

An Embodied Faith: The Individual Body – Genesis 2

Today, we begin a sermon series we are calling Embodied Faith. During the next 4 Sunday, we are exploring images of *the body* in Christian life. Turns out it's a hugely important idea, but not one that we often take time to explore. We'll talk about this thing called the Body of Christ. We'll talk about our participation in the singular body of the earth. We'll talk about something quirky and wonderful called the mystical body. We begin today with the body that is most singularly important to each of us—the body that shapes how we understand all other bodies: our own physical body. What should we make of this thing? Is this body created good? Or is it sinful, mortal flesh? What is the human body good for in the life of faith?

Let's begin with Scripture, in Genesis the 2nd chapter, where we read a story about the Creation of the first human body,

In the day that the Lord^a God made the earth and the heavens, ⁵ when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; ⁶ but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground— ⁷ then the Lord God formed the human—Adam—from the dust of the ground—the Adamah, and breathed into nostrils of Adam the breath of life; and Adam became a living being. ⁸ And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there God put Adam whom God had formed.

I wanted to start with this familiar story of the Creation of Adam because it gives us such a clear image of what our faith says bodies are.

First, they are **dust**. You are dust. I'm saying nothing unkind about your hygiene. Your body is the same stuff as the earth. This is Biblical and it is empirical science. You are oxygen and carbon and hydrogen and nitrogen, with a bit of calcium and phosphorus. And a few of you have some cool inserts made of metal or plastic and a few of you have high concentrations of chocolate. But at the most elemental level, your body is made of the same things that make up the world around you. There is no difference between you and the earth.

You are dust, and *when you die, to dust you shall return (Gen. 3)*. The moment you stop breathing, and your body's regenerative powers stop, you will decompose and become part of the earth again. Matter cannot be created or destroyed, it just changes forms. You who were once stardust will be raindrop or a mushroom or a cockroach. Your body is matter.

But that is not the whole story. Scripture insists that there is something else that makes up your body beside matter. In the story, this "something else" is Ruach. Spirit. Breath. This Spirit/Breath comes into your body at your birth and is with you every day of your life. I don't know if God literally breath into our noses, but what actually happens is not that far off. You spent months in your mother's womb underwater getting oxygen through a cord. Suddenly, you were pressed out into the world, that cord is cut, and you have to find a way to get air into your lungs immediately. Your tiny body presses the fluid out, internal pressures change causing a teeny little heart valve that was open in utero to suddenly close, blood flowed into your lungs,

and you went (GASP). And there was breath and life. And you have taken in the breath of life every five seconds since. 20,000 times a day, 750 million times in your life, you breath in and breath out. And you live.

You are dust AND breath. You are utterly common. And you are miraculous. Somehow, after millions of years of evolution, the stuff of your body got organized into the most complex organism on the face of the earth. Your stuff can recognize a trillion different smells. Your blood vessels can circle the earth four times. Your brain contains 86 billion nerve cells joined by 100 trillion connections. If all of the DNA in the 23 pairs chromosomes in every cell in your body were uncoiled and laid end to end it would stretch 34 billion miles—to Pluto and back 3 times!

You are a dust creature, with a complexity and capacities that are staggering. You are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139)

Let me say something else that I think is obvious: your dusty, delightful body is essential to your Christian faith.

It’s kind of amazing that that statement could be conceived at all as controversial. Of course bodies are important. After all, God became a body. God takes on our flesh and shows us what a body is, what it is for. Surely bodies are good?

Not according to some. Christianity has failed to affirm the dignity of the body and we have even relegated the body to a kind of inferior status. Back when Christianity was getting going and when the NT was written, the Greeks promoted the idea that something was “real” if it was *immaterial*. Perishable things—like bodies—were seen as lower or less valuable. Paul—bless his heart—picks this concept up and runs with it and writes all this stuff about how there is a dichotomy in all of us between the “spirit” (which is good) and the “flesh” (which is bad).

Paul was doing his best, he was working with what he had. But Paul was just plain wrong about bodies being dualities with a “higher” and a “lower” aspect. So many truly horrendous things have come to us through this mis-representation of the body as a two-part hierarchy. What kind of bad things? It’s where we got the awful idea that our bodies are sin-ridden shells and that our true hope in life is to die so that we can lose this flesh and be taken up into heaven. It totally corrupted the biblical idea of heaven as a place we go to, instead of what it is, which is the Reign of God breaking in and re-making this world. It gets worse. The two-part body gave rise to Christianity’s demonization of sexuality and desire, it underscored gender discrimination. It gets worse. The two-part body provided theological sanction for enslaving people—it didn’t matter what happened to black bodies so long as they were taught about heaven.

I could go on, but let’s just say that how we see bodies matters. And nothing could be more harmful than imagining our body as a hierarchical duality of spirit over flesh.

I’m not sure what your own relationship to your body is like. If I had to guess, I’d venture to guess that your relationship to your body is, at least to some degree, is ambivalent. If I asked

you if you love your body and cherish it, you might say, “those aren’t the words I would pick.” Loathe. Criticize. Rage at. Despair over. Lament. Tolerate.

All of us have some work to do to mend our relationship to our flesh. Our culture—rooted in this spirit-flesh dualism—has never helped us form good relationships with our bodies. On the one hand, we are body-obsessed. We have unrealistic and unhealthy standards of beauty and bodily perfection. And on the other hand we treat our bodies terribly. Our food systems are lousy, our activity and stress levels are not good. We have the worst health in the wealthy world because we’ve said a doctor is a luxury. We obsess about bodies, we abuse them; we don’t love them.

I don’t know what might change—whether we would feel differently and treat our bodies differently—if we could hold in front of us a better image of what the body is. But let’s try. Let’s hold to the paradoxical truth of bodies. Let’s embrace our dustiness *and* our divinity?

A certain humility about the body—about all of our lumps and bumps and imperfection and even our mortality—comes with accepting that we’re just dirt all dressed up. Look at the lilies of the field, Jesus says—they never worry about how they look and nor should we. The lilies don’t agonize over their own mortality—they don’t keep each other hooked up to artificial bloom lengthening machines. There is deep humility that comes from embracing that you are dirt. Of one kind with the earth.

But I also think that this breath of life—this spark of divinity—that is in us from our first breath to our last is just as important to recognize in ourselves and one another. We are dirt that is capable of thinking about itself. You are capable of perceiving beauty and feeling joy and giving and receiving love. Every body has that capacity. I will always believe that a being that possesses these qualities deserves to be honored and cared for, and deserves to live on this earth alongside other bodies in freedom, sharing in the earth’s material abundance.

I was a kid growing up watching Star Wars; I was struck even then when Yoda said: “luminous beings are we—not this crude matter.” I love that line, but I would say to Yoda that it’s not an either/or but a both/and. We are luminous beings and crude matter. We believe that our flourishing—as individuals and as a society—depends on us seeing our bodies in this both/and way. We are ensouled dirt. Shimmering humus. Radiant compost.

We are physical and spiritual. Neither is more important. Neither is separable from the other. Our God created us this way. God comes to us in both ways. In the words of stories or songs that vibrate in the air. In sacraments that are cool water on our skin, and sweet bread in our mouths. And in faith, which is trust in things we can’t see; in hope that sustains us when we can’t go on. And in love... which is, perhaps, one experience we know in which the physical and spiritual are exquisitely conjoined. God comes to us in love. God is love in spirit and flesh.

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