

Faithful Flesh: Hungering for the Holy



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1 ISAIAH 55:1-9

FAITHFUL FLESH: HUNGERING FOR THE HOLY

Today we are concluding our worship series on the body. For the past six weeks we've been reflecting on what it means to be faithful in our flesh-to live an embodied spirituality.

It has been a hard conversation for many of us. We aren't very accustomed to thinking theologically about our bodies. The food we put into our bodies, the things we do with our bodies, the care that we take of our bodies somehow seem divorced from our spirituality. And yet these past few weeks we have been reminded that our faith tradition calls us to glorify God in our bodies. Our frail and feeble bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit that lives within us.

This morning, as we conclude our series on Faithful Flesh, I want to invite us to focus on our hunger for the Holy.

If we pay attention to our bodies, we can feel despair residing in our flesh. It has weight and mass. It is too heavy to carry and it is growing. Like a cancer, it drains away our energy and leaves us feeling depleted and exhausted. It fills us with a sense of dread and puts a knot in our stomach. It makes us angry and impatient, frustrated and helpless, resentful and bitter.

For nearly four months we watched helplessly as five million gallons of oil spewed out of a tiny hole no bigger than a dinner plate on the ocean floor a mile beneath the gulf surface. And then last week, we came face to face with the environmental impact of our petroleum based lifestyle when a pipeline burst here in Calhoun County spilling 800,000 gallons of oil into the Kalamazoo River fouling the banks, killing fish, and coating wildlife. We could actually

smell the oil here inside the church on Tuesday. It is going to take months to clean up the mess.

But cleaning up spilled oil is the least of our problems. At some deep level the despair we feel in our bodies comes from the growing realization that the way of life we have become accustomed to is unsustainable. We are destroying our planet because of our insatiable demand for oil. We are warming the atmosphere, melting the polar cap and destroying delicate ecosystems. Our thirst for oil is corrupting our role as divinely appointed stewards of the earth and it is corrupting our relationships with neighboring countries as we all compete for the same increasingly scarce oil resources.

If we pay attention, we can feel despair welling up in our bodies every time we hear about another hate crime. Last week a gay man here in Battle Creek suffered multiple stab wounds during a brutal attack late at night in a secluded section of the Leila Arboretum. A vitriolic hate message was posted the next day on Face book, either by the assailant or by someone so filled with hate that they actually believed the victim got what he deserved. Queer people deserve to die. When we hear those stories we can feel despair welling up in our bodies because it feels like fear and hatred are increasing not diminishing. It feels like life is getting worse, not better. It feels like divisions are widening, not narrowing.

Today the national unemployment rate stands at 9.5%. All across America nearly one out of every ten workers are unable to find jobs. They can't support their families, they can't pay their bills, they can't keep up with their mortgages. The gap between the haves and the have-nots just keeps getting wider and wider today. In our bodies, we feel the weight of despair. It is heavy and exhausting to carry. It fills us with a sense of dread and puts a knot in our stomach. It makes us angry and impatient, frustrated and helpless, resentful and bitter.

But if we pay attention to our bodies, we can also feel hope residing in our flesh. It is energizing and empowering. Hope feels eager and restless. It is light and expansive. Hope quickens our steps and strengthens our weak knees. Hope attracts us to each other and draws us together in the bonds of Christian community.

Authentic hope always resides in close proximity to despair. In the gospel of Jesus Christ, the hope of new life comes three short days after the utter despair of Golgotha. In our passage this morning from the prophet Isaiah, the hope of redemption is lodged right up against the despair of 40 years in exile.

Hebrew children born in exile had grown up listening to their parents yearning with the hope of one day returning to the Promised Land. They heard them talking about glory of the Jerusalem's Temple, about singing psalms of assent as they walked in procession up the holy hill to worship and offer their sacrifices to God. They grew up listening to their parents talk about being chosen by God to be a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.

But those Hebrew children buried their parents in Babylon. Their parents all died in exile without ever seeing their hope realized. These second generation exiles had more in common with their Babylonian neighbors than they did with their Jewish ancestors. They had learned how to fit in with their captors. They had acculturated themselves to their circumstances in life. They had forgotten about being God's chosen people, forgotten about being a light to the nations, forgotten about being a source of blessing to all the families of the earth.

Despair does that to us. It is too heavy to carry and leaves our bodies feeling depleted and exhausted.

But this morning we heard the prophet Isaiah stirring up

hope in the bodies of his people. They had made it through forty years of despair, but Isaiah reminded them that survival wasn't enough. God was calling them to a higher purpose: "Why do you spend your money on that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?...Listen so that you may live." Don't be content with blending in and becoming model citizens of Babylon. You are God's Holy people, a City on a Hill, a Light to the Gentiles: "Nations that do not know you shall run to you...because the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel...has glorified you."

Authentic hope always resides in close proximity to despair. Our hunger for God dwells in our bodies at that very place where despair and hope meet.

In 1975 a young priest named John Kavanaugh was in the last year of his formation as a Jesuit. He was serving at the House of the Dying in Calcutta and was wrestling with his decision of whether or not to return to the comfort and riches of being a college professor in the United States. He had several conversations about his struggle with Mother Teresa and shortly before he left to return to the states, he asked her to pray for him:

She said "for what?" "For clarity," I replied. And she immediately said no, she would not pray for that. I complained that she seemed always to have clarity and certitude. "I've never had clarity and certitude," she said. "I only have trust. I'll pray that you trust."

As your senior pastor, there are a lot of things I don't have clarity or certainty about, but right now there are two things that I am particularly hopeful about.

I am hopeful that this fall we will launch a second Sunday morning worship experience to reach out to young families and young adults in Battle Creek who are yearning for a deeper spiritual life but have given up on the institutional

church. I hope that we can persuade those who have been turned off by the sins of the church, by our homophobia, by our judgmental attitudes, by our petty squabbles over doctrinal differences that bear no relevance to the challenges they face in daily life...I hope that we can stir their hearts with the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. I hope that we can reach out to the next generation and provide a spiritual home where they will be challenged to discover and employ their God given gifts to serve the greater good and to make a positive impact on the lives of others. I hope that we can invite them into an experience of community that embraces diversity as a precious part of God's design for creation, a community where people care deeply for one another, a community that embodies the forgiveness, patience, tolerance and compassion that Jesus modeled for us in his life and ministry.

There are a lot of things I don't have clarity or certainty about, but I am hopeful that this fall we will launch a second Sunday morning worship experience to reach out to young families and young adults in Battle Creek. So in the absence of clarity, I pray for your trust as we move forward in hope.

I am hopeful that within the next twelve months, we will open a church sponsored preschool here at First Congregational Church to prepare young children in our community to succeed in school. Within a three mile radius of our church we have twice the national average of high school drop outs, twice the national average of single parent households, and family incomes that are way below the national average. We have a lot of at risk children living in close proximity to our church and I hope we reach out to make a difference in their lives. Education is their ticket out of poverty and that is something we value in our church. We sponsored the first kindergarten here in our church before the public schools in Battle Creek were willing to include it in their curriculum. We hosted the first public library in Battle Creek right here in our church. Most

of our members have completed high school and many have gone on to receive a college education. We know how important it is to do well in school.

We also know that today most families are two income households. Within a few months of giving birth, moms are returning to their job in the workplace and one of the highest priorities of every young parent is finding a quality, affordable, highly reputable preschool program that will nurture their children in authentic Christian love: love that is patient and kind, not jealous or boastful or arrogant or rude. Love that does not insist on its own way, that is not irritable or resentful, that does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the right. Those qualities of love that the Apostle Paul laid out in the 13th chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians apply just as much to the relationships between children and teachers in preschool as they do to brides and grooms at their weddings.

There are a lot of things I don't have clarity or certainty about, but I am hopeful that within the next twelve months we will open a preschool program here at our church that will prepare children in our neighborhood and in our wider community to be successful in school. So in the absence of clarity, I pray for your trust as we move forward in hope.

Hope is more than wishful thinking. Hope motivates us to act, to do something, to take a first step. Real hope always involves the risk of failure. We rarely get things right the first time we try something new. Hope motivates us to act in the face of uncertainty. It provokes us to fail and failure leads us back into despair. But if we can't fail, then we can't risk, and if we can't risk, then we can't hope. Authentic hope always resides in close proximity to despair. That is the only place where our hunger for the Holy can be satisfied. Amen

