

Uncovering the Body of Christ

Think of bodies. What parts of male and female bodies make us ill at ease? What parts of our bodies are weak, vulnerable, mephitic, neglected, or maligned? What members of the body could not possibly have been fashioned by God in her own image? To what organs do we refer when we use the terms asshole, dick, or cunt to denigrate another human being? No matter what parts we name in this exercise, Paul insists that none of them are inferior in the eyes of God. He writes:

...The parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those parts of the body which we think less honorable we invest with the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require.

But God has so composed the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior part, that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

1Cor 12:22-26

If we take seriously Paul's instruction, we are to put away our modesty, because no part of the body is dishonorable. We should not suck in our stomachs, hide our scars and stretch marks, cover the breast as we nurse a child, refrain from comment on buttocks, penis and vagina in polite conversation even in this sacred space.

For a member of my family it was her ankles that offended. Perfectly fine ankles, but she thought they ought to be more well defined. She thought her legs looked fat because the muscles extended further toward her foot than those of the models in Seventeen or Vogue. She hated her ankles and legs so much that she endangered her life to change them. I returned from my first year of college to find that she weighed just 95 pounds. Within a month, she weighed 87 pounds, contracted pneumonia and nearly died. She was proud rather than afraid when she found out she had less than two pounds of fat on her body. Yet she still insisted her legs were too fat--she was too fat, still too fat. Her whole self suffered for the sake of one part.

One way to end the shame about our inferior parts is to realize that our modesty does not dignify us--that our efforts to cover ourselves in fig leaves will not conceal us from God's loving gaze. We think that by dressing, grooming, and speaking as if our bodies were truncated, made up of only those parts fit for the public eye, we ennoble our appearance. We are called by the message of 1 Cor 12 to realize that the body, as it was given at birth and as it is taken in death, is of God's making. Our dusty flesh which suffers, wrinkles, scars, withers and dies, is thus dignified. Rather than dignify ourselves and our appearance by hiding what we hate, silencing what is weak, or amputating what offends, we ought instead to

dignify the appearance of the hated, amplify the voice of the weak and embrace the offensive.

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians likens the members of our community to the members of our physical body. As members of the body, we are all dignified, no matter how hated, weak, or offensive. Paul writes, "... God has so composed the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior part, that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another." 1 Cor 12:24-25 In the next chapter, Paul tells us what this caring for one another means. He writes:

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.
1 Cor 13:4-7

Who in this community makes you ill at ease? Who would you rather not see, hear and smell? Who is suffering, oppressed, silenced? They are easy to list. The lesbian, the prostitute, the mentally ill, the homeless, the physically disabled, the drug-addict, the teen mother, the woman who is raped, persons of color, the feminist, the poor, the uneducated--these members of the community are neglected. We treat them like we do those parts of our bodies of which we are ashamed. We hide them, starve them, deny them. We honor ourselves at their expense. We asperse their God-given dignity.

Jesus' call to befriend the captive, comfort the suffering, liberate the oppressed is the defining feature of his message. In the beginning, in Nazareth, Jesus said,

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.
Luke 4:18-19.

We are uncomfortable with Jesus' command to love one another because he commands us to love the least of these. Rather than discomfit ourselves as Jesus required of his disciples, we spiritualize this commandment. We substitute the abstract concept of love for the real love we ought to show the oppressed. We turn sacrificial neighborly love into a generalized feeling of goodwill. We say we don't mean any harm to lesbians, drug-addicts, the poor, and the uneducated. But we are unwilling to do them any good. We are unwilling to liberate them from oppression, listen to their cries of injustice, or do them any real kindness. We won't risk standing in solidarity with them. We won't let them preach to us.

Consider one case. Will true Christian love be liberatory in the ELCA's deliberations about human sexuality? Will we choose to hear the voices of gay and lesbian pastors in the pulpit--not just from those who are willing to silence

their own bodies and hate parts of themselves; not just from those who keep themselves in the closet where they cannot offend anyone; not just from those who are denied the joy, fulfillment and challenge of long term intimate relationships and family; not just from those who live the lie of a heterosexual life; not just from those whom we force to say “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body” (1 Cor 12:15)--but from all who have the gifts of ministry? Will we receive the body and blood of Christ from their hands? Or will we make what Martin Luther King, Jr. called the mistake of “the white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice; who prefers the negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice”? (Letter from Birmingham Jail, paragraph 23)

Even lesbians and gays, even these most hated and feared people, these silenced, ostracized, tortured, oppressed members of the body, we must respect, love, and dignify if we are to follow the commandment to love. We have given false dignity to our communities by silencing, ostracizing, hiding and hating these persons. We treat them as we do the hated parts of our own bodies. When will we love as Jesus loved us? When will we dignify as he dignified?

Let us be impatient for justice. Let us emulate Jesus. Nearly two thousand years ago Jesus proclaimed release to the captives and liberty to the oppressed. When will we get to this task?

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