

"This is My Body" by Sandra Miller



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Good morning. So, how do I look? Last week I was told I looked elegant. It was nice to hear. This week I'm going for smashing. Did I succeed? It is not mere vanity that moves me to begin this way, and hopefully you will understand me as saying that I have been beautifully and wonderfully made in the image of God. When I look at the trees in all their green finery or think about their fall raiments I know that God likes nice clothes too.

I don't preach often enough for anyone to remember that, like Kate, I always start by offering the last lines of this week's psalm in prayer. This morning I would like to begin by praying all of Psalm 19 as adapted by Nan Merrill:

The heavens declare the glory
of the Creator;
the firmament proclaims the
handiwork of Love,

...

Let the words of my mouth

and the meditation of my heart

find favor in your Heart

O my Beloved, my strength and

my joy!

Amen.

I resonate with the beauty and sense of mystery of this psalm. I resonate with it in my body as a prayer for help, help with where I am in my journey and help with my discernment about recommitment. I resonate in my body as if I am vibrating with the music made by the stars. When my faith wavers or when I am trying to hold on to that better part of me, this psalm, especially those last lines rise up in the recesses of my mind. And I don't think I consciously knew that to be true until I wrote this.

"Until I wrote this" is a phrase that fits the entirety of this sermon. Just two weeks ago a tumble of words came running out of my fingers and through a pen to the pages of my journal. The urge to write was compelling and surprising for me who in recent years has only written in my journal on silent retreat. It was a whole body experience that was the culmination of many body experiences.

I signed up a few days after the journal writing marathon to fill a hole in the preaching schedule. I thought that what I had written was a nearly finished sermon. As I began to

transcribe the words from my journal to my computer I found and incorporated some new clarity.

So, here I am trying to articulate a story I don't fully understand myself, in the week that Psalm 19 is part of our reading. This is the work of the Holy Spirit. The words of my mouth and meditations of my heart that follow came as a stream of consciousness. I'm not sure where the beginning of the story is. What I do know is that the catalyst immediately before the writing began was reading in Elizabeth Gilbert's eat, pray, love that when she needs to hear God she writes in her journal. It inspired me to try the technique though I haven't used it since.

This sermon is not a learned exegesis. Heavens knows that this weeks lections intersect over and over with what I am about to share, but that isn't the word I received to bring to you. This is a deeply personal testimony to my life now, to a yearning for what Elizabeth Gilbert finds when she writes – her own voice, or not quite her own voice in times of need. Just as the writing came tumbling and unstructured, so did it morph into an address to Seekers. The words were not intentionally written as a reflection of where I am in relation to recommitment but they are that too.

Here is an augmented 8th note of my journal entry of the 29th of August:

I signed up for fall silent retreat – I need that silence in community to help me let go – again. To let go of letting circumstances define and run my life much like the

circumstance of poverty runs the lives of well, financially challenged people. Parenthetically, how easily those living in poverty are erroneously defined by their circumstances is a learned societal behavior that many of us turn back on ourselves to define ourselves by our own circumstances. I have for some time now been defining myself by my poverty of spirit. I have not felt blessed by that poverty despite the wisdom of the Beatitudes, just as I did not feel blessed when I was financially challenged.

I am poor in spirit, which I am coming to understand is a different thing than being depressed – not that they don't often come to inhabit me hand in hand; they can and do sometimes come alone, unbidden and unwanted. One leads to the other, but it's a chicken and egg thing. Does it matter which comes first?

All that is to say that right here, right now, I am poor in spirit, but I am not sure if I am also depressed. It is common for those of us who suffer (and suffer is not a word I use lightly) from cyclical depression to be unaware that we are depressed in various stages of the cycle. Many of the symptoms that tell me I am depressed are happily absent, though that is not a definitive measure.

What is true is that currently I do not know how to be alone with myself in ways that feed me despite being an introvert who relishes time alone. I do not know how to be at rest when I am awake. By my own standards I don't even cook for myself in ways that feed my soul as well as my body – and if you know me at all you know that I love food from its beginning as the tiniest seed to be planted or embryo that grows, I honor God's abundance in the prayer of preparation, I savor the flavors in

every part of my mouth that has the capacity to distinguish sweet and sour, salt and herb. I walk through the grocery store or farmers' market and ingredients still sing to me "take me home". A meal comes together in my mind and the ingredients and I go home together. When it comes time to put it all together I can't quite garner the energy and enthusiasm required. Most often the ingredients go together in easy and uninspired combinations that nourish but do not satisfy my soul. Sometimes, not often, but sometimes, I end up throwing out spoiled produce which for me is sinful for oh so many reasons. I am a person by disposition and training who is a foodie; one that no longer relishes spending time in the kitchen for the joy it can bring me – for the sake of the world that is a core piece of Sandra's world. For Sandra as God made me in God's own image. I rarely cook for loved ones anymore. Sharing communion at my table with friends is something I did often in my life in California, and that too shows, or is a contributing cause to my poverty of spirit.

The outline of this story might start, this time around, with the years long off and on conversation that Deborah and I have been having about needing a support group around body image issues. Then came the unexpected request from Liz at Circle Time some weeks ago for support which has now led to a small group of us agreeing to be accountable to each other. Then there was the bike episode. Then there was a seeking for some rest and relaxation by watching some TV on a Saturday afternoon, and then there was reading *eat, pray, love*.

I'll digress a bit here to say that I've been mulling over the writing of a sermon in the back of my mind for more than a year now. It has at its core a short paragraph I wrote one day at work trying to answer the question "was Jesus homeless?" My initial response was yes and the sermon I

expected to write was going to be about my work with people who struggle with issues of homelessness. Homelessness is a body issue like no other and God certainly works in mysterious ways. The TV show I ended up watching was a sappy made for TV movie called Our House.

It's about a lonely, wealthy widow with cancer whose suicide attempt is foiled by a homeless woman. She takes in 6 chronically homeless people and dies happy while Billy, the woman who saved her, reads the opening passage from the book she's written called Our House. Billy believes that people aren't necessarily homeless even when they are houseless because she has a community of friends who help each other despite their homelessness. She writes that home is where love dwells. So today I don't believe that Jesus was homeless in his life on earth even though he was houseless. I believe that Jesus is both homeless today, with the millions who are experiencing homelessness, and that Jesus has a home here – not contained by the walls of Seekers Church but between them, as Billy believed. Jesus lives in each of us, in this expression of the Body of Christ, and in that larger Body of Christ that spans all of God's creation.

And now we are back to the body – the temple that each of us has been given the honor to care for and inhabit while we live and breathe on this earth for the sake of the world. More particularly, we are back to me, to my body and my journey because that is where my authority lies. This container and all that it holds – mind, body and spirit, is what I know best even in my current disconnectedness and spiritual poverty. What I can tell is my story – my story of recommitment that I wrote instead of reading *eat, pray, love* until my eyes closed for a nap as intended.

I really thought I deserved that nap since I had set the alarm clock on a rare "free" Saturday so that I would be awake and alert when Glen and Deborah delivered Deborah's old bike into my keeping.

You should have seen me as Glen so patiently and lovingly (the man is a saint) tried to get me to ride a bike for the first time in 30 years or so. But I couldn't. Not because I didn't want to but because my body couldn't manage it. This body. The one that keeps telling me so many things. Putting the cart before the horse, or more correctly, the end somewhere in the middle, the bike is sitting in my dining room as a symbol of my recommitment. The old adage about never forgetting how to ride a bike is true. I know how to ride a bike; my body wants to but I just literally can't at the moment. I know what it feels like to have a rich spiritual life; I just can't seem to have one at the moment. My commitment to myself, and therefore to Christ, is to get back on the bike and back to a rich spiritual life. I have no idea how long it will take but I know a little about how I will try.

For me that means starting small; individually identified intentions that parse out this leg of my journey into doable bits. As I've said, I am going on silent retreat in a few weeks – my second this year because I recognize a hunger that needs to be fed.

Another intention is to live back into that part of my life that's about music. The music that the firmament sings as day turns to night the truth of which every composer in every genre tries to capture. I need to listen to music. In part

that requires buying a new stereo which carries a lesson for me about how I spend my money now that I have a little set aside. How does spending money in this way enhance or inhibit my living in solidarity with those living in financial or spiritual poverty. I don't yet have answers to these complicated affiliated issues, I only know that I miss music and the substitutes I am using for its absence do not feed me.

Everything's connected – the knee bone's connected to the thigh bone and eventually it reaches the diaphragm and larynx from which I used to sing. Do I think that listening to music and singing will enrich my spiritual journey and help me to connect to the divine in me? My past experience says it will. Why and/or how did I let go of this piece of my life? The simple answer is that my choices in response to the circumstances of my life were reactionary and negative. There's something in here that relates to the message in next week's lection from James about not receiving what you ask for because you ask wrongly or ask for the wrong things but I can't say exactly what.

What I know is that this is my body, and it is teaching me to ask for what I need. Liz asked for help and reignited Deborah's and my conversation and my recognition that I need to be accountable for some stated intentions. Here are the intentions I have asked to be accountable for:

- I will track what I eat everyday and be careful to not eat low glycemic index foods
- I will eat soy in some form or other at least 4 times a week
- Starting gently I will do stretching exercises everyday
- Starting gently I will begin a 3-4 times a week exercise routine at home

- I will walk from work to church for School of Christian Living, and mission group meetings as often as possible
- I will read for at least 30 minutes a day
- I will complete working on my clothes clean out by August 30th
- I will continue to clear out the porch/studio and get rid of stuff
- I will persevere until I get a new job

I wrote to our little group: "I know it seems like a long list and you may be scratching your heads thinking it's too much all at once, but I need to do this. I may well fail some days but I will start tomorrow."

I have failed at some of my intentions some days, and one of my intentions thus far altogether. But I hold them up everyday and I report weekly to the group because this is my body and that which is "I" needs it to carry me to the end of my days. And this body is part of a larger body, the Body of Christ through which God calls me into my work in the world.

I have let circumstances get the better of me. I have let my self-esteem be eroded by circumstances. I stopped doing things that brought me closer to God; activities and practices that allowed me to respond joyfully with my body, and so with my life. In this season of recommitment: how am I nurturing my relationship with God if I am not caring for this living/dying vehicle I inhabit; how am I caring for the whole of creation; how am I working for the end of my personal wars with myself? Caring for my body is caring for the Body of Christ. My brokenness and my wholeness affect the brokenness and wholeness of The Body of Christ. It is so very simple and so very hard. I know that I am not alone in finding it hard

to be what God wants and needs me to be.

Hope is alive in my heart, in large part because of God's love for me as expressed in the love of this community. I pray that hope is alive in each of you and that you know the love of this community of Seekers.

Today I say to you that this is my body given for you. It is given in prayer just now particularly for Emily, John, and Debbie and for those of you who have entrusted me with prayer requests and those who allow me to accompany them on their spiritual journeys. This is my body given for each of you and all of us. I hope that you will all stand up with me on October 18th to make our shared commitment statement that at its core says "this is my body given for you and for the sake of the world."

Amen