

## The Gift of our Bodies

As we begin our reflections this morning with the words from Psalm 139 still in our minds, I would like to guide us in an exercise to help us center ourselves on our bodies, these marvelously formed “temples” in which we live. Follow with me as you feel comfortable.

Let us close our eyes and try to relax, while focusing inwards. Become aware of your breathing and take several slow deep breaths in and out as you relax in the presence of God here in this place. Become aware of your muscles and joints, “knit together” in your neck, back, arms, legs, hands, feet. Feel the ground under your feet. Open and close your fingers and then rest your hands open on your knees. Perhaps you are aware of a part of your body that is sick or in pain. Just let it be as it is. Or perhaps you have some fear or anxiety that you carry in your heart, or some recurring troublesome thought. Accept those concerns too, they are real and a part of you right now, and God is also aware of these things. God knows us “inside and out, every bone in our body, we are never out of God’s sight”. Let us rest in that thought for a moment. (PAUSE)

Now open your eyes and look around. We see other people, with different physical characteristics, stories and challenges, but all intimately formed and known by God, and representing to each other the body of Christ.

We are indeed “fearfully and wonderfully made”!

In light of this belief, and with the earthy reality of our humanity tangible in our bodies, how do we respond to God and to others? What does it mean to be stewards in the care of these bodies, minds and spirits that are made holy through our relationship with God? What are the implications for our relationships with other people? And with the rest of God’s creation? Last week Luke described the relational story of the bible and the interconnectedness of God, people and the land. This can continue to be a reference for our reflections today.

I found Jo’s definition of stewardship to the children in the first week of this series helpful to me. 1) We can make careful or careless choices in looking after what has been entrusted to us and 2) the choices we make affect others.

As with the other gifts entrusted to us (time, talents, money and creation), in considering our bodies we may find ourselves as Christians up against cultural

norms that cause us to struggle with our body image and how to take care of our physical selves.

We are bombarded with advertisements through the media that, on the one hand, glorify the physical appearance of the human body and, on the other, encourage us to disregard it. And of course there are solutions for medical problems available too! All you need to do is to talk to your doctor to see if the miracle medication is right for you! Attractive, easy fixes for life's problems!

So, should it be our personal goal to have the *perfect* body, and is living a long and healthy life the goal of stewardship of our bodies as temples for the Holy Spirit? Or do we somehow seek to live in ways that acknowledge God's ultimate and intimate sovereignty over our lives, and strive for healing and wholeness for *all* on this earth?

God did create our bodies good, and God created us male and female, thus offering us the good gift of our sexuality, and God gave us the gift of wholesome relationships with each other and with God's self. God also created us to be in harmony with the rest of creation. In other words God created us for shalom..... which involves living gratefully, unselfishly, generously and thoughtfully. It involves living with awareness of who we are and of whose we are.

Jesus is our supreme example of this kind of awareness. Jesus, conceived through the Holy Spirit, was God made manifest to us in flesh, inhabiting a human body, yet thoroughly aware also of being God's son, as God also declared and affirmed. (Matt 3 v17: and a voice from heaven said "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased")

### **How did this incarnate Son of God then live in his human physical state?**

Early on Jesus learned how to discipline his body and address the temptations that came through his mind. He also showed great love for and enjoyed the company of all kinds of people: men, women and children, especially the poor. He attended weddings and special celebrations. He healed sick bodies and released people from mental illness and demonic oppression. He wept at the death of a friend and had compassion on those grieving. He struggled in the face of his own death.

### **What can we learn from Jesus' life about the gift and stewardship of our bodies?**

- 1) As God created, inhabits and loves our bodies, this should encourage us to let go of our body image struggles of being too fat, too thin, too unattractive in some way, and learn to love ourselves as God loves us.

Self acceptance and self forgiveness are often the first steps towards freeing us from the behaviors that are detrimental to our health, even though we may very often need the help and support of others to keep us accountable.

- 2) As we love ourselves, our aim should be to love and respect God's holy dwelling in others, including those who are different from us by gender, race, culture, sexual orientation, and the many other ways by which we define ourselves. In other words we should avoid labeling others in defining who they are. Jesus challenged others but also looked for points of connection and affirmation, ways to free people and to allow them to live their lives more fully. (John 10 v10 "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly") Self respect and respect for all others is key to reducing the risk of abuse and harm in relationships.
- 3) Jesus was an advocate for the poor and weak, and taught God's justice and righteousness. Stewardship of the body may mean advocating for the health of others as well as ourselves. Think of the recent example of the contaminated water supplies diverted to the poorer section of the Flint MI community which arose from the apparently careless choices on the part of some in authority, causing damage to the environment and

the health of others. In what circumstances do we see Jesus body hungry, thirsty naked, sick and made vulnerable, and how do we respond?

- 4) Jesus freely gave of himself in ministry, but also frequently withdrew to a quiet place to pray. We also need to seek a balanced life, to get away from constant activity and dependence on screens and schedules, in order to rest and renew body and spirit, to meet in solitude with Jesus. Part of this balance can include exercise, which is a great way to get in touch with our physical bodies, even to feel exhilarated by their capabilities and, if we are outside, to be refreshed by appreciation of creation.
- 5) Jesus wanted bodies to be well but, however we work at it, unfortunately not all illness is preventable. A large part of Jesus' ministry besides teaching was in curing people of diseases, making the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk. And, tied in with that, was the message of liberation. Those healed were frequently also reassured of forgiveness, which points to the deeper need that lies in every human heart. Jesus typically led people to recognize and express their own underlying problem, whether it was physical or spiritual or both but, in doing so, he

never cast blame on the sufferer. Remember the story of the man born blind and the disciples' question "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?", and Jesus' response: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." Frequently we also struggle with the "Why" question in the face of suffering. How can a loving creator cause or permit this to happen? Wrestling with God, and lamenting a loss is natural, even necessary, for healing. But if we get through this, to the realization that a loving God does not actually cause suffering but, rather, suffers and grieves with us, redeeming the brokenness, and ultimately triumphing over it, the equation is changed. (This is the "Grace disguised" to quote the title of Jerry Sittser's book which has been used in some of our grief discussion groups here at WMC)

In addition, a journey through illness or grief may also be a journey of growth in relationships with others, and of recognizing our interdependence as we support one another within the body of the church, receiving and offering the grace and love that allows people to survive and to grow in faith through an experience of weakness and need. We do need each other.

6) Finally Jesus acknowledged that our physical bodies are temporal and our ultimate existence will be in the place he has prepared for us with God. In some mysterious way we are made one with God even now in preparation for the eternal life that we will discover and enter fully after our deaths. But we are also mortal beings and Jesus shared that mortality with us as he anticipated his death and struggled over the manner in which it would come. Sometimes death comes prematurely, as it seems to us, through illness or accident or violence, just as Jesus himself experienced. Others of us face the gradual changes of aging as joints ache, physical appearance alters, strength and abilities decline and minds become forgetful. Ecclesiastes 12 v 1-8 describes this process of aging and perhaps the underlying message to “remember our creator in the days of our youth” could be received as one of stewardship in the choices we make throughout our lives. Take care of your body and put the most into your living while you have the strength and ability. Don’t waste time and talent. Living in healthy and life honoring ways throughout the whole span of life does indeed prepare people for aging well and for dying well. (We do here at Waterford have a resource

folder, "Living into a Faithful Eternity," which offers a useful guide for thinking through stewardship issues related to the end of life).

So in summary let's live our lives gratefully, encouraging one another to be intentional and careful in how we nurture and tend to the gift of our bodies, and also honoring and caring for the bodies of others as we acknowledge that they too are formed and loved by God, who sent His son Jesus to share our humanity. Jesus revealed God's love to us as He shared with us in life and as he gave up his physical body in death, but his broken body has become our healing and our hope through the resurrection.

Thanks be to God.

## Take home messages

God created our bodies good, and knows each one intimately (Ps 139 v 13-18)

Our bodies, minds and spirits are created for relationship with God, others, and all creation

Our bodies are vulnerable and carry wounds

Our bodies, and those of others, need to be cared for and treated with respect at every stage of life

Our earthly bodies are temporal and will return to dust

Our hope is in redemption and the resurrection

The goal is shalom