
Holy Bodies

Romans 12:1-8

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on August 24, 2014 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

When I surveyed the lectionary readings and decided to preach on the Romans pericope, I sent a mental text message to myself—OMG PPOP—Oh my God, Powery preach on Paul? Romans is Paul's most theologically argumentative epistle and preaching on Paul can be a tricky enterprise. But I want to thank apostle Paul for helping me remember one of my favorite preachers. She's a woman and is actually an "unchurched preacher." No letters behind her name for seminary degrees. No degrees, actually. Not even a GED. Though she doesn't have any school degrees somehow she seems to possess a Ph.D. in wisdom and love. There's one particular sermon of hers that is, to use the words of Nat King Cole, "unforgettable." Her name is Baby Suggs holy, a woman preacher in Toni Morrison's 1988, Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Beloved*. This novel is a fictional narrative account of a former slave's memories of post-Civil War Ohio. Baby Suggs holy, despite having "busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue" through the furnace of slavery, preaches about the corporeal body to a corporate body in what was known as the Clearing in the woods. Morrison writes that she preaches from her "heart" and this is some of what she proclaimed:

'In this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. ..Yonder they do not love your flesh. They don't love your eyes...No more do they love the skin on your back. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Raise them up and kiss them... You got to love it..! And no, they ain't in love with your mouth... This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need arms, strong arms I'm telling you. And O my people, out yonder, hear me, they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight. So love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up. And all your inside parts ...you got to love them. The dark, dark liver—love it...and the beat and beating heart, love that too. More than eyes or feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize.' Saying no more, she stood up then and danced with her twisted hip the rest of what her heart had to say while others opened their mouths and gave her the music. Long notes held until the four-part harmony was perfect enough for their deeply loved flesh.

What a sermon. Baby Suggs holy not only urges the hearers to love their flesh because "out yonder" they don't love it, but she uses her body, particularly her twisted hip, as the climax of her heartfelt sermon while the community brings it to a close with chapel choir-like music. Baby Suggs, holy, talks about the body and uses her body to preach a word of hope to those whose bodies had been mistreated. Her explicit exhortation to love the flesh means to love the body. When she says, "love your heart" she's implying to love your whole self. This somatic sermon scene has been called a "liturgy of Spirit" (M. Shawn Copeland), which should be no surprise since the apostle Paul teaches that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. In other words, Baby Suggs encourages us to love your "head and shoulders knees and toes, knees and toes..." And why shouldn't we?

We can't leave our bodies at the narthex door when we come to worship. We walk in. We process in. We stand. We sit. We sing. We pass the peace. Some make the sign of the cross and bow before the cross. Some even sleep during sermons. Many years ago, I had a 9 year old boy give me a memorable departing gift of a picture he called "Luke preaching to sleeping people." In his picture, he showed everyone in the congregation

sleeping on cots while I preached. Our bodies worship and our bodies are at worship; we couldn't worship without them because our bodies are liturgical texts. If we could escape our bodies, we would be leaving out a critical part of our Christian life.

And why wouldn't we love our bodies? God did. The incarnation of God in Jesus Christ in human form reveals how God embraces the body and implicitly affirms human bodies as significant for the spiritual life. God loved the world so much that he became a human body so that there would be no nobodies. At the heart of the Christian faith is a broken body hanging helplessly on a cross, a body offered as a sacrifice. A bodily performance of cruciform love affirming the importance of bodies for the life of faith and the body as an epistemic site of God's presence and glory.

Yet we continue to struggle in the church and the academy to remain whole selves. We won't say, 'check your brain at the door of the church,' but we may think it's okay to check our bodies at the door as if worship is only about mental ascent and an university education is only about our neck up. Through the combination of Neoplatonic philosophy and the privileging of an Enlightenment mentality à la Descartes—"I think therefore I am"—the mind predominates the body historically therefore the goal becomes to escape bodily reality as a pathway to a deeper spirituality. In this perspective, the body is viewed as suspicious, threatening, and dangerous if not controlled thus irrelevant for the Christian life.

But the body is inescapable and thinking that bodies are unimportant for faith and faithful discipleship opens the door for the exploitation of bodies. When a body, some body, is deemed insignificant it can be treated in anyway because it is viewed as disconnected from the spiritual life. This is what led to the brutal context of slavery in *Beloved* and its associated corporeal terrorism. When bodies don't matter, we can torture them, shoot them, behead them, objectify them, brand them, hang them, make fun of them, ignore them and abuse them, including little innocent bodies. A disembodied faith is disengaged from everybody. To be anti-body is to be anti-human and anti-God because God became a human body to redeem and heal bodies and claim them as vital for the spiritual life.

"The incarnation of Jesus is proof of the importance of the body as a means of grace"(Lynne Westfield) and knowledge. Our bodies have been graced with the presence of God as humans created in the image of God. But every time we hurt the body intentionally, we destroy the beautiful image of God found in the collective body and we reveal a distorted and immature spirituality. Any move toward the destruction of a body is a gesture in the direction of the destruction of God because to embrace a body is to embrace an enfleshed God and to affirm that we encounter God, not by leaving the material world but by immersing ourselves more deeply into it.

By embracing our bodies we become more fully human. By embracing our bodies and presenting them as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, we engage in what Paul calls 'spiritual,' or it can be translated, 'rational' worship. Paul affirms the body as a locus of doxology and says elsewhere, "glorify God in your body" (1 Cor 6:20). He places the body front and center in the Christian life. He's not body shy. He teaches that a bodily sacrifice is spiritual or rational. The spiritual includes our bodies. Spirituality encompasses materiality. To be spiritual means to be embodied. What you do with your body and to someone else's body is integral to your faith. And even if we use the translation 'rational' worship instead of 'spiritual,' Paul maintains his integrative vision because that would suggest that reasonable worship is embodied, and that he is calling for what author Mark Johnson calls "the body in the mind." Paul will not allow us to live disintegrated lives so he foregrounds the human body as critical for a Christian response to God's mercy. Bodies matter for Paul (cf. 6:6, 12; 8:23) because if one wants to become more spiritual one should become more embodied as a human and person of faith, not more disembodied. The Christian faith is a material one, not just a virtual hashtag one on twitter. It takes place in and through bodies.

For Paul this is not just the corporeal body, but a corporate body of a community. His bodily vision includes other bodies not just the individual one. To be Christian is to have a body and be a part of a body because the Christian life should not be lived alone in solitary confinement. We have not arrived here today by our own resources. Somebody prayed for you, supported you, encouraged you, cheered you on, gave you an opportunity, taught you how to read and write and think and explore. You are here because of the corporate body.

Paul uses the ancient metaphor of body, which is a social metaphor that implies unity among diversity (cf. 1 Cor. 12:4-31). He says, "For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another." An aspect of being transformed by the renewing of our minds deals with our and other bodies in that one should not "think of yourself more highly than you ought to think" because all in this community have gifts, though different. But each gift, each member, each body part is vital to the formation of a whole body. Everybody matters and every body is a somebody because in the kingdom of God there are no nobodies. This is part of the transformation that has to occur in our minds if we are to move beyond all of the hate in our world—in Ferguson, MO, Iraq, Nigeria, and the Eastern border of Ukraine and Russia. Conforming to the world means privileging the self over others and disregarding some bodies because of fear and selectively respecting other bodies. Yet we cannot be one body without every body part.

Paul's vision will not allow us to slip into a type of spiritual solipsism. If his body metaphor was insufficient for calling us to community, Paul does something else. Notice "present your bodies" is plural and "living sacrifice" is singular. There are many bodies but there's only one sacrifice. How we are together in our life together as a community signals whether our worship is holy and acceptable to God. "Embodied community in Christ in which the gifts of others are valued, and each member uses one's gifts on behalf of the body as a whole: this is worship" says Luther Seminary professor, Mary Hinkle Shore; "this is a sacrifice that is alive, holy and acceptable to God." There can be no living sacrifice without each other and the inclusion of every member of the body. No individual body is too wide or too thin or too short or too tall or too dark or too light because everybody is somebody.

Not until everybody is deemed a somebody can we make the one sacrifice. Until we acknowledge our common humanity, our communal sacrifice will be incomplete because it won't be one. The sacrifice will be unacceptable and impossible if all bodies do not come together as one and until all bodies are considered to be "members of one another," a part of the same body. There can be no acceptable sacrifice until we truly believe that our destinies are tied together and we live in an inescapable web of mutuality and act in ways that embody this belief. Our worship as a community will only be acceptable to God when we are truly one because what is acceptable to God is the unity of the body. Without that, there is no spiritual worship or living sacrifice; without that, there's no transformation only evidence of conformation to the way it has always been and it has to be clear to us that the way it has always been is not working in our world. The one singular sacrifice can only be holy when the body is wholly, totally, one.

Will you present your bodies for the wholeness of the one body in Christ? Will you sacrifice so that the one sacrifice can be made? Will you give of yourselves for the greater good of the community? While embracing your own body, will you affirm every body and recognize that grace has been extended to all to offer a holy and whole sacrifice to God? Every one can't be a leg or toe or an exhorter or leader and thank God everyone can't be a Tarheel. You can only, as an Emory professor taught, "do you" and be you.

We need you here this year. We need your gifted and graced bodies in order to be the one body in Christ and to offer the one sacrifice in order to truly worship God. So here in this place, love your body despite what

others might have said to you in the past because you can't truly love any body if you don't love yourself—your eyes, your skin, your hands, your mouth, your feet, back, shoulders, arms, neck, inside parts, your liver and lungs, your heart. Love your body but don't forget to love the one body of Christ because it is only in connection with this one body that you will discover what it means to truly have communion with God. May we make four part harmony together this year. And let every body say 'Amen.'