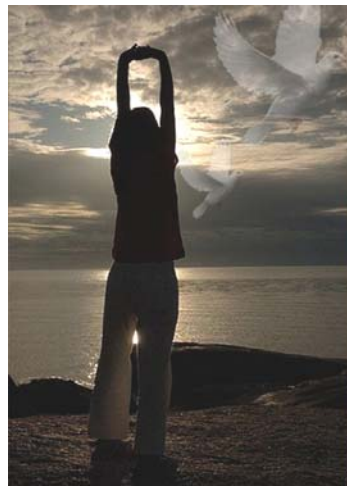


Faithful Flesh: Reverencing Our Bodies



SUNDAY, AUGUST 1, 2010

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1 Corinthians 6:12-15a, 17, 19-20

I decided to create a survey on Facebook in order to help my sermon along. I asked people to say in a word, sentence or paragraph what it means to glorify God in the body. Here are some answers I got.

LeAnn: yoga, eating healthy, listening to music and moving...

Elizabeth: Loving other bodies.

Haley Macon: Loving and appreciating your own body and all of the wonderful things it can do. Speaking in a loving fashion about it and encouraging others to do the same. It's kind of a "screw you!" to God to be complaining about the size of one's hips when God has given you so many other physical blessing.

Jeffrey: when we pray, opening our eyes instead of closing them. we start with seeing each others bodies and saying the words of the sacred and seeing the sacred on each others bodies.

Dominique: Dance!

Ian: Sex!

Erin: It means respecting and loving your body (and others) as part of creation, expressing oneself (or one's community's self) with the gifts one is blessed with, and finally, trying to recognize God in every thing.

Wade:
to exult our need for loving touch, and to offer it as a gift to others to receive on their terms, to love and respect the limits we set for ourselves, to use our bodies to heal pain (inflicted by other peoples' bodies, by their words, by their religion, by our own shame, etc)

Mike: to appreciate—rather than run away from—the

instability of my body.

Jes: -Knowing where our food comes from and responsibly, joyfully, and thankfully indulging in our share while making sure we share.

-Redeeming appropriate touches in society. on the shoulder, a hand held, a cheek kissed in ways that are mutually honoring.

Audrey: feed the hungry, heal the sick, sight for the blind, liberty for captives.... needs of real bodies being at the core of spirituality, not just as metaphors or abstractions or ideals for a kingdom down the road some day

Who knew facebook could be so spiritual? Let us pray...

Temple Bodies

By Rev. Emily Joye McGaughy
August 1st 2010

I took a class in seminary entitled “Theologies of the Body.” It was taught by Professor Mayra Rivera Rivera, a brilliant and beautiful Puerto Rican theologian who often taught as much through her presence as she did in lecture. During the year that I did most of my coursework with her she published “The Touch of Transcendence” her first book, an incredibly dense and delicious text which paints God as “irreducibly Other, always beyond our grasp but not beyond our touch.” Isn’t that just divine language: God beyond our grasp, but not our touch??

Professor Rivera had celebrity status with me. I spent way too much time writing and editing papers for her. I enrolled in every single class she taught. And when she called on me in class, my heart would race and all of sudden I’d get tongue twisted, incapable of formulating those brainy answers she so obviously deserved. I wanted to be her prize pupil, her one and only! I got A’s in her classes, partly because I worked hard but also because the content of her classes felt like the content of my core. That is, thinking about God and bodies and relationships comes naturally to me. It is the stuff of my soul, the material of my mind. So you can imagine what horror I felt when I sat down to write my final paper for this class, Theologies of the Body, and experienced the worse case of writer’s block I’ve ever experienced in my God-blessed life. I was going to write a treatise on incarnational

theology. I was going to define what it meant to experience one's body as source and signification of God. I was going to make Mayra, the infamous and fabulous, Mayra Rivera Rivera proud and I was going to leave seminary on a cloud because my magnum opus on the body was going to rock her professorial world!

AND I GOT NOTHIN.

I sat down to write 2 weeks in advance, having already consolidated all my book chapters and articles for reference. And every single day I would write a couple words and erase. A couple sentences and erase. A page, erase. I thought it was my environment: so I went from my study to the library to an outdoor coffee shop, back to my study. Nothing. I thought maybe it'd help if I read over some key materials again. Nope. Nothing. I talked to my smartest friends and tried to get my ideas mapped out. Didn't help. It got down to the wire. I had one day to write 12 pages and I had two paragraphs at best. With my tail firmly tucked between my legs and all of my ego succinctly sucked from my soul, I called and asked for an extension, which Professor Rivera easily granted. To make a long story even longer, I'll tell you that I struggled through the extension and eventually turned in the worst piece of garbage in all my graduate school career. I got a B in the class and I've never quite gotten over it. I couldn't understand what was wrong with me; I never had issues coming up with content and particularly not about a subject that I cared so much about. I ran into Professor Rivera in a coffee shop that following summer and did everything I could to avoid her seeing me—I was still swimming in shame—but alas, she caught my attention and waved me over. After expressing my sincere apologies for my failed final paper, she suggested that I go read the opening remarks of a book called "Bodies that Matter" by Judith Butler. She said reading that passage might put some of my struggle into a broader perspective. So I immediately went home, desperately craving anything that would diminish my feelings of dim-wittedness. I found the book on my shelf and found out that one of the world's leading scholars in rhetoric also had problems trying to write about the body. Here's what Judith Butler says:

"I began writing this book by trying to consider the

materiality of the body only to find that the thought of materiality invariably moved me into other domains. I tried to discipline myself to stay on the subject, but found that I could not fix bodies as simple objects of thought. Not only did bodies tend to indicate a world beyond themselves but this movement beyond their own boundaries (...) appeared to be quite central to what bodies are. I kept losing track of the subject. I proved resistant to discipline. Inevitably, I began to consider that perhaps this resistance to fixing the subject was essential to the matter at hand."

Judith Butler is right. And my writer's block, though it was so so wrong, was right. The body is not an easy thing to write about or to talk about (or to preach about, so be gentle with me, ok?) because bodies are always changing, both in physical ways and in the ways we conceive of and understand them.

I've done a lot of thinking about this, Church. I'm convinced that there is no one definition of the body. I think, ultimately, we get to decide how we define our bodies. Many brave and faithful folks have fought and died for people's inherent right to define their bodies for themselves. The freedom to self-define and self-determine are critical for any humane enterprise: be it government, religion, the family or the individual. AND this freedom ushers in a plethora of definitions and determinations. So it is with the body. For some the body is a vehicle: it takes us from place to place. For others the body is a stage: it's blank space for expression and the drama of life to unfold. For some the body is tool: we labor and toil and work with it. Others, the body is a canvas: we curate, decorate and adorn it. The list goes on and on. Exercising our hard-earned freedom requires that we sift through all of these options and definitions and functions and decide what works best for us. If we **don't** then we allow forces outside of us to define what our bodies will be and do, and what value our bodies have and for whom. Ask any woman, person of color, differently abled person or L.G.B.T. person the dangers of allowing outside forces to define one's bodily worth. This is life and death stuff, both in terms of skin and breath and heart-beat, but also life and death when it comes to the

human spirit's connection to God.

As Christians, we inherit biblical definitions of the body. Note I say definitions, plural. ***Our text isn't even*** consistent about the meaning and function of the flesh. So, as Christians it's part of our obligation to our ancestors and future children of our faith to decide which of these biblical definitions remains faithful to our people and God throughout the ages. Coming to a working-definition of the body is helpful because it enables us to decide what the body should and shouldn't do, what it should and shouldn't be about. I think Paul gives us some helpful tools for definitions and determinations today.

He says right here in First Corinthians: 1) the body is ***for God***; 2) The individual body is one member of the corporate Body of Christ. 3) The body is...here's the kicker... the temple of the Holy Spirit. The temple of the Holy Spirit. The temple.

When Paul talks Temple, Paul is talking the language of first century Jews and Gentiles. The church in Corinth was comprised of both, and both groups Jews and Gentiles—knew religious life as temple life. Greek Gods and the Roman Imperial Court had temples constructed in their honor where pagans and citizens went to pay homage. Pagans build altars in these temples and festivals happened around them to commemorate important days in Greco-Roman life. The role of the temple in Israel's life is no short story, but one filled with hope and heart-ache, a story that continues in Jerusalem today. The temple served as the centralized place for worship, the place where Torah was read aloud and sacrifices were made to YHWH by the high priest.

As a person trying to convert Jews and Gentiles to this new sect of Jesus-followers, Paul uses brilliant rhetoric by picking up on the dominant religious imagery of both parties. One of the things I'm learning as a pastor still wet-behind-the-ears (to directly quote Tom Ott) is that people listen a whole lot better when you use their language and their dominant symbol systems. So here's Paul using the language and symbols of both Gentiles and Jews, essentially

saying: you know that place you go to see God and hear God and feel God and taste God and smell God and pray to God and sacrifice for God and sing for God and dance for God... and you know how that place is special because your people have been going there for years and years...well that place isn't actually the real deal. The real deal needs no walls, needs no incense or childcare or hymnals or bulletins or cantors or instruments. The real deal is capable of being anywhere at anytime and that real deal is God. That God resides right over there and outside of here and importantly right in here and MOST importantly between here and here.

You are temple bodies, brethren. You are temple bodies, sisters. You are temple bodies, mothers and fathers and children and grandparents. You are temple bodies, says Paul. And because you are temple bodies, God goes with you all/ways, everywhere, all the time. And God's presence is particularly strong when two or three gather together because there's more square footage for God's presence when you've got two and three temples together, right?

So what do you think? Does this definition work for you? For us? Is your body a temple?

I must confess this is one of those theological paradigms that sounds great in theory. I love this passage from Corinthians, and you know what Church: I believe it. I believe the Holy Spirit is right here and between here and there. And I believe it is my duty as a follower of Christ and pastor of a people to glorify God with my body. But I don't always live like I believe. You know what it means for me to believe the body is the temple? It means that I show up everyday in this skin and pay attention. It means that I wait and listen for God's revelation. And if I'm really being faithful, it means that when God reveals God's word to me in my body, I act on it.

If I define my body as a temple, then my definition automatically implicates my behavior. Defining the body as a temple means something about how I live. It means that I eat when my body is hungry. It means that I drink when I am thirsty and sleep when I am tired and dance when I am

moved and caress when I am in love and exercise when I am energized.

And if we, as a community, define all bodies as temples that also means something about how **we** live. It means that we listen and respond to bodies that are hungry, bodies that are raped, bodies that are discriminated against, bodies that are incarcerated or tortured, bodies in chronic pain from inhumane working conditions and poor health care. On a less drastic scale, it means that we hold our brethren's hand in worship if we know he lost his wife this year. It means that we hug the children of this community at every stage of development, helping them feel a sense of safety as they grow. It means we feed each other healthy food and encourage each other to push it through that last 10 minutes on the treadmill. It means that we speak truth to each other about not desecrating the temple with toxic substances or toxic attitudes. It means admiring our glamorous architecture--God's good handy work *at work* in our flesh--from the outside and entering the depths of the internal sanctuary with one's whole mind, heart, soul and strength. It means constantly keeping each other in check about the fine line between worship and idolatry, between being beautiful for God's sake and glorifying one's self in vanity. It means remembering that our bodies are not in and of themselves God, but members of the corporate body of Christ that lives and moves and has being **for** God. It means reveling in the unfolding mystery of every living being on earth, and searching every face for the glory of God, including your own.

Let the people say amen