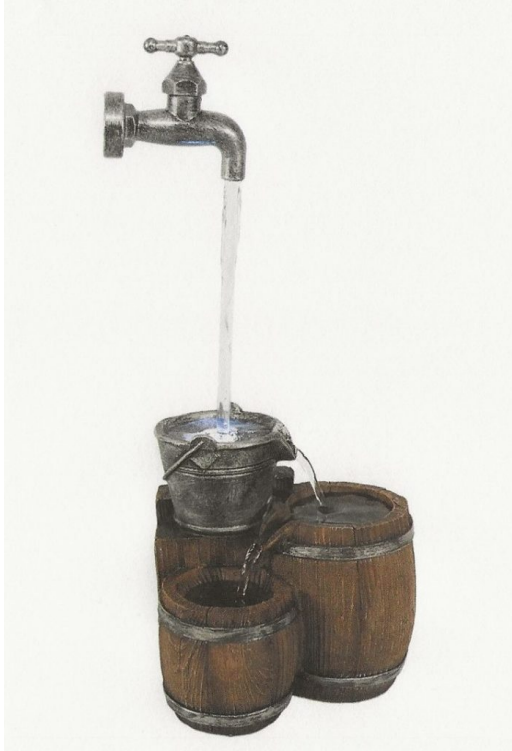


“Embodied Faith” by Erica Lloyd



The First Sunday in Lent

February 26, 2023

Today is the first Sunday in the liturgical season of Lent. Lent may be the most *embodied* of our seasons – okay, maybe second place after Advent, with all of its improbable conceptions, big pregnant bellies, and wearying journeys. But Lent is a close second: beginning with Jesus’ weakened, weary body stumbling out of the wilderness, ending with his crucified corpse buried in the tomb. And in between, Christians have traditionally marked Lent with some kind of fast.

I feel very attuned to this this year, because I’ve been doing a lot of thinking about my relationship with my body. And as important as our bodies are – I mean, we live our whole lives

in them! – they are hard to talk about sometimes. Even here! In this congregation where we regularly affirm the dignity and beauty of creation, extolling the essential goodness of the birds and the fish and the rivers and the mountains, how often do we include our own bodies in that mix?

Personally, I could use that reminder. And I also think it's the kind of thing we are called to as people of faith: speaking prophetic truth and love against the false stories told not only in American culture in general but also specifically in the American church. Because I think there is a gnostic-like disdain for the body alive and well in the church, particularly in evangelical Christianity. Gnosticism was a philosophy espoused by some in the early church that, among other things, defined material existence, including our physical bodies, as evil. Though the church ostensibly squashed this movement within the first century or two after Jesus, I think traces of it remain.

This quote from a recent Gospel Coalition article is a typical example: "We find that at times our *flesh* is driving our conduct. Paul captures this idea in his letter to the church at Philippi when he describes the 'enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly.' Apart from Christ and the power of the gospel, people are controlled by *physical* desires."

When it comes to our physical being, there's a surprising amount of contempt from an institution that chooses to call itself the *Body* of Christ. The ghosts of Gnosticism linger – and look, I'm someone who generally finds a lot of the ancient "heresies" fascinating and worthy of reflection. But as someone who just happens to have a physical body, I'm *really* not into this one.

I haven't always felt so strongly about defending the goodness of my body. I'm 42 years old, and for entire *decades* I lost sight of the fact that there was a lot of goodness to defend. Swept up in religious fervor during the formative years of my late teens and early twenties, I totally bought in to the idea that you had to be very wary of the body. In my college youth group we quoted from books like "I Kissed Dating Goodbye," internalizing the idea that our bodies' natural responses like attraction and desire were evil. Trusting your body could only lead to suffering and sin.

Julian DeShazier, a pastor and artist who like me, came of age in the era of promise rings, recently wrote about this in a Christian Century Article entitled, "Our Holy, Human Bodies."

The church was the first place that taught me that my body was evil... As wonderful and transformative as my youth group was, it was also a place where I heard almost weekly that my purpose in life was to be in deep relationship with God—and that my body was in the way. Mouth, hands, genitals—these were never described to me as possible pathways to God but only as hindrances, things I needed to control and find a way to dedicate to God.

My youth pastor wasn't making this up or acting with violent intent. He was reading Paul, who seemed to hate his body—who was always talking about a "thorn in his flesh" and "carnal" this and that and purifying ourselves... it was clear to me: the flesh was against God, and our physical bodies were nothing more than a site for spiritual warfare.

To be fair, church was NOT the first place I learned disdain for my body. No, my earliest recollection of that awareness was on the playground, when the cutest boy in the sixth grade made fun of me one day. It was the stupidest thing, and thirty-plus years later I'm **almost** to the point that I can look back on it and laugh. But it was that interaction that

first taught me to be ashamed of my body, ashamed of the way it didn't conform to our society's ideal of what a female figure should look like.

It never occurred to me to dismiss this boy's opinion. As soon as he pointed out my flaws, I didn't have to look hard for confirmation that he was right: in magazines, on TV, everywhere I looked, I saw flat stomachs and big boobs and thighs that don't touch. This cultural context and the later religious influence eventually coalesced in a single truth: my body was not very *good*, in any sense of the word.

I spent many, many years laboring under this belief. I'm not sure exactly when or how I realized this was a burden I was no longer interested in carrying. It was at least in part linked to my deepening understanding of justice. As Julien DeShazier wrote in the same article:

When I became acutely aware of injustice in the world—racism, sexism, ableism, poverty —I noticed something almost immediately: these are more than ideological stances, they are attacks on the body... today's movements for freedom and liberation are about more than changing ignorant minds: they are about protecting bodies.

At some point in my radicalization, I realized if I was going to make any progress dismantling the patriarchy and rejecting the capitalist imperative to be dissatisfied with everything, I needed to start with their grip on me.

Somehow I began, little by little, setting my insecurities down, gaining confidence, gaining trust in my body.... just in time to realize it's starting to change as I age. Right now the decrements are minimal in the grand scheme of things: my hips and knees have made it clear that I will never run another half-marathon in my life, but I'm holding out hope for a sprint triathlon. I know I am just *starting* to experience these little losses of what my body could once do, that I

don't yet understand the magnitude that will accumulate over the rest of my life, and I wonder how I will be able to hold on to the fragile appreciation I've only just started to feel for my body over the past few years. Accepting changes in the way my body functions feels like a whole other battle I'm not yet ready to face. I'm praying I have a little more time to shore up my defenses. In the mean time, I'm grateful that this community is engaging in ongoing conversations about aging. I'm looking to you all to teach me the way.

Meanwhile, I have plenty of work trying to root out the remains of the insidious habits and opinions and self-talk about that had become rooted in my life. There are insecurities I have not yet let go of, things that I hate carrying and yet can't bear to put down. I get frustrated sometimes with my lack of progress.

And then I read this passage from Genesis in today's lectionary. And I realized the VERY FIRST THING that happens after the fall, the very first sign that Adam and Eve were cast out of paradise, was not feeling separated from God. It was not an angry argument about whose fault this was. It was not greed or violence or envy. No, the very first thing that happens after the fall is that Adam and Eve experience shame about their bodies: "And as they ate it, suddenly they became aware of their nakedness, and were embarrassed. So they strung fig leaves together to cover themselves."

When I realized that, I had one of those moments that breaks you open because that thing you've experienced, it's written about right there in scripture. My thing is *their* thing too; I'm not just some weirdo, my experience is a *human* experience. And I am reminded that millions of people have difficult relationships with their bodies – most with struggles much more painful than mine, all of us trying to believe that we, too, are fearfully and wonderfully made.

And boy, does that make the burden feel less heavy. That's why

I decided I to preach this sermon full of things I never wanted to say out loud to anyone, let alone a whole church full of people.

So I stand at the beginning of this Lent, looking to Jesus staggering out of the wilderness. And in this story, there is no shame about his physical state. It wasn't his body that was the problem; it wasn't the hunger, the exhaustion, the smell of sweat, the dirty, dusty body probably looking every bit as ragged as it felt. No, Jesus' body was making perfect sense given what it had just been through. The problem in this story is the accusing voice from outside the body, what that voice suggested the body should do with itself, like, for example, jump off a roof. Jesus' wisdom is in telling that voice to shove off without considering any of its nonsense.

The order of events here would suggest it was that 40 days fasting in the wilderness that sharpened this wisdom in Jesus. Now, everyone from Augustine to Martin Luther to Pope Benedict has talked about fasting as a means of disciplining the body to subjugate all those pesky physical desires, but that's not how I see it. Fasting isn't about beating your body down to the point that you can ignore it, it's about changing your normal habits so that you can pay real attention to your body, listen, learn what's important to it, and move from that point of simplicity and clarity. Look at how this worked for Jesus – this is ostensibly Satan coming with his very best material here, his most appealing temptations, and yet Jesus has zero interest in any of it, even in the “stones turning into bread” part. We don't see Jesus sweating blood over any of this. Why? Because Jesus has spent 40 days getting real clear about what will and will not satisfy him, and some hard-as-an-actual-rock crust of bread ain't it. He'll hold off for the buffet brunch the angels are bringing, thankyouverymuch.

This is what embodied faith looks like, I think: a faith that makes room for how our experience as physical beings can enrich and inform our spirits.

I'll leave you by reading the ending of Julian DeShazier's article, because he's already preached half of this sermon and I couldn't wrap up this up any better than this:

At the Last Supper, Jesus doesn't say anything about the remission of sins. He says, "This is my body." Jesus inhabited a body, and if we read scripture through a more humane lens, we notice all these moments where God not only affirms and dignifies bodies but also uses those often broken and limited bodies to make the miraculous real. God's grace performs not in spite of us but through us.

As my therapist is always reminding me, we only experience the Spirit through our bodies. We hear and feel; we sense and intuit; our heart is an organ just like the kidneys and uterus. Our flesh is the only way we experience God at all.

AMEN.