Honoring the Body

Psalm 23 (KJV) & I Corinthians 6:12-20 (from Eugene Peterson's The Message)

Thank you for invitation to join you for vespers this evening. It's an honor to be preaching for the Asheville School community. I know a few of your faculty -- Mary Wahl & Tish Anderson, in particular -- but first met Chaplain Wright when we sat next to each other on a flight to Chicago two years ago. I told Harry about our Way to Live project, and he told me about his ministry with you here at the Asheville School. Last April, Montreat hosted a conference on WTL and we were pleased to have Harry attend as our guest. It's a rare privilege to find a kindred spirit like Harry! Harry, I'm grateful for this opportunity.

As mentioned, I live here in Asheville but work with a project based at Valparaiso University in northwest Indiana. Our work involves understanding Christian faith not simply as a set of beliefs and doctrines -- although these are important -- but as a way of life shaped by practices, by what Christians do in the world in response to the gift of faith. We like to think of practices as embodied wisdom that has been handed down to us by generations of faithful followers of Jesus; wisdom about how to care for the earth and manage our stuff, skills for making strangers feel welcome, gestures for forgiving others, including our enemies; and even good manners for sharing food and fellowship around the dinner table -- as we just did -- and here around the Lord's Table. We don't just do these things with our minds, you see, we do them with our hearts and with our hands and with our bodies.

This evening, I want to focus our attention on one of these practices. I wonder if you can tell which one from the scripture passages we just read? The excerpt from Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth gives you the best clue. What is Paul talking about in these verses? In a nutshell, he claims that these human bodies of ours are both sacred and vulnerable, just as Jesus' body was. Since God honors you with a body, Paul reasons, so you should honor God with your body.¹

By encouraging us to honor the body -- our own and others -- Paul challenges the prevailing Greek philosophy of his day that considered the body as merely an earthly tomb for the immortal soul. The Greeks and Romans weren't bopping around singing "Your Body is a Wonderland." They were singing "Soma Sema -- Your Body is a Tomb" -- how's that for a love song? "Soma sema," was as popular a slogan then as "just do it" is now.

And speaking of "doing it," apparently that's what was going on in Corinth that got Paul all hot and bothered. If your body's nothing but a tomb, why does it matter how you treat it? Go ahead and gorge yourself with food. Have all the sex you want with anyone you please. Surely what you do with your mortal body won't affect the state of your immortal soul! Soma sema -- just do it. Not only were the pagans in Corinth saying this -- so were the Christians. Those early Christians had experienced the liberating power of the Gospel in their lives. Have you ever been "giddy?" Those Corinthians were giddy with gospel freedom. They felt unbound, unleashed. Like you seniors will feel after taking that final exam in a few weeks: "Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, I'm free at last!"
The problem was, those Corinthian Christians were so caught up in the spirit that they forgot about Jesus. Jesus was God's own son, and Jesus was born, lived, and died among us in a human body. With all due respect to Mel Gibson, the real Passion story is not about all the various ways people dishonored Jesus' body. The real Passion story, according to Paul, is about the way God honored Jesus' body by raising it from the grave. Just like Jesus, Paul says, we have been created in the very image and likeness of God. And just like Jesus, God will treat our bodies with the same resurrection power. So don't go around chanting "soma sema" and "just do it," Paul urges. Remember that your bodies are created with the same dignity as Jesus' body. Indeed, Paul goes on, your body is a sacred place—a sanctuary—a temple of the Holy Spirit.

Now I'm sure most of you go through your daily routine with conscious awareness that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit! Perhaps it comes to mind when you're offered a second bowl of Ben & Jerry's: "No thanks. I'd really like some more ice cream, but you see, my body is a temple of the Holy Spirit." Or perhaps you invoke this image when you're being screened by airport security personnel: "Be careful with that wand, sir; afterall, my body is a temple of the Holy Spirit." (Actually, I wouldn't recommend trying that because it might be misinterpreted.)

The Southern author Flannery O'Connor had fun with this image from I Corinthians. She wrote a short story in which two 14-year-old girls give each other the nicknames "Temple One" and "Temple Two." The girls attend a convent school, where Sister Perpetua, one of the oldest nuns, dutifully instructs them what to do if a young man should behave in an ungentlemanly manner with them in the backseat of an automobile. They are to say "Stop sir! I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost" and that, according to Sister Perpetua, would put an end to it. The two girls just think this is a riot, and one day they start kidding each other about being "Temple One" and Temple Two" in the presence of a 12-year-old girl. With this youngster, however, it makes quite an impression. "I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost," the girl says to herself, and is pleased with the phrase. It made her feel, O'Connor observes, as if somebody had given her a present.2

I'll leave it to you to read the story yourself and find out what happens to these characters. But imagine what it would be like, on one of those days when you're feeling downright yucky about your body, imagine what it would be like to have someone honor your body as a temple of the Holy Spirit.

This actually happened some years ago to a teenager named Kate who had a face full of acne. One day, Kate's anguish over her appearance made her unable to leave the house. Seeing her distress, Kate's father asked if he could teach her a new way to bathe. Leading her to the bathroom, he leaned over the sink and splashed water over his face, telling her "On the first splash, say, in the name of the Father, on the second, in the name of the Son, and on the third, in the name of the Holy Spirit. Then look up into the mirror and remember that you are a child of God, full of grace and beauty."

While this routine was not a miraculous cure for acne, what Kate's father did that day made her feel as if somebody had given her a present. This gift persisted throughout Kate's life. And because she learned to honor her own body as a teenager, Kate was able to honor the body of her children years later. Each time she bathed them, it was a baptismal act. Kate remembered that they were children of God, full of grace and beauty, made in God's own image.3
I learned an important lesson about honoring the body from Archbishop Desmond Tutu. I trust that most of you know who I'm talking about -- the small yet courageous South African church leader who won the Nobel Peace Prize for his struggle against Apartheid. Tutu and his colleagues have led their country through an unprecedented ritual of lament and healing through their work with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. But that's a topic for another sermon.

What Tutu said that so impressed me was that the battle against Apartheid was more than a struggle for civil rights, although it was that to be sure. Tutu viewed Apartheid as a fundamental religious problem because it perpetuated a condition in which people refused to honor the image of God in one another. South Africans viewed some bodies as having less honor and dignity than others. This disrespect for the image of God in one another was a deep violation of God's honor. As such, Apartheid was causing the whole country to live in a state of blasphemy. You may think of blasphemy as "taking the Lord's name in vain -- which it is. But cursing God's image is as powerful a form of blasphemy as cursing God's name.

Blasphemy against God was the root sin of Apartheid, according to Tutu, and redeeming the country from this sin is what kept him and his companions going, even during the darkest hours. God calls us to honor the body -- our own body as well as other bodies. And God calls us to resist all forces that dishonor the body, that refuse to see other bodies as created in God's image, as temples of the Holy Spirit.

We're learning that lesson not just in South Africa, but over in Iraq. During this weekend, we've been shocked by photos and reports that Iraqi prisoners are being physically humiliated by U.S. occupation forces. Without a doubt, this ugly, shameful behavior has stirred contempt for Americans throughout the Arab world. But we need a stronger response from our leaders than saying "I didn't like it one bit." We need to name it as sinful, as a state of blasphemy, as dishonoring bodies that have been created in the image of God and precious in God's sight.

And we are learning that lesson in our land. Did you see the outpouring of protest letters when television stations around the country preempted a recent Nightline program, a program that showed the faces and spoke the names of the US soldiers who have died thus far in Iraq? Honoring the body means respecting the dead, and those of you who take Latin know that "to respect" means to look at again. Instead of averting our eyes from the human costs of war, we respect those who have died by looking again at their faces and listening to their names, by contemplating the sacrifice they have made and the family members they have left behind.

We're learning about honoring the body right here in Asheville. Last Sunday, a handful of members from the Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas, came to Asheville to picket congregations that welcome gay and lesbian persons. Grace Covenant Presbyterian, my own church, was picketed during Sunday worship. While the picketers marched up and down the street outside our church, carrying huge signs with hate-filled messages, our church sanctuary had a full house -- like Easter Sunday -- including visitors from all over town. We stood in solidarity with our gay brothers and sisters on that day and said "no" to blasphemy and "yes" to honoring the body.
Just this afternoon, I learned a hard yet necessary lesson about honoring the body of a church friend who is dying. John is only 53, and he has an inoperable brain tumor that is rapidly draining life from his body. On Easter Sunday, John was sitting on the first pew with his family, face beaming bright as he sang those resurrection hymns with his lovely baritone voice. Today, only three weeks later, John is lying still in a hospice bed in his home, eyes closed and breathing labored. He no longer responds to voices of family and friends. How do you honor the body when someone is in that condition?

I said goodbye to John by placing my hands on his head and praying, as best I could through my tears, the words of the 23rd Psalm -- the same words we recited just a short while ago. I prayed that somehow, John will know deep in his bones and deep in his heart that God is with him now just as God has been with him every day of his life -- guiding him as a loving shepherd, leading him beside still waters, restoring his soul. Psalm 23 is a profound expression of the way God cares for each one of us and honors our bodies. I prayed this psalm as people of faith have prayed it for thousands of years, trusting that indeed, nothing can ever separate us from the love of God, and that our destiny is to dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

During your lifetime, you will have many opportunities to honor -- or to dishonor -- the body. My prayer is that each of you, in your own way, will learn the gestures and skills and embodied wisdom of this ancient yet contemporary practice. Honoring the body is not just a self-improvement strategy. It's a challenging practice for the restoring of community, for the healing of the nations, for the blessing of each other at life's beginning and at life's end.

In case you've never considered it before, I'm here today to tell you that your body is a temple of Holy Spirit. And in hearing these words from Paul, I hope that in some small way, you might feel as if somebody's given you a present.

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1 I am indebted to Stephanie Paulsell's Honoring the Body: Meditations on a Christian Practice (Jossey-Bass, 2002).

2 Inspiration for this literary example is from Craig Dykstra's chapter on "Youth and the Language of Faith" in Growing in the Life of Faith (Geneva Press, 1999), p.113.

3 Paulsell recounts this story in a chapter on "Bathing the Body" in her book, pp.48-49. "Kate" is a pseudonym and is my addition.