

Body Talk: Source of Shame or Holy Temple? **Genesis 3:1-7; 1 Corinthians 6:19**

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This weekend, we celebrate the legacy of the great Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Across America, schools, universities, churches, and communities are setting aside time to honor Dr. King with symposia, worship services, and community service days - each intended to reflect the importance of his role in the history of this country. He was a powerful preacher and speaker, a leader in the civil rights movement, a teacher and practitioner of nonviolent protest, an inspiring voice that woke a nation to the sins of racism and the prevalence of poverty in the so-called land of the free.

Yet, Dr. King was also a profound theologian. Undergirding all of his work was a deep faith in God and understanding of God's relationship with humanity. One of the themes he spoke about often was the Judeo-Christian understanding that all of humanity is made in the image of God. In a powerful sermon preached on New Year's Eve of 1960, he said, "The whole concept of the *imago Dei*, as it is expressed in Latin, the 'image of God,' is the idea that all men have something within them that God injected...And this gives him a uniqueness, it gives him worth, it gives him dignity. And we must never forget this as a nation: there are not gradations in the image of God... We will know one day that God made us to live together as brothers and to respect the dignity and worth of every man."

King's advocacy for the sacred worth of every person makes this weekend seem an especially meaningful time to begin our new worship series entitled *Body Talk*, because, of course, the dignity and worth of every man, of every person, is housed in a body. Yet, we don't talk much about bodies in church. Even on Christmas, when we celebrate that God came to live among us in a human body, we don't focus much on what it means to be embodied - to live in this mortal, fragile, amazing bag of bones. So, for the next few weeks, we are going to explore what our faith - and especially scripture - has to tell us about bodies. What can we learn about the value of bodies, different types of bodies, how God views bodies, and how thousands of years of theological interpretation have shaped how we feel about our physical selves?

As humans we often refuse to see the sacred nature of bodies - our own and others. In fact, we judge ourselves and each other based on social constructs that tell us which bodies have value and which do not. Though God created our bodies to be beautifully diverse, coming in different colors, sizes, shapes, abilities, and genders, humanity has always ranked bodies, inflating the value of some, diminishing the value of others. These judgements then shape our behavior, negatively impacting us both individually and communally.

Let me give you a few examples. Researchers estimate that about half of Americans made at least one New Year's resolution a few weeks ago. Among them, almost 80% of those resolutions were about bodies - losing weight, getting more fit, eating better, and so on. We clearly don't accept or celebrate our bodies as they are. Studies on body dissatisfaction reveal this, as well. One study showed that 50% of 13-year-old girls in America are critical of their own bodies. That increased to 80% by the time they turned 17. While body dissatisfaction is significantly more common in girls and women, up to 30% of men are unhappy with their bodies.

We may claim a belief that all people are made in the image of God, but we don't seem to believe it about ourselves.

Then there is the matter of other people's bodies - particularly bodies different from our own. We express our fear of "the other" in how we treat bodies. For example, in recent months, we have seen how brown and black bodies have been intentionally targeted in ICE raids, often gratuitously beaten, shoved to the ground, overpowered, even shot. In fact, we live in a global community in which every day bodies are murdered, abused, starved, dehydrated, imprisoned, deported, harassed, lynched, displaced, and more. We dominate and subjugate others by seeking to control their bodies.

Given these high stakes, it's important that we understand where our beliefs about bodies come from, but when we look to scripture, it is full of contradictions. Take our two scripture readings for today. On the one hand, we have the story of Adam and Eve, which seems to suggest that our bodies are something to be ashamed of. And then we have Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 6, verse 19, in which Paul teaches that our bodies are holy temples where the Holy Spirit dwells. Those are two very different messages.

Naturally, there are many different reasons for the contradictions in scripture. First of all, the Bible was written over hundreds of years by many different people. Many of the stories were handed down orally for centuries before being written down. With each retelling and each transcription, the storyteller had the opportunity to shape the story to reflect their priorities and purposes as well as the social and historical context in which they lived. That is one source of contradictions.

But, it's also important to acknowledge that how the church has interpreted scripture over time also leads to contradictions. As with transcription and translation, for thousands of years, scripture has been interpreted by humans who can hardly help applying their own values and the values of their social location. So, if we really want to understand what scripture tells us about bodies, we have to try to peel away the layers of interpretation to get as close to the original meaning as possible.

The story of Adam and Eve is a great example. Biblical scholar Phyllis Trible writes that while this is a very simple origin story, it "has been made to bear the sins of the world." Over the centuries, particularly in the Early Church, this story has been assigned meaning far beyond what the words actually say. It became the basis for the doctrine of original sin and is the source of much of our discomfort with sexuality and our bodies. In addition, Trible states, "According to traditional interpretations, the narrative ... proclaims male superiority and female inferiority as the will of God. It portrays woman as "temptress" and troublemaker who is dependent upon and dominated by her husband". Women are the reason men fell from perfection. This is certainly how I learned the story when I was a child - as have women for centuries. Yet, what does this teach girls about their female bodies? Their sexuality? Their value? Even in these days in which we are far more aware of gender politics and the history of patriarchy, the traditions and judgements attached to this story still inform how we think about bodies.

All of which is ironic because what the story actually says is that the snake told Eve that she and Adam wouldn't die if they ate the fruit of the forbidden tree; rather they would become

wise. She saw the fruit was good to eat and the tree was pretty and she thought being wise would be a good thing. So, she took a bite of the fruit, handed it to her husband, and he took a bite. They realized they were naked so they made some clothes and put them on. She didn't tempt him. He chose to eat the fruit. They were equally guilty of disobeying God, and the disobedience is what God was angry about. Scripture doesn't tell us our bodies are shameful or that women's bodies are particularly evil. That is the human interpretation informed by centuries of patriarchy.

Another significant influence on scripture and its interpretation has been Platonic dualism, a philosophical idea which spread from Greece into the Ancient Near East around the same time as the Hebrew Bible stories were first recorded. We can see its influence throughout scripture and in centuries of biblical interpretation.

Platonic dualism describes two different levels of existence. The top level is ultimate reality, the domain of ideas like truth, goodness, beauty, and perfection. This is where the spirit and sacred dwell. The lower level is the physical world which is the opposite of ultimate reality. Nothing in the physical world is perfect. Thus, the physical world is the site of evil, sinfulness, and injustice. The human body is part of the physical world and therefore is also evil and sinful. However, the human mind is capable of conceiving of the ideals, so there must be a touch of the divine in humans that dwells in the soul.

This is where the idea that humans' bodies and souls are separate things, and that our bodies are innately bad, comes from. We still talk about the separation of body and soul all the time and we still carry this negative association with the body.

We can especially see this struggle between body and soul in the letters of Paul. He writes about the sins of the flesh but, at the same time, writes of the body as home to the Spirit and therefore holy.

All of this is to say that when we think about our bodies through the lens of faith, we have to be careful to focus on what is actually scriptural. We can't understand the scriptural witness without clearing our minds of all the inherited interpretations and theology. Perhaps the best way to tackle this question about our bodies is to ask, "what do we know of God and how God would view our physical selves?" Which brings us back to where we started - we are made in the sacred and beautiful image of God.

As you reflect on this sermon in the coming days, I invite you to think about what stories have shaped how you view your own body and bodies different than yours. Where did the stories come from? Who told them to you? What purpose did that storyteller have in telling them? And, perhaps most importantly, in what ways can you see the image of God implanted on you?

May it be so. Amen.

