“Weaving together spirit and flesh”

A sermon by the Rev. Rachel Wildman

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford MA

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Scipture reference: John 6:56-69

*And Jesus said, “It is the Spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless.”*

This morning we are wrapping up 5 weeks of “bread-related discourse” from the Gospel of John. Since Sunday, July 25th, every week we have heard vignette after vignette of metaphorical, often confusing discussion from Jesus about himself as bread and wine, come from heaven. Much like Jesus’ disciples, I continue to struggle with these passages—to make sense of what they mean. As a woman who suffered from anorexia and binge-eating disorders in my teens, illnesses whose hallmark is the near complete separation of mind and body such that hunger, in the case of anorexia…and fullness, in the case of binge-eating disorder…aren’t even registered within the mind, today’s teaching evokes an especially similar reaction to that of the disciples. The flesh—the body—as useless here is indeed, difficult…who *can* accept it?

Thankfully, it turns out, not even Jesus can! The lectionary parses this long discourse into multiple weeks, but really it is intended to be one complete teaching experience, that began with the feeding of the 5,000 and ends with today’s passage. The feeding of the 5,000 was all about physical, bodily hunger. In it, Jesus honored that hunger as so worthy of divine attention as to delay the much-needed rest that Jesus and his disciples longed for on that late evening among the crowds, to make sure that actual, physical bodies were no longer hungry. If human flesh wasn’t important for the revelation of God’s liberating love, Jesus would have just sent the crowds away to find their own food as the disciples encouraged him to. If human flesh was not part of the goodness and beauty in which love must make its home, Jesus would not have continued to remind the crowds of the manna came down from Heaven to feed the starving Israelites as they were becoming a liberated people, as we heard in subsequent weeks.

These 5 weeks have not, in the words of one commentator[[1]](#footnote-1), been self-contained units, but one single whole, revealing Jesus’ insistence that “our bodies must be part of our life of faith as much as our “spirits” are.”

However, even taken as a whole, the meaning of Jesus’ exhortation that we feast on his own body and his own blood is a mystery our intellectual minds can never fully understand. And, as my colleague the Rev. Dr. Karen Coleman[[2]](#footnote-2) pointed out in her sermon at BU’s Marsh Chapel last Sunday, although Jesus tries to describe it with words…many, many words in John’s Gospel…he ultimately knows that words are not enough. Words are not sufficient to “understand” the Good News that he embodies. Rev. Dr. Coleman suggests that in mandating our celebration of the Eucharist—the sharing of bread and wine in which we re-member Jesus’ own body as we gather around this table and share it together… Jesus acknowledges that words are not enough…that sometimes we must engage our bodies—our senses—our physical presence with one another—in order to know—to perceive—to be transformed by—the Good News. Both Spirit and Body …both thoughts and physical experience.

As my favorite Bible commentary boldly interprets: “Spirit and flesh must be held together; this is the heart of the incarnation.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

The very person of Jesus, himself—born of a woman yet Son of God--embodies the truth that divine liberation is a of weaving together of Spirit and flesh.

More so than some other expressions of Christianity, we Episcopalians can certainly spend time in our thoughts! Our bodies, however, especially in more progressive Episcopal parishes, often get overlooked…or worse, our bodies get purposely de-centered in our worship and prayer lives. For some number of us, genuflecting and kneeling come with a lot of emotional baggage, and so get replaced not by a different physical expression, but by a somewhat restrained stillness.

But, as Rev. Dr. Coleman notes, words are not enough. They are not enough to experience ourselves as in union with Jesus as the Body of Christ here and now, and they aren’t often enough in other ways, too. We often don’t have words, or even thoughts, enough to pray—we don’t know what to pray for, or can’t articulate what we sense we need…often, we can’t even hold the suffering of the world and speaking that becomes too distressing…when our thoughts and words can’t, our bodies *can*. Our bodies can also make our divine experiences of wonder and joy, and of sadness and righteous anger, much more complete and transforming. Especially when so many of us still cannot access this, or any, sanctuary to receive the bread and wine that re-member *us* into the living Body of Christ, our bodies can access knowledge of divine wholeness that our thoughts cannot.

For many of us, this teaching IS difficult…we are not used to using our physical bodies to the same extent as we use our minds—it makes many of us uncomfortable—embarrassed…it is like that feeling many of us had as older elementary schoolers at our first dance—what do we do with our arms? We are stiff and awkward…

But, what if our bodies were just as much a vehicle for our faiths as our minds and spirits…not just in this sanctuary, but out in the world? Here in this sanctuary, in addition to sharing the Eucharist together, we might experiment with holding our hands…or heads… differently when we pray, we might experiment with kneeling, heads up or heads down…we might experiment with swaying, or I dare say, even clapping to hymnody that really moves us.

Out in the world beyond these walls, holding spirit and flesh together—the heart of the incarnation of God in the world—might be less visibly awkward, but more troubling to our current, Episcopal sensibilities. It might look like staying with the disgust we might feel when we find ourselves next to someone on the train who clearly hasn’t had the means to bathe in some time, rather than chiding ourselves for it and absorbing ourselves in our smartphone…it might look like the physical challenge it is to stay present to someone we love who is grieving, without trying to fix it, or cheer them up…it might look like belly laughing with a friend to such abandon that it might qualify as too loud for whatever environment surrounds you… and, perhaps most counter to our churchy sensibilities, it might even look like creating time for wonderful, wild passion with our spouse even when our list of to-do items is seemingly endless.

To hold spirit and flesh together in these ways are prayers that can often do more than thoughts or words…the prayer found in refusing to turn away from the discomfort of a physical reaction to another of God’s beloved can move us to action on behalf of that person—to devoted feeding, clothing, and housing hungry and dirty bodies. The prayer found in dwelling in the deliciousness of laughter or passion can liberate us—any deep experience of God’s abundance chips at fears and anxieties that are holding us back from becoming our fullest, freest selves.

In just a few minutes we will prepare to share Christ’s own Body together again as we celebrate the Eucharist together…Eucharist--The merging of Spirit and Flesh that words are not enough to capture. This morning when we pray the Lord’s Prayer, I will ask us to close our eyes…no peeking allowed…so that we each may experiment with different prayer postures in the safety of God’s gaze, only. For those of us who choose to approach this difficult teaching, This week, the invitation to “boldly pray together” will earn it’s badge of courage!

May we all enter the heart of the incarnation, however God is calling us!

1. New Interpreter Bible (NIB) Commentary on the Gospel of John [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rev. Dr. Coleman is an Episcopal Priest and University Chaplain for Episcopal Ministry at Boston University; from her sermon at Marsh Chapel on Sunday, August 15th, 2021 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. NIB [↑](#footnote-ref-3)