**Body & Spirit: The Body of Christ**

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*Scripture: Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 1 Corinthians 12:12-26*

*Hymns: StJ 72, HWB 304*

Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “there comes a time when it is vitally important to your spiritual health to … look in the mirror, and say, ‘Here I am. This is the body-like-no-other that my life has shaped. I live here. This is my soul’s address.’ After you have taken a good look around, you may decide that there is a lot to be thankful for, all things considered. … That [bodies] heal from most things is an underrated miracle. That they give birth is beyond reckoning.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Taylor’s link between our spiritual health and our appreciation for our bodies might sound jarring to our ears. We aren’t necessarily used to thinking of spirituality and embodiment as connected. Christian spirituality has – let’s face it – a rather dismal reputation when it comes to appreciation for the body. It’s more likely to be associated with the discipline or denial or even denigration of the body, as reflected in the well-known Bible verse from Matthew: “the spirit is indeed willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matt. 26:41b). We tend to think of the spiritual as higher and holier than the merely physical or material.

But we Christians inherited this dualistic perspective from ancient Greek philosophy, where body/spirit, earth/heaven, female/male, and evil/good were all thought of as either-or, as over-against each other. Not only that, but the Greeks also held to a hierarchy in which the spiritual goodness and rationality was associated with maleness, which was presumed to be superior to the bodily, earthly, more emotional and sinful aspects associated with femaleness.[[2]](#footnote-2) This kind of thinking has made its way into a lot of Christian theology, especially if we think of how the Fall in Genesis 3 has traditionally been interpreted – or misinterpreted – along starkly gendered lines, with Eve representing temptation, disordered sexuality, and sin.

We might think we have moved well beyond such dualisms, but they still surface in more subtle ways. Traditionally, women’s work throughout our history has revolved around caring for bodies in various ways: cooking and feeding bodies, cleaning and clothing bodies, caring for children and elders. Until very recently, intellectual, educational, and spiritual leadership were reserved exclusively for men. Even today, the types of jobs that were traditionally “women’s work” remain unpaid/underpaid and undervalued, which is a sign of Greek dualism continuing to influence our culture.

Given that this body-spirit dualism still shapes our theology and worldview, we wanted to begin a worship series today which we’re calling Body & Spirit. In it, we want to question these dualisms inherited from Greek philosophy, and point instead to biblical and theological resources for thinking of our bodies and spirits as profoundly integrated, as parts of our whole selves; in short, we want to elaborate a body-positive Christian spirituality. Rather than faith being understood as abstract intellectual belief, we want to highlight the ways that it shape] how we live our lives. Rather than seeing our bodies as obstacles to spirituality, we want to knit together the spiritual and the embodied practice of faith. We want to remember that it is precisely as embodied spirits or enspirited bodies that we are in the image of our earth-creating, incarnating, disciple-calling God. It is in – not despite – our bodies that we are able to live as people of faith, as we will explore in the coming six weeks or so.

I want to start with our passage from the Hebrew Bible this morning, which is the central prayer of the Jewish faith, prayed every morning and evening. This prayer is sometimes called the “Shema” after the first word in Hebrew, meaning to listen, pay attention, and respond. (Incidentally, it’s also the root of the name Simon or Shem’on, meaning he who hears and responds).[[3]](#footnote-3) Now as this already shows, the Hebrew worldview certainly makes no distinction between the body and the spirit, the way the Greek worldview does. In the Hebrew Bible, faith is a very earthy, embodied, practiced thing. Even listening is not simply about passively hearing, but about listening, paying attention, and then acting in response. And the rest of the prayer confirms this.

The Shema calls people of faith to love God with their whole selves, with all their hearts, souls, and might, and I want to add some of the nuances of the Hebrew to each of these words, cause they have slightly different connotations in the Hebrew.

1. Heart – we think of it as symbolizing our emotions or love, but in Hebrew (Lev), it also meant one’s intellect or one’s discernment or decision-making power, since they had no concept of the brain. So in the Hebrew Bible, you “know” and “understand” with your heart, and “wisdom dwells in your heart,” as well as joy and fear and other emotions.[[4]](#footnote-4) So, this could say, “love the Lord your God with all your emotions, understanding, and in all the decisions you make.”

2. Soul – Now here’s where you might be thinking – wait a minute, you just said they had no separation of the soul or spirit in the Hebrew worldview! Well, they don’t, because the Hebrew word here is *nephesh*, meaning “a living, breathing, physical being.” This is not a reference to a disembodied spirit that escapes the body after death (a Greek concept) but rather is much more holistic. The *nephesh* encompasses one’s “entire being,” one’s “life and body,” or one’s whole self. “Biblically, people don't have a soul; they are a soul, or in this case "*Nephesh*"—a living, breathing, physical being.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

3. Might – *me’od* – “much” or “very.” This word is used in last declaration in Genesis creation story: God saw that it was “*me’od* good” or very good. In this prayer, it means love God with your “muchness.” We can understand that as meaning, love God with your everything – all your mind and power and all that you have. It “means devoting every possibility, opportunity, and capacity that you have to honouring God and loving your neighbour as yourself.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

So what are we left with, when we take into account all these nuances of the Hebrew words of this prayer? A profound sense that we are to devote all that we are, our whole selves, our decisions and thoughts and feelings, our everything, to God. This is certainly not about a set of abstract beliefs, but about our integrated selves living out our faith. And I find it fascinating to look at the next few verses as well, because they add even more to this all-encompassing understanding of faith. “Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart” (remember, this meant all of one’s thoughts, understanding, and decision-making). “Recite them to your children” – so these words are to guide one’s parenting or one’s relationship to the next generation, wherever one is, whether “at home” or “away,” morning and evening. And then we have these instructions: “Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates” (v. 8-9). Now for some Jewish people, this has become symbolic action in the Tefillin (boxes containing Scripture, which are tied to one’s arm and forehead) and the Mezuzah (a box containing scripture which is installed on the doorframe of a Jewish home). As Christians, we may not take on these Jewish practices in quite the same way, but we can learn from them what these verses are calling us to. When it says to love God wherever we are, to bind God’s words onto our bodies, to install them onto the entrances of our homes, we can take that to mean that we are to embody the love of God wherever we are, to make our home in it, and to make it come alive in all that we do, with our whole selves. And let’s not forget that Jesus highlights these as the greatest commandments (Matthew 22).

This brings us to Paul’s well-known language of the church as the Body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12. This should be our first clue that there is positive body-talk in the New Testament, despite the increased influence of Greek worldview at this time in history! Now when I think of this passage, I usually think about this imagery as a powerful way to speak of the unity and diversity of the church community – there being one body but many gifts among those of us who participate in the church.

Interestingly, Paul mixes the language of Spirit and Body in this passage. After affirming that the Spirit is the source of the many gifts within the church, he speaks of the many members of the church being part of one body, “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (v. 13). Notice that he does not say that the Spirit is above the Body; rather, the Body of Christ is integrated with the one Spirit, and they are parts of a whole. So Paul – being a person of Jewish faith – had such high regard for the Body that he didn’t feel it was enough to simply speak of the Spirit – he spoke of both the Spirit and the Body of Christ.

Now, this imagery is so familiar to us that we probably don’t think about its significance, or possible alternatives. Why did Paul choose to talk about the church, the spiritual community, as the Body of Christ? Why choose such an ordinary and vulnerable image, rather than, say, something stronger, like the Fortress of Christ, or something more permanent, such as the Mountain of Christ? Why the Body? Well, if we run with it, this image suggests that the church is organic – a living body. It also suggests that it is able to adapt and heal and change and grow – it’s dynamic, not static. A body is also able to remember and act and love, as Paul explores in the final verses of our passage: “if one member suffers; all suffer with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it” (v. 26). As the Body of Christ, it is therefore up to us to continue Christ’s ministry of love, peace, and justice here on earth. It is up to us to embody what Jesus taught and lived; that is the task our faith calls us to.

And in many ways, our Anabaptist Mennonite tradition has understood the work of the church in precisely this way. Rather than emphasize the saving of souls alone, our Mennonite organizations have emphasized ministry to the body as well – ministries that meet the bodily needs of our neighbours and even of strangers in the Way of Jesus. Mennonite Central Committee, which is celebrating 100 years this year, began in exactly this way: its first project was establishing soup kitchens in southern Russia, out of a belief that meeting people’s basic, bodily needs – their real hungers and thirsts, and need for safety and peace[[7]](#footnote-7) – is not a distraction from the gospel, but the very substance of it. Though we may not often think of it this way, our Mennonite tendency toward the practical, toward lived faith, means that we practice a very embodied spirituality, one in which the body and spirit are integrated. This is how we live as the Body of Christ.

The early Anabaptists tended to talk about discipleship as “following in the footsteps of Christ.” Paul called this being the Body of Christ that drinks of the Spirit. But perhaps sixteenth-century Spanish mystic Teresa of Avila put it most poignantly when she said, “Christ has no body now on earth but yours; yours are the only hands with which Christ can do his work, yours are the only feet with which Christ can go about the world, yours are the only eyes through which Christ’s compassion can shine forth upon a troubled world. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”[[8]](#footnote-8) AMEN

**Benediction: Sing the Story #171**

1. Quoted in: Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2015), 250. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Susan A. Ross, “God’s Embodiment and Women: Sacraments” in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, ed. Catherine M. LaCugna (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 195. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://thebibleproject.com/explore/shema-listen/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://thebibleproject.com/explore/shema-listen/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://thebibleproject.com/explore/shema-listen/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://thebibleproject.com/explore/shema-listen/> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://mcccentennial.com/> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See *Sing the Journey* # 164. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)