

"This Ain't Free"

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

A Sermon preached by Joshua Lazard in Memorial Chapel on April 2, 2015

While the hip-hop lyricist Kendrick Lamar opted to use an expletive for the second track title on his sophomore album "To Pimp a Butterfly" I have clearly not opted to do so with the title of today's sermon. Kendrick launches into the existential flight of mind as many young adults do and we get a peak into the mind of a 27-year-old from Compton, California as he journeys in and out of what it means to ontologically be a black man in this country, but also what it means to embody it physically. That is to suggest that Kendrick's lyrics address the dichotomy of what life lays at the feet of just about everyone over the age of 25. We know this because Kendrick shows in his first album that all too often life can arrive quicker than right now and sooner than immediately.

As only Kendrick can do, he bridges the gap and walks the gauntlet between both body and spirit. Far too often we listen to and are influenced by thoughts that make us choose one over the other. Sometimes for the sake of bodily ecstasy and other times because of pneumatological expediency. Kendrick demonstrates through his album the internal wrestling that many of us face and how one can exist in that binary: how does one encompass the 'both/and.' Perhaps he was attempting to answer that eternal, yet ephemeral, Pauline conundrum of how do we exist in this world, but not be of this world.

I bought Kendrick Lamar's album while sitting in the airport hearing that iTunes had cleared it for early release upon returning from a mission trip and it's been the album that's been on constant rotation since that day. However, without fail, I find myself consistently drawn to the second track, an interlude where Kendrick lays assault into the ways in which his ontological existence have been made a commodity. On the surface, he's having an argument with an upset ex-girlfriend who apparently doesn't see his worth, but Kendrick responds in this poetic and hip-hop double entendre declaring that this body, his physiognomy is not for sale! That his body is worth something.

The way in which he does so is deeply prophetic given the current national conversation that we as a country, and probably as a campus, are having. It's also prescient given the conversation that so many of us have had at one time or another in our ecclesiastical settings about the difference between the body and the spirit. So often in these circles, people are encouraged to choose their spirit over their body; to engage in holiness living, a type of ascetic lifestyle that abstains from the daily indulgences that many people take for granted. Kendrick rejects that. Instead he

offers a lyrical opportunity for what it means to live in that liminality, to find comfort in the ambiguity and find a way through the disorientation.

The pericope in which Paul penned his missive to the church at Corinth was written to an assembly in the first century that had none of our conceived and pre-conceived notions of what it means to be the Church. The word "Christian" did not exist. This assembly, the Followers of the Way, were forging new ground as they created the rules, the doctrines, and the traditions of what it would soon mean to be Christian. Paul hears back from the church at Corinth that things aren't going well, they are not going according to plan. They are a divided bunch and disagreement in their middle name. They are not handling well what it means to exist in the binary; living in liminal space is not what they do well. Caught between what it means to be part of the Jewish and Hebraic tradition and what it means now to be an apocalyptic Jew; stuck between their Jewish faith and what it means to live in the Roman empire. They're struggling with their existence and trying to reconcile their being.

Can you see Paul pacing back and forth in a room trying to figure out what to write to them? His brow furrowed, his feet trudging against a dusty floor kicking up the dirt that glints in the waning sunlight of an afternoon. He breaks his train of thought and makes the bold declaration "For I have received from the Lord" –and nearly 2,000 years later we still have the recorded words of institution from the Last Supper. These words are uttered across the globe as congregants and celebrants prepare for Holy Communion.

On Maundy Thursday, we remember the Last Supper; we celebrate the Eucharist; we participate in Holy Communion. Many are reminded of the fresh spirituality that awakens and renews our spirit. Liturgically sound or not, we all know how this story ends. Even on a Thursday, we become enraptured with anticipation, waiting for the celebration and jubilation of what is to come. Our spirits leap at the sheer beauty that can be Resurrection Sunday morning. Our spirits are happy because we know what is to come, but let us not rush with spiritual expediency and miss the bodily sacrifice that Jesus made.

Jesus' body was real. It was flesh and bones and blood. There was a distinct humanity about him. It begs understanding this because historically we have to encounter the fact that Jesus died a death that was reserved for political dissents within the Roman Empire. Death on a Roman cross was for those who ran afoul of the Roman government or dared to challenge the Roman establishment of order. Depending on which Gospel you read from, as Jesus was saying that he was sent from God, therefore the Son of God, he was understanding his divinity; coming to grips with his divine nature. That in and of itself was anti-establishment enough, for the only one who could make that claim was the Roman emperor. But as Jesus came into the knowledge of his own divinity, he was also attempting to liberate humanity--through his parables and

through his actions. Lest we forget, this very human Jesus walked into the temple where there were money-changers and flipped over tables! These words of institution that Paul received from the Lord remind us of Jesus' humanity and we are reminded of his body--and it ain't free--it comes with a price.

Kendrick Lamar makes the claim that his body ain't free--that it costs. That not just anyone can have it just because they want it; it's a clear declaration of personal agency over himself. He presses the claim through lyrics that his body ain't free in the face of rhetoric that attempts to silence the voice of people who look like him, and against a historical backdrop that used the black male body as a legalized commodity. Even as the characters in the Gospel texts tried to own Jesus' words, own his movements throughout the Galilean countryside, as they tried to own his thoughts. Even as Jesus walked the via dolorosa, they tried to own his body forcing him to carry his cross, own his body by forcing him to wear a crown of thorns, the crowd tried to even own his title as the crowd called him the King of the Jews. Even as the Roman government tried to own him as a political prisoner, the words of Paul remind us that Jesus' body ain't free as it was broken and blood was shed. Jesus had to pay with his life in order to show us a better way. "This is my body for you...."

As Kendrick contemplates his own life's work, I can't help but imagine that he's asking himself just how can he do what's right by God and still what's right by the people here on earth. How can you live this life and make a difference without compromising your relationship with God. Paul's words are an invitation to bring us as Christians to this common table and wrestle with this together.

The stark humanity and the supernatural divinity are both present in the Eucharist. What Holy Communion represents should make us ask ourselves how to refrain from being so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good?

The entire narrative of Jesus is replete with ways in which Jesus existed in that binary of body and spirit. It was this christological space that he inhabited in which he told people to follow him. This political death in which Jesus faced, this 1st century lynching tree on which Jesus hung, acts as a reminder of what it means to sacrifice. Our bodies are not free, they are worth something. Each and every one of us is worth something, our entire composite life story, body and spirit is worth something.

Kendrick, in a contemporary sense, helped me anchor what it meant for Jesus to offer up his body. This, ain't free. It cost Jesus something to walk up the road to Calvary and hang on a cross. It was messy; it was gruesome; it was bloody. Through Kendrick declaring what essentially amounts to self-love of his body and spirit, it makes Holy Communion more accessible to me. Kendrick seemingly bared his spirit and his body when he dropped the verses on that track and Holy Communion is essentially that: the bareness, the transparency, the nakedness of Jesus in the bread symbolizing the body and the wine symbolizing the blood that was there hanging on a cross for all

present to see. And understanding that when you do this, when you expose yourself, you leave a little bit of yourself each and every time. The Eucharist acts as table of equal footing; all who come forward are occupying the same common ground to enter into yet another christological space of bareness, of vulnerability. And undoubtedly, to be vulnerable means you've given up something, it cost you something; to be in that exposed state was not free.

What transformed this lynching into a crucifixion is that "on the night which he was betrayed, he took a loaf of bread and gave thanks." What made Jesus' death not an act of condemnation against the world, but one of redemption can be summed up in the fact that he gave thanks. The words "having gave/given thanks" are encapsulated in one Greek word "εὐχαριστέω" which is a Greek portmanteau of the word "εὖ" for good and "χάρις" for grace. In other words, on the night which he was betrayed, he took a loaf of bread and properly acknowledged that God's grace works well.

Every time we celebrate communion, we are properly acknowledging that God's grace works well. God's grace works well by performing a mystery that God can transform an act meant for evil and condemnation into a marvel embrace of redemption. God's grace works well because the body and blood of Jesus paid a price for redemption that many of us are not willing or able to pay. So every time you utter a thanksgiving unto God, you are simply acknowledging that God's grace works well.