is in the field of what we call today human sexuality.

It may seem odd to turn to the Apostle Paul on matters intimate. Paul was not married and tended to view intimacy and sexuality as distractions from the focus on the return of Christ, which he expected during his lifetime.⁶ Yet Paul’s underlying views on the body provide a terrific grounding for our ethics.

I need not remind you of how frequent and cacophonous has the church’s voice been on human sexuality in the past several decades.

- Around the world Christianity has argued over the legitimacy of birth control, the legitimacy or illegitimacy of homosexuality, and of whether or not marriage should continue to be defined as occurring solely between a man and a woman.
- Denominations are splitting, as they did over slavery and over the ordination of women.
- In some places Christians in this country are supporting and then later backing off from their support for harsh, even deadly measure some governments impose on those who engage in sexual behavior before or outside of heterosexual marriage.

⁶ See all of I Corinthians 7, but particularly verses 8-9, and 26.

- As in many church fights, there is often more intensity than reason, more shouting than measured, thoughtful exchange.
- I find it particularly difficult – and often unhelpful – to speak publicly about something that is so innately private, which is perhaps why, in Genesis, the text at one place depicts, following the Fall, the man and woman sewing fig leaves for themselves,⁷ and at another place, God outfitting them with such coverings.⁸

But with all these caveats let me say this about the body based on Paul’s text before us: If indeed the human body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, as Paul maintains, a sanctuary in which none other than the Spirit of God resides, then several things follow:

- Anytime a human being forces another to share his or her body – his or her Temple – God is greatly dishonored. Thus, sexual acts brought about by duress, by fear, by inequality, by imbalance of power, by force, by gun- or knife-point, are the greatest violation of the image of God in a human being, and the most direct violation to the Spirit of God humans can know. The Temple of the Holy Spirit is invaded and desecrated when the most intimate acts known to humanity occur through force of any kind: physical, psychological, spiritual.
- Likewise, anytime the sharing of the human body occurs for financial transaction, career advancement, antidote to loneliness, desperate desire to save a failing relationship, anytime the sharing of the human body occurs as act of revenge, as an avoidance of issues in existing relationships, even out of experimentation and exploration, as relatively innocent as they may be, neither body involved is treated as the Temple that it is, God is not glorified in our bodies, and we who willfully enter into such sharing are less than we have been created by God and redeemed by Christ to be.
- Furthermore, when our bodies are invaded or violated by another, beyond our control, the destruction for us is no less devastating than the destruction of the Temple was for the people of Israel; but the grief, presence, promised redemption and rebuilding on the part of God remain in place. The Temple may have been destroyed, but God’s love for its bearers has not diminished.

“Do you not know that your body is a Temple of the Holy Spirit?” Paul asked, and it is.

(b)

A second place to address the body today is not something that Paul faced directly but something that we do. It is what we commonly call *virtual reality*.

In a widely read article published in the *New York Times* December 29, author Pico Iyer writes:

⁷ Genesis 3:7.

⁸ Genesis 3:21.

- Wealthy adults are paying \$2285 a night to stay in a cliff-top room at the Post Ranch Inn in Big Sur partly for the privilege of not having a TV in their room
- The future of travel involves “black hole resorts” where prices are high because there is no internet access
- In China and South Korea, there are internet rescue camps to try to save kids addicted to the screen
- And according to a book called “The Shallows” by Nicholas Carr, the number of hours Americans spent online doubled between 2005 and 2009, and the average American teenager sends 75 text messages a day.⁹

All this sharing of information, all this communication, brings productivity to our economy and expands our ability to communicate with one another. In addition, it has proved to be a major tool in the freedom movements around the world about which we so deeply cheer. But all this sharing occurs in disembodied form. We now listen to music rather than attend a concert; listen to a sermon rather than attend worship; engage in intimate online conversation rather than face to face; and form Facebook friends rather than friends face to face.

Despite the speed and productivity of virtual reality, because it is disembodied, it is, by definition, “shallow.”

We can only go so far with virtual reality. Reality itself has a body.

(c)

A third place to address the body is one with which Paul was also concerned. That is simply providing for the needs – the bodily needs – of the saints.

Just as Paul spent a good part of his ministry collecting offerings for the needy at Jerusalem,¹⁰ Christians can never rest as long as human bodies anywhere in the world are without rest. As long as anyone is hungry, as long as anyone is without water, as long as anyone is without shelter, as long as anyone is without life-sustaining medical care, there is work to be done, for the bodies of the world.

There is been no greater proponent of that aspect of Christian faith than the preacher and prophet our nation remembers this weekend. On one of the walls in my home is a framed picture of striking garbage workers in Memphis, with their iconic signs “I AM A MAN.” In their fight for decent wages and safe working conditions, and in the voice he gave to that fight, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was saying, what they knew, and what Paul

⁹ Pico Iyer, “The Joy of Quiet,” *The New York Times* 12/29/11.

¹⁰ See “Excursus: The Collection” in *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 2070, with reference to Galatians 2:1-10, I Corinthians 16:1-4, Romans 15:25-28, Acts 24:17.

stressed: that *bodies matter*: One cannot be a man, a woman, a complete human being, when the Temple of the Holy Spirit is denied what it needs.

IV.

“Take, eat,” Jesus said. “This is my *body*.” *My body*. “Do this in remembrance of me.”

We will. And we will live it.