

“Life in the Body”

Introduction: I’m going to ask you to do something it’s likely you’ve never been asked to do in a sermon before...that is, pinch yourself! It doesn’t matter where, just find a piece of flesh and squeeze. Did you feel that? Now, I’ve instructed you to do this not to make sure you’re awake, but to make sure you realize that you have a body. “Well, of course I have a body,” you might be saying. Yes you do, but do you know what it means? Why did God create us with bodies? And, even more intriguingly, is there any connection between our life in Christ and the life that we live in our bodies? We’re certainly not helped by our culture, which tends to either glorify or objectify the body. Nor are we helped by a strand of Christian teaching which declares that the body is markedly distinct from our soul and so doesn’t really matter very much to our life in Christ, if at all.

So, on this communion Sunday, when we come to remember and even ingest or internalize the body of Christ, I want to think with you about the fact that we are bodily creatures; we are not just soul or spirit. And as bodily creatures, we are temples in whom the Spirit of the living God has chosen to dwell. Which means that our life in Christ is intimately connected to life in our bodies, probably more so than we have ever thought.

I. The Importance of Our Bodies to God

A. Let’s begin by taking a quick survey about how important the body is to God. This is revealed through four important touchstones – creation, incarnation, resurrection, and what I’ll call habitation.

1. In creation, as we have just read from the Genesis account, God created men and women in his image, giving us bodies in the process to help us be stewards over all that he has given us. Most importantly, after he did so, he pronounced all that he had done, which includes our bodies, “very good” (Ge. 1:31).
2. In the incarnation we learn that God himself became incarnate, that is, enfleshed in a body. In Jesus, he became fully and personally present in a body that lived in a particular time and place, and that ate and drank and slept and laughed and touched and cried and even died. In the incarnation, God honored the body.
3. In the resurrection we see that the body really matters to God as Jesus was raised from death, in a body. This brings us hope, therefore, that our ultimate, eternal existence will not be a disembodied one in which we just float around aimlessly, but one in which we will sing and dance and hug and work and play in a way in which our body and soul will be perfectly and gloriously integrated.
4. Finally, and in the meantime, God has chosen, somehow and remarkably, to make his home in our bodies, inhabiting us through the person of his Spirit, to the extent that Paul calls our bodies temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19). This means that our bodies are actually sacred places where God is present, and thus places where we encounter him and through which we come to know him and honor or glorify him. How often do you think of your bodies as places of encounter with God?

So, contrary to our culture, we're not to glorify our bodies by trying to attain the perfect body, at least as far as our culture defines it, but to glorify God in our bodies. And, contrary to some dualistic Christian teaching, we're not to ignore our bodies, as if the physical doesn't really matter or that our bodies are really just a kind of prison from which our soul will eventually escape. Instead, Christian teaching is that our life in Christ is intimately connected to life in our bodies.

Illustration: As a sweet example of this, consider the life of Elijah, a prophet who was called by God to speak his word forth in the 800's B.C. to the Israelites and especially to their nasty King Ahab and his equally nasty wife, Jezebel, whose hobby was to kill as many of the Lord's prophets as she could. 1 Kings 19 tells us that Elisha became so burnt out and even depressed by this call that he ran into the wilderness, prayed that he would die, and then fell asleep in exhaustion under a tree. Did God tell him to tough it out, that his body didn't matter, that he needed to get up and get moving because he still had important spiritual work to do? Quite the contrary. In his mercy, God sent an angel who tapped Elijah on the shoulder and told him to get up and, not to go do ministry but to eat. When Elijah looked around, he discovered that the angel had brought him food and water (perhaps the very first angel food cake). Elijah ate and drank and then went back to sleep. The angel allowed him to rest and came back later with still more food with the message: "Get up and eat, for the journey will be too much for you if you don't." Strengthened by the rest and the food, the text tells us that Elijah was now able to set off to do what God was calling him to do (1 Kings 19:1-8). Quite wonderfully and tenderly, God cared for Elijah's body, knowing the intimate link between the physical and the spiritual. We can't participate in what God is doing in the world unless we care for our bodies. The experience of Elijah is an illustration in living color that the human person in the Bible is never described as being made up of separate parts, like "body" and "soul," but that the whole human person is both body and soul.

II. Glorifying God in Our Bodies

A. So how do we begin to think about honoring, or glorifying God in our bodies?

1. One way, quite practically, is by caring for them, from getting enough rest, to eating the right foods, to exercising, to doing what the doctor tells us. Why? Because the healthier our bodies are, the better we will be able to be the body of Christ in the world, faithfully carrying out God's purposes for our life over the long haul.

2. Serve with your body. In one of Jesus' most challenging teachings, we read that as we use our bodies to honor the bodies of others, caring for the thirsty and hungry and sick and imprisoned, that we honor Jesus himself? One of the ancient mothers of the church put it this way:

Christ has no body but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours.
Yours are the eyes with which he looks with compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes,
You are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours. [Theresa of Avila]

As Paul put it a bit earlier in his first letter to the church in Corinth (3:16), a gathering of Christians into a community was a gathering of diverse bodies that together became one body, the body of Christ, representing him and acting on his behalf in a particular location. So, it is through our bodies, as we serve and care for one another and for others, that we participate in what God is doing in the world.

3. Pray and worship with your body. A temple, after all, is a place of prayer and worship, of communing with God. Did you know that prayer and worship are a physical act? Our whole beings long for God, they thirst for him, as Psalm 63 declares. Read through the psalms and you will see that worship and prayer are done in all kinds of poses, with hands held high, to kneeling, to prostrate on the ground, to walking. When words become inadequate, often the body wants to get into the action; will we let it?!

4. Live morally with our bodies. “Flee sexual immorality” Paul writes just before vv. 19 and 20. Notice he doesn’t say, “flee sex.” Sex is a beautiful gift, God’s idea, created by and given to us by him. It’s a beautiful way that gives us the capacity to join intimately with others as it points to our capacity to join in intimate relationship with God. But God calls us to honor him by using that gift responsibly, faithfully, the way he had intended as our creator for it to be used. And certainly we can go on to say that living morally isn’t limited to how we handle our sexual lives. We can live immorally with our bodies when we steal, covet, murder, tear someone apart with our words, and or even live selfishly.

5. Listen to your body. Often, God speaks to us through our bodies, and our bodies don’t lie! What is God saying to you, about your life and the way you are living it, through your body? Our bodies are usually the first to know when we’re not caring for it, when we’re overcommitted, stressed, anxious, or tired. We glorify God by listening, and making the necessary adjustments that lead toward health. As one writer put it, “I can’t trust my mind as often as I trust my body. My mind tries to talk me into business as usual, but my body isn’t fooled. Insomnia, intestinal pain and diarrhea let me know there’s work to be done” (Elouise Fraser, *Confessions of a Beginning Theologian*).

But listening to our bodies goes even further. Our bodies, as vulnerable and fragile as they are, reveal our brokenness. Through ageing or injury, we come to understand our finiteness. Through the ways in which we might have used or abused our bodies, we come face to face with our sinfulness. Disease, like cancer, can bring us to a place where can we feel that our body has become our enemy. In each of these cases of brokenness, and others like them, we are invited to draw ourselves close to the One whose body became vulnerable, fragile, and broken for us so that we might become restored, renewed, and made whole. At the table of the Lord, we are given the opportunity, through bread and wine, to internalize the Lord Jesus, to have his body minister in a very intimate way, to our own. It is a tangible way, given to us by our Lord, to experience and ponder the intimate link between our life in the body and our life in him,