

Faithful Flesh



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Rev. Emily Joy McGaughy

First Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
145 Capital Ave., NE
Battle Creek, MI 49017
269·965·1225
www.fccb.org

FAITHFUL FLESH: SOCCER AND SALVATION

by Rev. Emily Joye McGaughy

2 Corinthians 4:7-12

Watching the world cup for the last month (or so) has given me pause to think. Soccer is the world's sport. Perhaps more than any other sports tournament, the world's stuff comes up in the World Cup. Just yesterday I was sitting in the living room of complete strangers watching the captains and players of Argentina & Germany make public statements about their no-tolerance attitudes toward racism before the game started. "What's that about, I asked?" For the next 20 minutes I talked with my boyfriend's extended family—people I'd never met before—about the athletic and political histories of both countries. Similarly, I remember watching the world cup in 8th grade when the U.S. played Iran. During the game, Iranian fans were chanting "beat the white devil." I was only 13 with very limited exposure to world history and I couldn't understand for the life of me why anyone would say such a thing. "What's that about, I asked?" For the next hour my mom and her crew informed me about various political events of the 20th century including the 1979 revolution, the hostage crisis and the U.S.'s involvement in the 1953 Iranian coup-de-tat that ousted the Moussadeq government.

I seem to learn a lot about history about every four years. I seem to have a lot more to talk about with people in familiar and new places when the World Cup happens. When two teams consisting of eleven body's lace up their cleats and play their hearts out for the soul of their country, my world somehow gets bigger and more connected.

It's a lot like death, actually. During my short time in ministry, both here and in California, I've noticed something about what happens when people die. All of sudden people who haven't sat down with one another in years sit down in living rooms and get connected. All of a sudden histories start coming out the woodwork. People want to talk about the newly deceased. People want to tell stories ... stories about where their mom went to school, who their cousin

loved, what branch of the military their grandpa served in, what holiday seasons most set their grandma's heart on fire. When people die and families gather, my world somehow gets bigger and more connected.

Now don't go quoting your pastor as saying: The World Cup is like death. Truth is, I've had some of my most alive moments in the last month watching the games in South Africa. World Cup isn't like death. It's what happens to people when the game is being played and what happens to people when someone dies that is similar. It's about connection and history. But really it's about the body. It's about something intensely physical, whether it's athletic competition or death, something intensely physical has happened. It's about the body.

Connection depends on the body and histories reside in the body and on the body and between bodies. When American and Iranian bodies get together, there's history up in the space. When Argentinean and German bodies get together, there's history up in the space. When family members of a no-longer breathing body get together, there's history up in the space. Our bodies connect and our bodies bring history into time and space. Our bodies are the locus, the center-piece of our lives, through which all games are played, all lineages continued, through which all connections happen and all histories accumulate. Our bodies are the source of our experience.

And to be honest: Christianity hasn't done the greatest job of helping us live that truth faithfully. The role of the body in Christian theology has been ambivalent at best and down-right oppressive at worst. Our connection to ourselves, to each other and our sense of history has suffered as a result.

It's the height of irony given our identity as an incarnational faith, an incarnational faith—meaning that in Jesus God took on human flesh and dwelt among us. That's right: God, the Alpha and Omega, the Author of our lives, the Creator Most-High, Most Magnificent, that God...wanted a body and made it so. Incarnational faith means God wanted to wear skin. God wanted to know touch. God wanted

to breathe air and play in the sand and look into the eyes of other people. God wanted to belly laugh and gut cry and eat food and drink wine. Incarnation faith means God had a body. So what's with all this struggle we have about our own bodies in the Christian tradition?

I wish I had a single answer for you, but in all honesty, historical struggles never have single causes. I do not have a single answer, but I do have concern. I have concern about discomfort and silence about the body in Christianity. I have concern about who suffers as a result. I have concern about the unchallenged messages our children receive everyday about the function and purpose of their bodies. You can believe that when religious institutions are silent on a topic, the secular world is not. Where **we** have discomfort and silence about the flesh, advertising industries and impossible working conditions haven't failed to hyper-sexualize it, shame it and exploit it. The messages bombarding us on billboards and websites do not depict the body as sacred and worthy of respect. And it's time for Christianity to strengthen its spine and answer back to this culture.

This morning's text from 2 Corinthians 4 gets us deeply into the issue. So let's go there.

The Apostle Paul was a complex guy and I'm gonna get to him in a minute. But before I get to the man, I want to say one thing about his writing. His spiritual metaphors make surface some of the deepest struggles of human life. And the metaphor we pick up on this morning is perhaps one of the most profound examples of that. The opening line you heard Tom read this morning says "we have this treasure in clay jars." Some versions translate "we have this treasure in earthen vessels." That's beautiful language isn't it? "We have this treasure in clay jars...so that we may know this extraordinary power comes from God and not from us." Paul is meaning making about the body in this passage. Instead of immediately taking this metaphor personally and applying it our 21st century bodies, perhaps we might pause to consider what Paul's use of the clay jar imagery tells us about Paul's 1st century body.

He uses a, b, a, b format and delivers a poetic and persuasive work that proves its theological point through contrast. Listen again:

But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. 8We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; 9persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; 10always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. 11For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. 12So death is at work in us, but life in you.

Repetitive contrasts.

Treasure/Clay Jars
God/Us
Afflicted/not crushed
Perplexed/but not in despair
Struck down/not destroyed
Life of Jesus/death of Jesus

So what's the theological point? It's pretty obvious when you think about the great lengths Paul travels to describe **opposites**. The theological point is that we've got **opposite** forces at work in the universe and they are playing themselves out in our mortal flesh. Given what we know about Paul's life, his metaphor about the body makes a lot of sense. It's well documented that Paul experienced physical torture on more than one occasion because of his commitment to the Gospel. When people experience physical trauma they often develop either/or thinking as a coping strategy. And that's what we see with Paul. He associates his physical pain, his experiences with religious and political punishment with the body and the world. He associates his spiritual experiences, his encounters with Christ, with the spirit. He sets the metaphor up so that the body is the thing that **contains** the spirit. And it's no doubt that this is the main refrain that continues running through most Christian discourse today. The main refrain is that bodies and spirits are separate and that

one is wholly superior to the other.

Now lest you think I blame Paul for Christianity's entire struggle with the body, let me say this: Plato, Constantine and Augustine didn't help either. And Paul isn't always so either/or in his thinking. Like I said, there isn't one answer. But this split is often gets played out in our tradition and it isn't always pretty. When you make the spirit wholly superior to the body, you give folks license to disregard their bodily integrity and that, like Tom pointed out last week, is the genesis of violence.

I used to provide pastoral care to dialysis patients who would tell me they prayed everyday for a cure while continuing to put toxic foods in their bodies. As a person who *also* wanted healing for them, this kind of prioritizing prayer over health practices infuriated me. And often times, they were just doing "what their pastor told them." This is an example of spirit/body dualism and it's theological nonsense.

The body and spirit are not separate. We see no such separation, no such superiority of the spirit over the body in the synoptic gospels. And when we lift up Jesus' name as Lord and Savior, we are claiming a historical figure who was at once fully human and fully god. So the separation falls short there too. The separation between body and spirit is a human construction, and in that way, it has taken on a life of its own because of our perpetuation of the idea. That doesn't mean the idea is true. Because this idea has a life of its own that has proved disastrous for people's health, we think working to eradicate such separation is faithful work. We think it's time to bring the body back to Christianity.

We think it's time to consider every human body a distinct site of revelation, worthy of tenderness, care, grace and compassion. We are going to do that here, at church, in full confidence that spiritual and physical health are one in the same. I pray that all of you will consider your own bodies an integral part of this worship series over the next 5 weeks. Considering our bodies a site of revelation isn't always easy. I think I've met one or two people in my entire life who didn't struggle with some kind of body issue. One or two. My

sense is that many of us, myself included, spend a lot of time trying to avoid what the body has to say, so again the consideration of the body as revelation is pretty counter-intuitive. But I guarantee our spiritual capacities will deepen with every session of body listening, every session of body testimony, every session of body recognition we do together as a faith community. Because below all that avoidance we practice or body-hate we've internalized, the still speaking God awaits.

This worship series isn't just about body healing for us. Last week Tom talked about our chances for survival depending on our ability to draw people in their 20/30's into this church. For the most part, people in their 20/30's will go to a yoga class before they'll step in a sanctuary. Research shows that young people want embodied spirituality, faith that engages their senses and restores them to body wholeness. It is no accident that our church attracts young people and people of different skin colors and people of differently abled bodies when we host a basketball tournament or host a dance in our courtyard. Incorporating this body stuff isn't just about getting in touch with ourselves, it's about our survival and relevance in the future.

Here's what I learned while watching world cup *this year*. when the body is in play, somehow our world gets bigger and more connected. Church: the body must be in play. Game on.

