

Albany Presbyterian Church

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Many of us take great pride in being useful and helping others. Clergies, mothers, or fathers, all of us, or most of us, are therefore reluctant to talk about ourselves, what we need, and how we feel. Many of us feel ashamed even to ask for time off. They say most of us let activities and responsibilities besiege us so much that we let our bodies be broken and poured out so often that we struggle to be useful to anybody.

Mark tells us Jesus cares, and he deals compassionately with the disciples who were tired and weary in their bodies. In verse 7, we see they were sent to preach repentance and forgiveness to him. In verse 33, they return and gather around him to report on all they have done and taught. They are tired, having gone for so long, even without eating or drinking. "Come with me," Jesus says, "to a quiet place and get some rest."

The work of the gospel continued and spread greatly and widely; all those who went out to hear John the Baptist were now coming to Jesus, especially after John was beheaded and buried.

Jesus was followed, perhaps more so than the politicians in political rallies, some Pop stars, or members of the 'All Blacks' to whom the people may run after. They went wherever he went and followed Jesus into villages, towns, or the countryside. Jesus could not get a break, had no quiet moments, and had no solitude; he was always followed wherever he went.

They were looking for someone to give them confidence as God's people, that God is with them, which was what John the Baptist had done for them. They were broken in their body and wanted desperately their and their loved ones' broken bodies to be healed. They came on foot, carried others on stretchers, and went wherever Jesus went. And Jesus deeply cared. His response was his divine pathos, which is compassion and love. In verse 34, Mark says he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. He saw them and was moved by them in verse 53. Jesus went out to meet with them and their loved ones, and they were healed even by touching his clothes.

What was it like for those who followed him like this? How does this compare to today?

Stanley Hauerwas, a well-known American theologian and writer, says that we are far too spiritual or intellectual in the practice of our faith. He says that Christian faith is not a set of beliefs or doctrines one believes to be a Christian; instead, Christianity is having one's body shaped and one's habits determined so that the worship of God is unavoidable. In our embodied life together, the words of the doctrine take on flesh.

He says the greatest problem the church is facing is not inept clergy, mean congregations, or the preoccupation of the churches with their institutional maintenance. It is, instead, the intellectualization of faith. He said this in the age of information overload when a wide variety of media delivers news faster than most of us can digest; the last thing any of us

needs is more information about God. Instead, we need the practice of incarnation by which God saves the lives of those whose intellectual assent has turned as dry as dust, who have run frighteningly low on the bread of life, who are dying to know more God in their bodies, not more about God but more God.

What does “Knowing more God in our bodies” mean today?

The body is where we are. Our souls rest. It is where we see the world. It is the temple in which God is experienced. Therefore, we need to learn to wear our skin with gratitude. No matter what we think of our body, we can still offer it to God to continue being useful to the world in sublime and ridiculous ways. Barbara Brown Taylor says this in her book “an Altar in the world finding the scared beneath our feet”. She calls “knowing more God in our bodies” the incarnational practice, which she says is a daily practice in which we confidently recognize God's speaking to our flesh. It is a practice of listening to what God says in our lives in our bodies. Even in our body, sick or well, lovely or irregular, this is where we are; we are shaped as we are, uniquely, reverently, and respectfully. She says our sense of the presence of God becomes heightened when we experience pain in our body. We experience the divine pathos of compassion and love when we are in the sick bed of our loved ones. In such a way, God speaks to us in our body, and we are to listen, honor, and be thankful. This way, we are truly “the followers of the Word made flesh.”

Secondly, it is our body that connects us with other bodies. Regardless of who we are, which shape or colour we are, we share common experiences in being human. So, in incarnational practice, “knowing more God in our bodies” is not solitary Practice because it is in our bodies that we come into communion with one another. In such a way, Jesus taught us to honor the bodies of our neighbors as we honored our own. And his ministry was all about encountering the bodies discounted by the world in which they lived with the leper bodies, possessed bodies, widows, orphan bodies, foreign bodies, and hostile bodies with compassion and peace.

This is what Paul says, speaking to the early church that was greatly divided between the Jews and Gentiles, in Ephesians 2:14: Jesus is our peace, who has made the two groups one and destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace and in one body to reconcile them to God through the cross by which he put their hostility to death. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. Through him, we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Jesus is the chief cornerstone; in him, the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. In him, you, too, are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by the Holy Spirit.

Jean Pierre de Caussade, the 18th-century spiritual director, says that to know ‘more God in our bodies,’ we are to pay closer attention to God’s presence in each moment of our lives and surrender ourselves continually to God’s will. It is through trusting God who provides us with all our needs through prayer or meditation every moment we know and experience

the presence of God in our every moment of the day. He said, in such a way, "Everything turns to bread to nourish me, soap to wash me, fire to purify me, and a chisel to fashion me in the image of God. Grace supplies all my needs."

This can be experienced in all our daily lives. It happens in our walks; we meditate, notice, and surrender to God while we walk. It can even be done in our favorite activities: eating, sharing laughter, or in-house chores like cleaning, gardening, sewing, or laundry.

Of course, it happens when we worship God on Sunday, noticing God's presence, reflecting, singing, praying in fellowship, and sharing a meal together. This happens in the Eucharist, as we remember, break bread, drink and taste, reflect, and most of all, pray. Taylor says Jesus did not leave them with some great truth that answers all our questions about our lives and the world. A concrete thing that Jesus left his disciples to do was tangible ways of being together in their bodies that would continue to teach them what they needed to know when he was no longer around to teach them. Jesus gave something warm and near that they could bump into regularly, something so real that they would not be able to intellectualize it and so essential and untidy that there was no way they could ever gain control over it. Jesus gave them things they could touch, smell, taste, and swallow. God does not come to us beyond the flesh but in the flesh at the hands of a teacher who will not be spiritualized but who goes on to be the embodied sacraments of bread and wine. So, Jesus said not to believe in this, but he said to do this in remembrance of me.

Lastly, another way of practicing "knowing God more in our bodies" is by being the body of Christ in our world by "being his hands and feet." This was what Teresa of Avila, who worked among the poor and the sick, said in the 16th Century: "Christ has no body on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion for the world is to look out; yours are the feet with which He is to go about doing good; and yours are the hands with which He is to bless us now."

This is an extremely challenging word. Yet, these are very important words to remember. Because we are his body, and we are to continue Christ's ministry, we seek to reconcile the world with God to bring healing and restoration. And this is how we know God more in our bodies. Though we might feel unsure about how to do this, we lack confidence or resources. Still, we are called to be Christ's living and active body. Perhaps we can be, though it might not be the whole garment but even the fringe of Christ's cloak that brings healing and restoration to all who desire to be made whole.

Therefore, God is experienced in our bodies, together and apart. God cares deeply for us, and his response always is with deep compassion and peace. And as the embodiment of God in the world, he wants us to respond in the same way. So, thanks be to God for loving us just as we are, speaking to us in our bodies, and choosing us to be the embodiment of grace, seeing ourselves and others as Jesus sees them, with compassion and peace. Amen.