

God Within Us - Honouring God with Our Bodies by Discerning the Body

This morning, our reader's theatre drew us into two scripture passages that encouraged us to consider how seeking God within us is a practice that involves our whole selves as embodied people. We are embodied beings, and our bodies, in all their diversity, give shape to who we are, and give shape to the world around us. There is no escaping it, we are creatures of earth, of matter, of dust. We live and move throughout our lives as a sometimes graceful and sometimes awkward collection of skin and sinew, of muscle and fat, of bone, blood, and organs. Our bodies are sites of both pain and pleasure, of joy and sorrow, of creation and destruction, love and hate, of togetherness and isolation, and most basically, of life and death. It only makes sense, then, that the God who ordained for us an embodied existence would affirm us, would meet us, and would be *found by us*, in all the many complexities of our embodied lives and in the embodied lives of others.

Some of those well-known words we heard from Psalm 139 give us a language for describing God as the God who, although seeming far away, nonetheless knows us intimately, hemming us in behind and before (139:5). God is acquainted, extols the Psalmist, with our embodied movements even better than we ourselves know them: God knows when we move from here to there; when we "sit down" and "rise up," when we walk our various paths; and when we lie down. And should this really surprise us? After all, God is the creator in whom we live and move and have our being. Even in our mother's womb, the Psalmist declares, God was not somehow absent. Rather, the divine life infuses all life, in all its stages of development, with the basic energy that animates everything. Every life, including our own, is in a fundamental way formed and held together by God. The Psalmist uses such wonderfully creative images to depict the way that God holds and forms us: Like a potter, God molds us as earthy clay; or like a

weaver or a seamstress, God weaves or knits us together like a fleshy fabric. The miracle of God's life-infusing presence in everything made is not a one-time infusion either. The very fact that everything continues to exist and doesn't just fall away into oblivion, is by virtue of the God who upholds everything and continually gives life to everything. And so, the Psalmist also notes that once born, God does not cast us off or depart from us but is present to us, ever fashioning us and ever holding us fast in all the strengths and weaknesses, in all the living and dying, of our fearfully and wonderfully made bodies.¹

The Psalmist's affirmation of our bodies as being wonderfully made by God and as being accompanied by God through the many stages of life, is such an important affirmation to hold on to in our world today. There are, of course, so many forces—cultural, social, religious, political, and economic—that compete to decide which bodies deserve affirmation and praise in our world, which bodies deserve to be honored and given the title of “wonderfully made,” and which bodies deserve to be accompanied through life. And then those ideals get used to shape public policy, shape buildings and infrastructure, markets, social media platforms, and product lines, all with the aim to knit and weave together our social body in the image of the given spirit of the age.

While there have no doubt been many positive social and political developments in recent years that have given public visibility and representation to our world's bodies in all their manifold differences and abilities, so many cultural forces continue to prop up damaging and unrealistic images of the ‘idealized’ or ‘normal’ body, the strong body, the slim body, the ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ body, or the age-immune body. These idealized images of the body can often set so many people, from young age to later in life, at odds with their own bodies *or* at

¹ St. Augustine once remarked concerning God's closeness to us: You...were deeper inside me than my deepest depths and higher than my greatest heights.” *Confessions*, III, 6, 11. Translation by Sarah Ruden (p.63 of her 2018 translation).

odds with the bodies of others. When this happens, when skewed and unrealistic expectations about our bodies or the bodies of others are internalized, we can begin to lose some of the basic affirmations that we heard this morning: God calls all of us fearfully and wonderfully made, God accompanies us in our embodied life from birth to death, and God has given everyone bodies that can be honorably used to glorify God in every stage of life. If we lose these affirmations, we will no doubt struggle with the very idea of seeking God within us or within others.

As has already been mentioned, the topic that our worship materials invite us to explore today is “Honouring God with Our Bodies” and I will be honest, when I initially tried to write a sermon for this with the scriptures from Psalm 139 and 1 Corinthians 6 in mind, I struggled with discerning what direction to take. Psalm 139 and the affirmation of our created goodness, the inherent worth of our bodies, certainly seemed like a good place to start. By calling our bodies “wonderful,” this Psalm invites us to see our own bodies as good and beautiful and worthy of love. This Psalm then in turn also invites us to live our embodied life in ways that express our gratitude to God for giving us the gift of life. We do this today as we worship together, as we sing or pray or sit in silence, as we pass the peace or kneel or raise a hand or greet each other with a nod of the head, a smile, a handshake, a fist pump, or as has been common during covid, an elbow or a wave on the zoom screen.

You could perhaps also say that Psalm 139 invites us to honour God with our bodies by setting forth a divine example that we are to imitate in our own human way. We are to *imitate* the God of Psalm 139 by loving and caring for our own bodies and the bodies of others from birth to death, through seeking each other out for relationship and connection, and through accompanying each other through the mundane parts of our lives—in our sitting down and standing up. There is much wisdom contained in Psalm 139 by itself, in other words, that we can

learn from, not only about the goodness of the bodies we have been given and God's presence within them, but also about how we can honour God with our bodies.

But let me tell you, when I turned to consider the topic of "Honouring God with Our Bodies" in relation to 1 Corinthians 6, I found myself stuck for a bit. The theme for today comes, of course, from 1 Corinthians 6:20, which we read towards the end of our reader's theatre. And I suspect that we may have all been nodding our heads with Paul when he claims that our bodies are "a temple of the Holy Spirit" and we may even have said a silent but hearty "Amen" and "We will!" in response to his admonition to "Glorify God in our bodies." The two verses where Paul says these things really do seem to fit well with the affirmations that we heard in Psalm 139. You are fearfully and wonderfully made – so take care to honour God with your bodies. But, if we read all of chapter 6 of 1 Corinthians to try to get some sense of what led Paul to give that admonition in his letter in the first place, let me tell you, we will find ourselves stumbling upon a messy, difficult, and soap-opera worthy set of community problems related to the use and abuse of bodies in the church and the ways those uses and abuses impact the corporate body of the church as a whole.

You see, Paul's positive admonition to the Corinthians in verse 20 to honour God in their bodies comes *after* he really laid into some of them for what he described as some rather shameful uses of the body that he had been hearing about through the grapevine. Paul's positive admonition to honour God with their bodies, in other words, only came after calling out those in the Corinthian church that he believed had been *dishonouring* God with their embodied lives. Let me give you a brief sampling of three different accusations against the Corinthians that Paul packs into the 18 verses that lead up to the two that we read for today:

- 1.) In verses 1-8, Paul expresses exasperation at hearing that church members are taking each other to court and defrauding one another. "Shame on you," he says, "that you

can't figure this kind of stuff out in the body of the church community without having to go to legislators outside of the community!"² We don't know the specifics of the cases Paul was referring to, but in his mind, he thought mature and Christ-like people should have been able to sort their conflicts out within the church, not in the courts.

- 2.) Then in verses 9-10, Paul follows up his shaming of the Corinthians that are taking each other to court with a list of other wrongdoers (presumably some of them were reading the letter—that must have been interesting)—and among that list he mentions, among others: thieves, the greedy, the sexually immoral, and drunkards—who will at this rate not, according to Paul, inherit the Kingdom of God;³
- 3.) And finally, if that wasn't enough drama to address, in verses 11-18, Paul argues against some of the different understandings of so-called "Christian freedom" and "liberty" that individuals in the Corinthian church had been claiming and enjoying.

Perhaps you might be able to see why I might have struggled to move from the poetic affirmations of Psalm 139 to 1 Corinthians 6 when writing this sermon. With Paul's words here, we get a punch in the gut. In the 18 verses leading up to his affirmation that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit and that we are therefore to honour God with them, Paul challenges the Corinthians to see how "honouring God with their bodies" will involve maintaining certain individual and community boundaries: some actions are ok, and some are not for those who have been incorporated into the body of Christ.⁴ The body is good, wonderful, and honourable, but oh, it can be used badly and not just in ways that impact ourselves as individuals. Rather, how we treat, use, and present our individual bodies impacts the community of God, Christ's body, as a whole. As Paul says, "we are not our own," for God's Spirit dwells within us and incorporates us

² In her article "Tensions," *Leader* (Summer 2022), pp.2-4, Kimberly Penner (Pastor of Stirling Mennonite Church) helpfully points out that there are times, especially in cases of failures in church leadership and accountability, where outside help to settle disputes is important and necessary, especially to protect the vulnerable. We can affirm with Paul that this is to the church's "shame" (1 Cor. 6:5) but the fact that it is shameful should not be used as an excuse to put the interests of church leadership and reconciliation efforts above the more immediate needs of protecting the vulnerable, especially in a situation of harm.

³ This "sin list" has far too often been used by churches to shame some—especially those deemed 'sexually immoral'—while ignoring the blatant sins (for example greed) of others.

⁴ This is a basic definition of boundaries discussed in MCEC's recent *Boundaries* Workshop for new pastors.

together with everyone else in the community, such that the damage to one part of the body affects the whole body. In a fundamental way, for Paul, we are not individual bodies who happen to relate to each other and to God, but by the Spirit we are drawn together to make one body because the same Spirit dwells within us. For this reason, every member of the church, for Paul, must respect a variety of personal and corporate boundaries if it is to honour God.

But here's where things get tricky: **what** are the church's boundaries as they relate to the use of our bodies? And **who** has the power to decide what those boundaries are within the church? And **who** gets to police them, or do we police them at all? And **how** can you tell when those boundaries have been crossed? And **what** are we to do when they have been crossed? These are difficult questions, questions that are politically charged, questions that lead us to examine who has power within the church and who does not. And, despite there being much wisdom gained from looking to scripture for help, scripture rarely gives us ready-made answers that we will find there that can be universally given for all times, places, cultures, and situations, no matter how hard philosophers, theologians, preachers, and ethicists throughout the ages have tried to give them.⁵ Despite it being necessary and right to affirm some fundamental boundaries within human communities, boundaries that protect against bodily harm or abuse or the taking of life, for example, almost invariably community boundaries concerning how we are to honour God with our bodies require regular negotiation and contextual discernment in the body of Christ. And this discernment takes a lot of work.

But this work of discernment is actually a really good thing! What would be more worrisome would be if Christian communities believed that boundaries either did not matter at all—which seemed to be what some of the Corinthians might have thought—or that the

⁵ Some boundaries, such as those implied in the 10 Commandments, are more universal in nature.

boundaries were so clear and set in stone, that they must never be discerned and never require discussion. It is part of the life of the church that it must always be at work on the question of boundaries and to do this requires that the church be a discerning body—a body of believers that, like the God we worship—searches out the paths before us, to discern together how we can honour God with our bodies.

The topic of discernment brings us back to Paul’s letter to the Church in Corinth. In particular, it brings us to something Paul says a little later in his letter, where he makes it evident that there were many in the church who had been failing at discerning their own and each other’s paths—who had become slack with the task of ethical discernment in the church. Paul noted that this ethical discernment had been so lacking that many had been eating the bread and drinking the cup of the Lord in an “unworthy manner,” a dishonourable manner. And what manner was Paul referring to? These individuals were excluding some people and leaving them with nothing to eat. In what should be seen as one of the more disturbing verses of the New Testament for all affluent churches—verse 29—Paul says, “for all who eat and drink *without discerning the body*, eat and drink judgment against themselves. For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.” This is quite the claim for Paul to make. “Taking Eucharist or Communion,” Paul is saying, “while not *discerning the body*, without ensuring that truth and justice and love are being upheld in your community, is actually going to make you sick.”

Scholars think that the particular problem that Paul is referring to here is that there were rich or upper-class Corinthians who were divided from and failing to care for and include the poorer members of the church at Corinth.⁶ What is notable is that the language Paul uses to describe this very concrete community issue is language of *the body*: you have failed to discern

⁶ See, for example, Dale B. Martin’s discussion of the class makeup of the Corinthian Church in *The Corinthian Body*, (Yale University Press, 1995), pp.61, 194.

the body when you do not provide for everyone, and you are divided from your poorer brothers and sisters in Christ. You are the body of Christ and each of you are a temple of the Holy Spirit that you share, says Paul, so how can you share that Spirit while dishonouring each other in this way?

Honouring God with our Bodies, for Paul, involves discerning the body to which you belong, the body of Christ into whom you have been incorporated, and seeing if its very basic elements are functioning. Is the body being fed, or are some going without? Are some acting like they are superior to others? Are there divisions? Again, these are tough questions, but questions that cannot be ignored by the church. Which of course leads to the difficult question: What does this mean for this body, for this particular body called Bloomingdale Mennonite Church? How does the way we live as a church body honour or dishonour God? As I have just suggested, that is a question to be answered together through discernment! In other words, don't worry—I haven't planned a Paul style punch in the gut this morning. But what I will leave you to reflect on this morning is a word of encouragement that reflects my attempt at synthesizing my learnings from Psalm 139 and 1 Corinthians 6: God is the God who does not neglect us in our embodied lives but loves and cares for us in our bodies by discerning them and searching them out. In imitation of God, we, the church, must care for our body and the bodies of others, for we are one body, called to witness to Christ our Lord.

AMEN