

Soul Tending: ReConnection

John 2:13-25

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If you have ever been nearby when someone had a sudden outburst, you know how disruptive and unnerving it can be. So, imagine how people in the temple marketplace must have felt when Jesus arrived in a whirlwind of destruction. It was Passover, when nearly 300,000 people would travel to Jerusalem to make their sacrifices at the Temple, so the market must have been especially crowded that day. Cattle, sheep, goats, and pigeons were the animals sold for sacrifice. So, in addition to the shouts and calls of vendors and shoppers, the market would have been filled with moo-ing, bleating, and bah-ing, as well. Plus, there were long lines to exchange money. After all, before you could buy an animal, you had to convert your Roman money into Jewish money as that was the only accepted currency in the temple marketplace.

So, it was into this cacophony and chaos, that Jesus arrived wielding a whip he made of cords to drive people and animals out of the marketplace. In a fit of anger, he flipped over the tables of the moneychangers, so coins went flying in every direction. Then, Jesus shouted out, “Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!”

You know how a crowd reacts when there is an “incident”. Everyone stops what they are doing to watch and to gossip. You can imagine the shock felt by merchants and shoppers alike. Those looking on from a distance would have stood with their mouths hanging open. Those driven from the market might have stopped just outside its walls to ask each other, “What was that all about?”, “Isn’t that Jesus the prophet?”, “What does he mean by ‘my Father’s house’?” “We were just doing what we’re supposed to. Why is he so angry?”

Of course, we as readers are shocked by this, as well. This is not the Jesus we imagine walking from place-to-place healing and teaching us how to love. This is a man out of control, throwing a fit, destroying property. In our bewilderment, it’s easy to miss what happens next. The Jewish officials approach Jesus and ask him for proof that he has the authority to do this. Jesus responds that if they destroy the temple, he will raise it in three days. They think that is preposterous. The temple has been under construction for forty-six years. How could he possibly rebuild it in three days? And then John, our foreshadowing narrator, stops the story to deliver an aside to us, “But he was speaking of the temple of his body”.

Today is the third Saturday/Sunday in the season of Lent and so the third sermon in our series on soul tending. This series was born of our staff’s concern that while most of us have returned to the pace and practices of life before the pandemic, we may still be struggling with mental health. So, each sermon this Lent will focus on how we might soothe or heal our souls in preparation for Easter. Today we’ll explore reconnecting our souls with our physical bodies, with the Body of Christ, and with the body of all creation.

For Jesus to speak of his body as the temple was absolutely radical. For Jews, the temple in Jerusalem was the holiest of all places. They would make every effort to get there - especially on the Jewish holy days - because the Temple was where God resided. Matthew Skinner, professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary writes, “Here was the place, they believed, where

God was most present. The Temple served as the focus of identity -- religious, national, social, you name it -- for many (but certainly not all) Jews of Jesus' time, especially those influenced by the elite members of Jerusalem society.”

So, for Jesus to claim that his body is The Temple was a momentous change in theology. God did not reside in the Temple building. God was to be - is to be - found in him, in his body. Jesus is God incarnate, and Jesus has taken God out of the building to be among the people. As followers of Jesus made in the image of God, God resides in our bodies, as well. The apostle Paul, writing to the Corinthians, says it this way, “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?”

It is a fair question still today because so many of us barely recognize we have bodies, let alone treat those bodies as temples for God. We spend our lives preoccupied with the life of the mind or with the many responsibilities we have to work and family. We don't think of our bodies until a growling stomach, full bladder, or deep yawn force us to pay attention to our body's basic needs.

Of course, there are other, deeper reasons why some people disconnect from their bodies most of which are related to trauma. One way we cope with trauma is to dissociate. Some describe this as leaving their body or becoming numb to their body. There are also those who are deeply ashamed of their body, and so disconnect from it.

Some people, however, live in the opposite extreme so concerned with their bodies that they become obsessive to the detriment of their families and their wallets. In the United States, our bodies have become a marketplace not so different from that at the Temple. Americans spend billions of dollars each year on gym memberships, exercise classes and equipment, diet plans, and supplements.

Finally, there are those who not only disconnect from their bodies but choose to do things that are physically harmful. Of course, eating disorders are one example as are excessive alcohol use, smoking, drug use, and risky sexual activities.

What is interesting for us is that all of these behaviors are symptomatic of some kind of sickness of the soul such as depression, anxiety, stress, or PTSD. Research has shown us over and over again the connection between body and soul. We see Jesus recognize that connection over and over again in his ministry as he heals people from both physical and psychological ills.

So, how might you strengthen that body-soul connection in positive ways which honor your body as a temple for God? There are several spiritual practices that work remarkably well. Mindfulness, meditation, and prayerful exercise all help bring us into our bodies in a spiritual way.

Yet, perhaps the simplest and most effective is breath prayer. With a breath prayer, you breathe in slowly as you say a word or phrase in your mind. For example, you might breathe in as you say to yourself “Breathe in the love of God”. Then, when you slowly release the breath, you say a complementary phrase such as “Breathe out my self-doubt”. You can insert whatever words are meaningful for you. Some people use passages of scripture, others use just one word.

Whatever you choose, you continue this practice of breathing and simple prayer for a set length of time or until you begin to feel connected to the presence of God within you. There is another way in which we can reconnect with the body that is meaningful in the Christian context. That is to reconnect with the body of Christ. We all who gather as believers and make up the community of church are the body of Christ together. This is what we remember and celebrate as we break the bread for Communion.

Often, when we are feeling soul sick and weary, our tendency is to isolate ourselves. Of course, the covid pandemic forced us into isolation for a while. Yet, the body of Christ doesn't function if its parts are separated from each other. We all are stronger and healthier in this community where we care for each other and then go out to care for the world.

Which brings me to my last thought about Jesus, his body, and God's temple. We said already that the shift from God as residing in the building called the Temple to Jesus as the temple where God abides was a radical shift in theology. Even more radical is the idea that God lives in each of us. And now, Mary Oliver invites us to an even bigger perspective - that the temple is all of God's creation. Perhaps that is where we find healing for both body and soul.

Here is her poem, "Where Does The Temple Begin, Where Does It End?"

There are things you can't reach. But
you can reach out to them, and all day long.

The wind, the bird flying away. The idea of God.
And it can keep you as busy as anything else, and happier.

The snake slides away; the fish jumps, like a little lily,
out of the water and back in; the goldfinches sing
from the unreachable top of the tree.
I look; morning to night I am never done with looking.

Looking I mean not just standing around, but standing around
as though with your arms open.
And thinking: maybe something will come, some
shining coil of wind,
or a few leaves from any old tree—
they are all in this too.

And now I will tell you the truth.
Everything in the world
Comes.
At least, closer.
And, cordially.
Like the nibbling, tinsel-eyed fish; the unlooping snake.
Like goldfinches, little dolls of gold fluttering around the corner of the sky
of God, the blue air.

May it be so. Amen.