

The Spiritual Significance of Our Bodies¹

We're talking about the healing of the self in the Christian vision. Much of the self we would want to call spiritual. I'm thinking about the intellect, emotions, will and so on. We've been looking at all of these areas. I must say as we progress through this series, that if all these different dimensions of our lives are brought into the wholeness and vision of Christian discipleship, we would indeed be different and whole persons according to God's vision for ourselves. Today I'd like to consider the human body as a dimension of ourselves that also is a center for God's renewal.

We talk about the human body in a particularly interesting and confusing time. Our's is the era of the makeover or the extreme makeover. I read a news report last week, which predicted that by 2015 nearly 20% of us will have had some kind of cosmetic surgery. And many more of us will have enhanced our self-presentation through low tech means—hair styles, cosmetics, exercise, clothing and so on. Ours is also the era of managed moods through pharmaceuticals. Eighty-one percent of Americans are taking at least one prescribed drug on an ongoing basis. No society has been that dependent on medication.

¹Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on June 29, 2008 at the First Presbyterian Church of LaGrange, GA 30240.

What's up? Cultural observers tell us that the emerging attitude is that who we are as people is who we decide we want to be. Our looks, feelings, and health are all more managed and under our control than ever before. The person isn't, as we've been saying, a multifaceted being with thoughts, feelings, will, appearance. The person, today, is what we want to project ourselves to be. Increasing numbers of people have public image managers who create a public impression for someone. More and more, people choose who they want to seem to be and then, with help, they can create that image or that personage. At its extreme the body is a perpetual construction site where the self is being fashioned—and usually the self is young, slender, beautiful, muscled, and so on.

What does our faith teach us about our bodies and our "selves" in this era of cosmetic surgery and life coaches? The most powerful insight about body is that God the son took on a body when he came into the world. The body of Jesus Christ is immensely important to his work of redemption—his mission. Jesus dies with great bodily suffering. He comes back in the resurrection, essentially to present his revived body for the sake of the disciples' faith. Jesus ascends still in his body. It is reasonable to assume that he is still embodied as he reigns with the Father. Jesus' body is never abandoned or set aside.

Now, why is Jesus' body or his bodily self important for us? There are several answers to that question, not the least of which is that he serves as an example for you and me. What Jesus exemplifies is the proper understanding of our bodies.

You see, when God reached out to humanity most decisively and boldly, he needed to take on a human body. Jesus' body was the center for his outreach. Suddenly we see clearly the purpose of our own bodily existence. It's so we may serve—God and others. How does our text put it? "Glorify God in your bodies!"

Let me pause this sermon for a quick moment and call your attention to something. I'm hoping that you are noticing how I'm doing my thinking on this point about our bodies. I'm using a theological principle which is that Jesus Christ is the perfect example of human living. Never before his coming has this human life been lived fully in the manner that God designed it. Because of this there is a rich treasure of insight to be had when you and I as his followers simply use him as our example. When God really really wanted to kick up his work in the world, he came personally in bodily form. Here's my conclusion. Body is for service.

When I think about the human body my mind can hardly help but go back to a situation that had a fair degree of impact on my thinking. The head of the Dayton, Ohio Council of Churches

contracted some kind of degenerative disease, which left him barely able to walk or to do much of anything. For months he attempted to work and attend the various meetings that went with a job like his. He could only manage with his wife's assistance. Her life came to a stop, so she could come to work with her husband. As she labored to walk beside her husband and to help him eat, it struck me for the first time how important his body was for her well being and hers for his well being.

Our physical being is purposeful by God's design. We're not our own just as Jesus was curiously not his own in his ministry. Just coming to clarity about this puts a great deal into perspective. Ponder for a moment how dependent on your body are the people in your life. The chores you do around the house, the sound of your voice, your work skills, your stamina to keep going, your living touch, your strength and vitality, what you enjoy and how you relax are all ways that you serve those around you bodily.

This helps us to see that there are improper uses to which we put our bodies. I had a minister friend with whom I did a variety of activities including athletic activities. For a time we'd swim laps at lunch time in a local pool. Now Mark was having troubles in his ministry and seemed to be much more interested in exercising than in much else. His wife was distressed and spoke with me. "Doug, you need to

understand...Mark doesn't just jog. He drives himself. Sometimes he'll run 13 or more miles at a time. That's not normal. It's not healthy. Well, at length Mark severely injured his back. During his hospitalization, he realized that he wasn't eating nearly enough and was about 20 lbs. underweight. His doctor was frank with Mark. "Mark, he said, "your body is telling you that it's sick and tired of your taking out all your troubles on it."

In our lesson from First Corinthians, Paul is talking about the misuse of our bodies. We misuse our bodies when we use them as a source of self-absorbed sensuality, when we use them to alter our mood. We misuse our bodies when we use them to threaten or overwhelm another. We all know the variety of ways that we can abuse our physical selves--recreational drug use, eating for mood alteration, extreme thrill seeking, any kind of addictive behavior, destructive sexual expression, or even just wasting time. We misuse our bodies whenever we miss their primary purpose of glorifying and enjoying God and serving in the world that God loves. "You are not your own," Paul insists. This whole lesson underscores the principle that our bodies are the seat of our purpose in the world.

In preparation for the sermon on emotions a couple of weeks ago, I came across a lecture from an International Emotions Anonymous convention back in 1980. The speaker started off by saying "we are all here because we're not all there." About 20

minutes into his talk he exquisitely made the point of today's sermon and I'd like to share his words with you:

Do you know the program of health we have, the 12 steps? Listen to how it came into being. "I wonder if I might not get sober by trying to help another drunk." Personal happiness is the purpose for which we were created. But happiness is only possible through commitment to others. Any therapist who looks at anyone and says, "do your own thing" ought to be blown off the earth. If I did my own thing I'd be in jail in 8 minutes.

As with the others dimensions of the self—simply knowing the purposiveness of our physical beings—our bodies—can be very orienting. If you or I haven't figured out that service is at the heart of our purpose—we can recover that today.

One of the spiritual disciplines is the discipline of service. When you and I are serving someone—particularly in a menial way we are welcoming the Spirit of Jesus into our lives. Menial is a great word. It comes from old words that mean household. Menial work is household work that people turn over to servants if they can. It's always bodily. It's bending over a picking up stuff. Scrubbing. Cleaning filthy stuff. It's repetitive. Boring. Jesus did menial work with he washed the disciples feet. That was ordinarily the task of household servants. We recover the core purposiveness of our bodies when we do menial tasks. Let's not get to be so important that we lose the restorative, wise practice of servants' labor. Imagine

that, in these modest words from Jesus may reside deeply healing wisdom for our own lives—"I came not to be served but to serve."