



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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ASH WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 2023

JOEL 2:1-2,12-17; PSALM 103; 2 CORINTHIANS 5:20B-6:10; MATTHEW 6:1-6,16-21

THIS IS MY BODY

Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21 [*Jesus said, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.*

"So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

"And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

"And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."]

I wonder if there have been times in your life when you have been acutely aware of your body, of its needs, of its need for care. During illness perhaps, or pregnancy, or perhaps when your body has been

overworked, overstressed, or under loved by the world around you.

Most of us, I'm guessing, know just how it feels to be part of a society that values the

mind over the body, thinking over feeling, that values what the body can produce over who we each are as bodies. The role and the priority of the body have long been culturally diminished.

Yet we begin our church year with the anticipation of the bodily birth of Jesus. We begin by anticipating the reality of God entering into, becoming human flesh. Jesus walked among us, a human being, a body among other bodies, he touched, he healed, he loved, and by his life, death, and resurrection he taught us the importance, the sanctity of this embodied, earthly life, this bodily reality, our embodied reality. At the last supper Jesus shared with his friends, he broke bread and said to them “this is my body.” We hear these words repeated every time we gather at this table.

“This is my body” Jesus said – not my ideas, or my teachings, not my mind, Jesus tells us to remember his body. His body that was broken by a world that rejected

him and his message of love, a world that was threatened by his affirmation that all bodies, all bodies are beloved of God.

I do not have a body, I am a body. In this earthly life there is absolutely no separation between bits of me, between my mind, my spirit, and my physical self, I am an inseparable whole.

Each human body is a wondrous and truly awesome reality. By adulthood we have around 60,000 miles of blood vessels¹ ... a resting human body puts out the electrical equivalent of a 100W lightbulb² ... over half of our body’s cells belong to our microbiome, that incredible colony of microscopic life found predominantly in our gut that we are only just beginning to begin to understand, and these cells, an essential *part of us*, aren’t human.³ Truly amazing. Each of us, in all our splendid variety, a wondrous expression of the creativity of life on this planet! Of the creativity that is God, and is expressed through all life.

¹ Cited from the British Heart Foundation:
<https://www.bhf.org.uk/informationsupport/heart-matters-magazine/research/how-are-blood-vessels-made>

² Cited from a PubMed study:
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2816633/>

³ Cited from the BBC:
<https://www.bbc.com/news/health-43674270>

Just amazing!

I don't believe, then, that during Lent we are called to dominate our marvelous bodies, to batter and shame them into submission through punishing spiritual discipline, to further harm or subjugate bodies which are stifled and limited by the way this world would have us live. Instead, I believe we're called to observe a holy season of deep-listening and response to the body, of reconciliation with God by returning to our embodied-ness.

Paul asks in his first letter to the Corinthians: do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you?

And so we commit to spiritual disciplines that teach us how to be faithfully embodied. We commit to the deep goodness of our embodied-ness with our attention and our intention. And it's not easy, but we commit and we do our best. It's not easy, because our minds tend to get in the way.

It's our mind, conditioned by the realities of a harsh society, that would have us, as Jesus says in our gospel reading, that would have us practice "our piety before

others in order to be seen by them." It's the work of the mind that gets us caught up in the doing, in needing to be seen doing what everyone else is doing, or doing what we think we should be doing. But Jesus is re-directing us. Let your spiritual practices be done in secret, he tells us, there will be the reward from God, from God who sees in secret.

Jesus is pointing us to that which is concealed, to our being, to our experience of embodiment, that's where we encounter the God in whom we live and move and have our being.

Our Lenten disciplines of self-denial and fasting give us little choice but to listen to our bodies, to learn about our whole selves, our being within which God dwells, and through which the Spirit flows. Through listening, learning, and responding with a right reverence to our bodies, we can come to know the great wisdom and great love bound up in our physical, embodied reality.

Lent can be, then, a season dedicated to fully experiencing our embodied-ness, of inviting the discomforts of recognizing all the ways in which we have become

detached from our whole selves: our patterns of habitual thinking, our habits of distracted behavior, all the things that draw us away from our being, and so away from God. In this season, we let go of the quick comforts we might mindlessly offer ourselves in daily life, and we return ... to our embodied dependence on God.

Our Lenten disciplines can teach us how to fall in love with our God-gifted embodied reality and restore a neglected fullness of relationship with God within and through this precious body; necessary preparation for the Good Friday and Easter Sunday that are to come.

The ashes we receive today are a sign of our mortality and our penitence, yes, but

they also serve as mark of our commitment to the remarkable, temporal reality that is the physical body, our embodiment. Our ashes will also mark our call to place this miraculous gift of flesh and blood, of life, at the very center of all that we do and of all that we are, so that we might begin to grasp all that truly can be ... for our own lives and for the world around us.

May yours be a holy Lent of revelatory awareness of your embodiment and restored connection to the in-dwelling presence of God's freely given love.



SAINT MARK'S
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL