

Bodies

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC,
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Luke 5:12-16

¹²Once, when he was in one of the cities, there was a man covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he bowed with his face to the ground and begged him, 'Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean.' ¹³Then Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him, and said, 'I do choose. Be made clean.' Immediately the leprosy left him. ¹⁴And he ordered him to tell no one. 'Go', he said, 'and show yourself to the priest, and, as Moses commanded, make an offering for your cleansing, for a testimony to them.' ¹⁵But now more than ever the word about Jesus spread abroad; many crowds would gather to hear him and to be cured of their diseases. ¹⁶But he would withdraw to deserted places and pray.

Luke 8:42b-56

As he went, the crowds pressed in on him. ⁴³Now there was a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years; and though she had spent all she had on physicians, no one could cure her. ⁴⁴She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his clothes, and immediately her haemorrhage stopped. ⁴⁵Then Jesus asked, 'Who touched me?' When all denied it, Peter said, 'Master, the crowds surround you and press in on you.' ⁴⁶But Jesus said, 'Someone touched me; for I noticed that power had gone out from me.' ⁴⁷When the woman saw that she could not remain hidden, she came trembling; and falling down before him, she declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed. ⁴⁸He said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace.'

⁴⁹While he was still speaking, someone came from the leader's house to say, 'Your daughter is dead; do not trouble the teacher any longer.' ⁵⁰When Jesus heard this, he replied, 'Do not fear. Only believe, and she will be saved.' ⁵¹When he came to the house, he did not allow anyone to enter with him, except Peter, John, and James, and the child's father and mother. ⁵²They were all weeping and wailing for her; but he said, 'Do not weep; for she is

not dead but sleeping.’⁵³ And they laughed at him, knowing that she was dead.⁵⁴ But he took her by the hand and called out, ‘Child, get up!’⁵⁵ Her spirit returned, and she got up at once. Then he directed them to give her something to eat.⁵⁶ Her parents were astounded; but he ordered them to tell no one what had happened.

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This is a sermon about bodies. *Cherished bodies, suffering bodies, healed bodies.*

Flesh and blood, physical, bloody, beautiful, scabbed over, holy, precious bodies.

Bodies with cancer, bodies with arthritis, busted knees, achy hips, tinnitus, vertigo.

Bodies that stretch to the sky every morning, bodies that climb mountains, strong bodies, wide bodies, short bodies, bodies with every shade of skin, bodies young and old and in between.

This is a sermon about *all our* bodies.

Jane Kenyon wrote of “the long struggle to be at home in the body, this difficult friendship.”¹ Most of us, at least some of the time, struggle with our bodies. Our bodies don’t fit the norms our society seems to expect. We know there are 9 billion bodies on this earth and only 8 of them are supermodels² - we know the ads and the Instas are full of hooey, but it’s hard to ignore them, and celebrate an un-filtered body.

Also, our bodies hurt. They don’t function. They’re sick or busted, covered in rashes or bleeding. They express our trauma.

We don’t talk about bodies in Christian faith nearly often enough, which is ironic because Jesus spent a lot of time on bodies.

“Read the Gospels with a focus on the life of Jesus. You will find bodiliness nearly everywhere. Jesus touches eyes, ears, mouths, restoring speech and sight. He heals lame and paralyzed people.”³

He spoke of his own body, broken and given as a gift.

¹ “Cages,” from the poetry collection *Room to Room* by Jane Kenyon, 1978.

² This is a paraphrase of an old Body Shop ad campaign

³ Jane Redmont, *When In Doubt, Sing*. p. 29.

And Jesus loved and tended to bodies - the broken and the strong.

We heard this morning how he saw two of those bodies.

A man *covered* with leprosy.

A woman *bleeding for twelve years*.

Our instinct might be to turn away from these bodies, to keep a wide boundary between us.

I admit I have done so.

For instance, the person on the corner last week, who was dirty, who was hungry. I rushed to give him money to quickly put steps between us.

But Jesus stretched his hand out toward the man whose skin was covered with sores - Mark's version of this healing says that Jesus, *moved with compassion*, reached out his hand. When the bleeding woman touched him, he turned *toward her*, and called her daughter.

In Jesus' sight, bodies - even bodies with skin sores, even bodies chronic menstrual bleeding, even outcast and

unclean bodies - bodies were holy and good and precious. Worthy of healing, moreover worthy of compassion.

And no wonder, when our Creator called humanity (body, mind, soul) very good. In some beautiful and holy mystery, our very selves are made to reflect the image of God. “The body reflects God's own goodness,” as Stephanie Paulsell writes.⁴ That includes healthy bodies and hurting ones.

And God sent God's very self to us *with a body* that walked, ate, drank, received tender care, suffered, died and rose.

Yet, there is something very difficult about these passages that focus on bodies, when Jesus cures illness instantly. We know nothing about the people he cures, except their diseases and their isolation. We don't know their names or their stories. They move from hurt to whole in the space of a few sentences. But in our world, cure does not come so easily. We do not live in an age of miracles. Our stories are far longer than these brief pericopes, and our bodies' aches are more intractable. The sufferings of our loved ones' bodies do not reverse with an arm outstretched in compassion.

⁴ Stephanie Paulsell, *Honoring the Body: Meditations on a Christian Practice*. p. 7.

And yet there is good news in these passages. That good news is *compassion*. For where there is compassion there can be healing. Healing can be part of our stories, too. Perhaps not always cure, but healing.

There is nothing good about suffering. Suffering is not beautiful. But the suffering body is still beautiful, precious, worthy of witness. There is beauty in cherishing every body. There is beauty in compassion which literally means suffering with. There is beauty, and there is a form of healing through tending the suffering body. Healing does not always mean cure, and cherishing the suffering body does not deny or overcome illness or injury. But tenderness is a balm; an embodiment of love.

Rev. Dr. Stephanie Paulsell calls this kind of tenderness *Honoring the Body*, and she writes, “The practice of honoring the body reflects the ways Christians have responded to the needs that all human beings share - the need to be sheltered and nourished, protected and loved - in a way that bears witness to God.”⁵

We take care of people’s bodies because they are beloved and precious in God’s sight. And we take care of our own

⁵ Stephanie Paulsell, *Honoring the Body*. p. 6.

bodies for the same reason: we have been given something dear. As Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, your body is a temple which you have from God. And so, we are invited to treat our bodies as beautiful sanctuaries - when our bodies feel strong and when they feel fragile.

There's a lot of recent research on trauma:⁶ how it's expressed in our bodies, and what helps our bodies cope with trauma. Dr. Bessel Van Der Kolk offers one key insight: "Social support is the most powerful protection against becoming overwhelmed by stress and trauma....Traumatized human beings recover in the context of relationships."⁷ The same doctor outlines ways that embodied practices (including yoga - which you're all invited to try today after church) helps to address trauma and illness and promote physical and emotional wellness.

Consider, for a moment, some of the other body stories in the Gospels, those which do not focus on curing illness - but instead lift up care and tenderness. There is a woman who comes to Jesus before he is to suffer, and takes ointment and rubs it into his skin in an act of exquisite care. There is Jesus, who kneels before his friends and washes their dusty, tired feet.

⁶ My particular favorites include Nadine Burke Harris' book *The Deepest Well*; Bessel Van Der Kolk's book *The Body Keeps the Score*; Resmaa Manakem's *My Grandmother's Hands*.

⁷ Bessel Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*. p. 81, 212

Two years ago, a group of Pilgrims watched a documentary, “The Antidote.” In the movie, viewers see doctors washing the feet of homeless folks - an act both pragmatic and kind. Yes, the gentle bath prevented illness - but it also offered dignity and care.

Compassion can be an act of healing when there is no cure.

So this is what we can do for one another’s bodies, in Christian friendship, in agape love. We see the person in front of us the way God sees them: precious in God’s sight; precious in our sight. We care. We tend. We anoint. We heal.

Let me close with a commission from Stephanie Paulsell:

“This is our task also: to learn to see our bodies and the bodies of others through the eyes of God. To learn to see the body as both fragile and deeply blessed. To remember the body's vulnerability and to rejoice in the body as a sign of God's gracious bounty.”⁸

Amen.

⁸ Stephanie Paulsell, *Honoring the Body: Meditations on a Christian Practice*. p. 34.