

An Embodied Faith: The Body of the Earth

1 Cor. 11:17-29 (CEB)

We are exploring images of the body this month. Bodies are central to how we experience faith. We've talked about our individual bodies—these unities of Spirit and Flesh. We've talked about how our bodies belong to one another in the Body of Christ. Our mutual belonging requires that we treat one another with honor and love.

Today I want to introduce a third image of the body for our faith. That is the earth as God's body. This image is not directly scriptural. Nowhere in the Bible does it say, exactly, that the earth is God's body. So, for some of you, this may feel like I'm wandering off into so liberal theological woo-woo world, making stuff up about God to serve a covert "eco-agenda." If that's you, I appreciate your skepticism. But I'm not the first one to see a connection between the earth and God. Paul Tillich, in the mid-20th century, called God "the ground of our being," a God "who is not apart from us, but who is the very core and ground of all that is." Hmm. The late great, feminist theologian Sallie McFague said it more succinctly when she said that the earth is God's body. This *was* a new metaphor for God, McFague admitted, but it is one with roots in scripture and one that is essential for life today. McFague studied the metaphors Christianity has used to describe God. Old metaphors like King, or Creator don't work anymore, she said. It is our duty to keep coming up with new ways of speaking about God that address the deepest needs of our present moment. The earth as the body of the God is such a metaphor.

We're doing some theological work today. We'll think about what this metaphor says, and what it means for faith. To begin, I want you to hear yet another text from Paul, from the 1st letter to the Corinthians. Here, Paul teaches an Christian community how to observe the Lord's Supper. It's fair to say Paul is not happy with the Corinthians and the way they are sharing the meal.

¹⁷ Now I don't praise you as I give the following instruction because when you meet together, it does more harm than good. ¹⁸ First of all, when you meet together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you, and I partly believe it... ²⁰ [W]hen you get together in one place, it isn't to eat the Lord's meal. ²¹ Each of you goes ahead and eats a private meal. One person goes hungry while another is drunk. ²² Don't you have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you look down on God's churches and humiliate those who have nothing? What can I say to you? Will I praise you? No, I don't praise you in this.

²³ I received a tradition from the Lord, which I also handed on to you: on the night on which he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took bread. ²⁴ After giving thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this to remember me." ²⁵ He did the same thing with the cup, after they had eaten, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Every time you drink it, do this to remember me." ²⁶ Every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes.

²⁷ This is why those who eat the bread or drink the cup of the Lord inappropriately will be guilty of the Lord's body and blood. ²⁸ Each individual should test himself or herself, and eat from the bread and drink from the cup in that way. ²⁹ Those who eat and drink without correctly understanding the body are eating and drinking their own judgment.

What did you hear? Paul's a little spicy here. Why? The Corinthians are sharing the Lord's Supper and in doing so, they're replicating the same divisions of wealth and power that exist in their community. "Each of you eats a private meal. One person goes hungry while another is

drunk.” Paul says when you share the Lord’s supper and preserve these divisions, you bring judgement on yourselves! The whole point of this meal is that *it’s Communion with God and each other!* It’s community! It’s an enactment of life together in and through the self-giving life of Christ. The body is given to us to feed everyone with one bread at one table.

We know the Christian tradition has said that God has a Body. That body is Jesus. You know what the body of Jesus does: it loves us and shows us God, and welcomes us in, Jesus’ body heals us. We also know that Jesus’ body is broken, it bears the weight sin and evil, but that the broken body isn’t destroyed or defeated. The body is resurrected and the resurrected body has an even greater capacity to nourish life. We know God’s body is Jesus.

What else do we know is God’s body? When Jesus is getting ready to leave the disciples—he gathers them and says, here is *another* body for you. From now on, I will be in the bread and cup. All the things that my body does—show you God, unite, forgive, heal—that now happens through a new body, this meal shared in community. The power to give life that is in Jesus’ body is also in the wheat and the grapes—it a life-giving body made from the stuff of the earth.

That’s what a sacrament it—something common infused with God’s presence and power. In Communion, we take the body of God into our body, and our body is joined to the One Body of God, to the Beloved Community of God; sharing the body, we are part of God’s New Creation.

The movement of God is always toward embodiment. When God saves us we aren’t taken up and out of our bodies; salvation is we are made to be at home in our bodies, at home with other bodies, at home with the Creation. God does not pluck us out, to deliver us to a disembodied heaven. That would be admitting that the Creation was a waste of time or irredeemable. Creation itself is a manifestation of God’s being. God makes the earth, and God suffuses creation with the processes and energies that bring forth life. In and through the body of the Creation, God connects all things, animate and inanimate, in an intricate wholeness. Within this wholeness is where we belong. Read Revelation 21—the future that God is bringing to bear, the heaven that God brings forth: “I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘See, the home of God is among you. God will dwell with you; you will be God’s people, and God will be with you.’”

Scripture says that the direction of God is toward embodiment. God saves us through communion with a renewed Creation. God makes us “a communion of subjects,” writes the theologian Thomas Berry; we are created for a “primordial intimacy with the entire natural world.”¹ The earth, Sally McFague says, is the body of God; it is the visible reality of the invisible God.² It is God’s life, given for our life.

We cannot afford to see the earth as anything other than the body of God, anything other than a holy sacrament of communion. Unless we perceive the holiness infused in the earth itself, it

¹ “The Universe Story,” Thomas Berry. *The Greening of Faith* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1997), 215.

² Quoted in *Grounded*, by Diana Butler Bass (New York: Harper Collins, 2015), 51.

will remain an object that we use for our satisfaction, until nothing left of it for us to use... and we are still unsatisfied. We have not recognized the earth as God's body. Like we did with the body of Jesus, we crucify it, even as we sit here quietly in worship.

We are all responsible. It is our collective appetite for comfort, convenience, and control that crucifies God's body.

Theologian Norman Wirzba has written about how we got here. It happened over time. For generations, our ancestors have been moving from the country to cities, to man-made geographies and landscapes where the earth and its creatures no longer command recognition or respect. Our imaginations have been taken captive, not by the rhythms of weather, soil, plants, and creatures, but by the market and the media that focus on our individual desires. This happened at the same time that we assumed God-like power, altering the world's land, oceans, and atmospheric systems. We have the power of God. But God gives God's self in love in the Creation to nourish life; we have taken from the Creation, we have stripped the body, beaten it, and condemned it to die.

Do you hear the urgency in Paul's voice: "Those who eat and drink without correctly understanding the body are eating and drinking their own judgment." There is a right way to share the body, Paul says. God's body is given for the sake of communion.

I don't know what you do in your life to enact communion with the body of the earth. I like to walk barefoot. Some of you dig in the earth and compost your scraps to grow flowers and food. Some of you make a point to spend time in places where the cathedral of trees arches over your head, and you work to preserve those spaces. Some of you traverse the capillaries of our watershed. Some of you avoid airplane travel and reduce food waste. In a few weeks, I hope we'll have a proposal to share with you that will allow us as a congregation to invest in a solar array that could provide up to 80% of this church's energy needs. Every time you decide to move your being into communion with the earth matters.

It's not just our actions that matter. Our imaginations matter, too. "The world is charged with the grandeur of God," the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote. "The glory of God is not just heavenly, but earthly," Sallie McFague says. Mary Oliver...

A few years ago, my friend Ashley wanted her church to reflect on this image of the earth as God's body. Ashley isn't much for subtlety. So they moved the communion table out, leaving a hole in the middle of the worship space. There, they spread out a tarp, and wheeled in several cubic yards of dark, wet, fragrant compost. On top of the compost, they put a flat stone, and placed the bread and cup, the body and the blood. As they sat in a circle around the compost, Ashley took the bread and the cup, the gifts of God for the people of God. And she said,

This is my body, which is given for you.

And there was communion.