

Sermon for July 12, 2020 by Lydia Gajdel
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
St. Paul and the Redeemer Episcopal Church

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Mother of us all.

It feels like we have spent most of 2020 talking about bodies. Sick bodies. Black bodies. Vulnerable bodies. How we care for bodies. How we protect bodies. Whose bodies we celebrate and whose bodies are dispensable. Our rhetoric and our actions have placed value on our bodies. Ironically enough, the more value your body has, the less you have to think about the fact that you have a body at all.

We have spent 2020 making the emphatic statement that your body matters in the public sphere. Whether it is in relation to Coronavirus and the prioritization of the economy over our most vulnerable citizens or protests for racial equity and the Black Lives Matter movement. How we are embodied shapes everything about how we navigate the world and experience public life together.

Which is why, after months of these conversations about embodiment, I found myself immediately annoyed with Paul and his letter to the Romans that we read today. But that's the relationship that Paul and I have, so I stuck it out and dug a little deeper.

At first read, this section of Paul's letter to the Romans sounds pretty straight forward. Fleishy, earthly bodies are bad, and the Holy Spirit is good. It doesn't get clearer than, "Those who are in the flesh cannot please God."

In fact, there are whole segments of our Christian family who take this idea and run with it, creating a theology of our bodily existence that disregards the fact that God made us and our bodies in God's own image and said that we were so Good. This theology understands the body and the earthly condition as a thing to be enduring, not something to be celebrated. It is a theology that denies the created world in order to prioritize the spiritual life with God. A dichotomy, I would argue, that is unnecessary because our complex God can hold many Goods at once.

And so can Paul.

As I read and reread this passage from the letter to the Romans, I got caught up on the word flesh. Over and over again, our English translation pits the flesh and the spirit against one another. The flesh representing the human, created world and the spirit as God. So, like any good U of C graduate, I went back to the original language.

In the Greek, there is a distinction to be made that will help us theologically. The distinction between *sarx* and *soma*. *Soma* is used in reference to the living body. This is human body, but it is also used to talk about the corporate body of the church and even our existence after the resurrection. *Sarx* on the other hand is what we are dealing with in this passage from Romans.

Sarx is flesh. Mortal, sinful flesh that comes with physical needs and desires. Drawing us away from our higher selves and holding us close to our most basic drives. There is an undercurrent to this word that Paul is inviting us to feel in our reading today. The distinction between body and flesh.

When Paul says, “Those who are in the flesh cannot please God” he is using the Greek *sarx*. Not just our physical body, but more importantly the guiding needs and desires that come from being ruled by this world. Paul is not going on a tirade about how terrible our bodies are. He is inviting us to think about what rules us. What has power over our lives. What drives our decision making and our values. He is saying, in short, the work of the Spirit should be above all else. Guiding us in all that we do.

Physical needs and desires are part of who we are. God created us as physical, sexual, embodied creatures and God created us Good. But what Paul is asking of us today is that we contemplate our priorities, ensuring that the embodied part of our existence is just that, a part. A part of the whole beloved creature of God.

Because so often we allow for our physicality to make decisions for us. Prioritizing personal capitalist gains over the well-being of our collective membership within the body of Christ. Sheltering behind the privilege our bodies afford us, be it because of our skin color, gender, or sexual orientation, because it is scary and hard to push back against a world that was created for you so that others may benefit. Hiding our bodies away in the name of safety, while other less valuable bodies are put on the line fighting for equity, or simply because for once they were deemed essential.

We will always be embodied and we will always experience our existence as embodied creatures. But it is our responsibility to cultivate our drives and our values in a way that our embodied selves may be at the mercy of the Spirit.

Because, in the wise words of Adrienne Maree Brown, what you give attention to grows. Our guiding principles and values, our relationships with God, matter because the things we cultivate, consciously or not, are the people we will become.

Which is what we hear when Jesus teaches the parable of the sower. We hear of seeds being scattered on the path and on thorns and on rocky ground and each time they fail to take root. It is only when the seed finds it's way to good soil that the grain develops and multiplies.

But good soil is not happenstance. It is not by accident that the seeds of the sower grew strong in the soil. Because rich soil is cultivated. In nature, plants, leaves, and other natural elements decay and provide their nutrients to the soil so that all that is planted there may be fed by generations of life before it. The same happens in our gardens as we create compost and tend the soil, turning over the dirt and taking special care to create a strong environment for plants yet to come.

We are not much different. We are beloved creatures of God who were made Good in the image of our God. But we must cultivate that Good. Pay close attention to what drives us. Constantly examining if we are being guided by the gifts of the Spirit or the ease and desire of human flesh.

Through my day job at a non-profit called Chicago Cares, I have the privilege of building relationships with people all across our city who are working within their neighborhoods to build a more equitable and just Chicago. Last week, I spoke with a pastor in North Lawndale about the community organizing work that her church is engaging in. Talking about the love and goodness of her neighborhood and her parishioners, she said, “It has always been there, we just need to keep stirring it up.”

It has always been there. We just need to keep stirring it up.

This is a call to action for all of us. To cultivate what drives us. To pay attention to where we place value in our lives. To allow for space for the Spirit. It is hard work to be who God created us to be, but we have been equipped with the guidance and the love to live up to our creation.

Amen.