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2/24/19--University Presbyterian Church
1 Corinthians 15:35-57; Luke 7:11-17

BODY AND SOUL

Perhaps you grew up reciting some version of this classic children's bedtime prayer:
"Now I lay me down to sleep/I pray the Lord my soul to keep/If I die before I wake/I pray the Lord my soul to take." This little prayer, though well intentioned, is problematic for more than one reason. First of all, I am sure I was not the only child who found this prayer terrifying. Imagine trying to lull little children to sleep at bedtime with a prayer that suggests the possibility that they might die in their sleep! It was a counter-productive bedtime prayer for sure.

This prayer is also problematic because of the underlying belief it teaches about what happens to us when we die. Specifically, it suggests the belief that when we die, the body gets left behind while the soul, that inner part of ourselves which is *really* us, will go on living. This kind of view about the body and the soul was expressed by the ancient philosopher Plato and was embraced by much of the ancient Greeks and Romans. This kind of thinking called Platonism, holds to the idea that the body is not the "real" me, but that it is just a "shell" which houses who I truly am. Platonism supports a dualistic way of thinking about life in which the body, and all the material world for that matter, is profane, while the soul, what's inside, is what is truly holy.

Whether we realize it or not, many of us in Western civilization have absorbed these ideas. Deep within our subconscious is the notion that the "real" me is found in my inner soul, my thoughts, and my spiritual being, and that this body of mine is just a temporary and less valuable part of myself.

Even the clergy have perpetuated this belief that the body is somehow a false shadow of the real self. Thomas Lynch is a funeral director who has written a book about his profession of tending to the dead. He recalls a situation where a young Episcopal priest was consoling the mother of a teen-aged girl who had died from leukemia. The priest said something along the

lines of the "body is a shell" kind of wisdom to the mother when she reached out and slapped him. 'I'll tell you when it's 'just a shell,' she retorted. 'For now and until I tell you otherwise, she's my daughter.'"

The Christian understanding of the human body offers a sharp contrast to the prevailing cultural views, both in ancient times as well as today. From the Christian perspective, the body is never "just" anything. It is never "just a shell."

The earliest Christians shocked their Roman neighbors by not only lovingly caring for the dead among their group, but by volunteering to care and dispose of the bodies of impoverished non-Christians who would have been unceremoniously dumped into a common grave. Roman society embraced Plato's thinking that the body was a corrupt vessel, and that dead bodies were especially loathsome. And so those ancient Romans were puzzled by the behavior they witnessed among these strange Christian people.

The early Christian understanding of the body grew from several deeply cherished theological beliefs. The first was their understanding of Creation. The Genesis story tells of a God who lovingly creates this material world and calls it "good." God gathers together the dust of the earth and creates bodies for the first human beings. And calls them good. Thus, Christians came to believe that world in all its material forms mattered to God.

But it was the person of Jesus who was crucial in shaping the first Christians' appreciation of the body. First there is the matter of the Incarnation. The Incarnation is the belief that God became human. In the person of Jesus, God took on a body. This idea of the Incarnation, that God became one of us in bodily form, helped underscore the Christian belief that God values the human body.

And there is also the witness Jesus offered about the value of the human body throughout his life. Jesus fed people's bodies. Jesus healed people's bodies. Jesus touched bodies that no

one else wanted to touch. And like in our gospel reading today, Jesus raised people's bodies from the dead. Jesus demonstrated a deep value for the bodies we live in.

Of course, the Resurrection of Jesus added further weight to the Christian appreciation of the body. Jesus was not raised as a spirit, or as a ghost, or as a figment, or phantom. He was raised as an embodied human being. Scripture offers us different stories of the resurrected Jesus whose body was clearly flesh and blood. We read about the resurrected Jesus eating with his disciples and about Jesus inviting his followers to touch his wounds. Ghosts or visions don't eat. Spirits don't have wounds you can touch. But bodies do. Those early Christians' value of the human body was deeply shaped by their belief in the resurrection of the body.

Except that sometimes, some early Christians were co-opted by the prevailing ideas of the culture, just as we are sometimes today. What began to bother some early Christians was this odd belief in the resurrection of the body--not just that Jesus' body was resurrected but the belief that all of us will have our bodies resurrected after death. To some early Christians who had been schooled in the Roman idea that the body was corrupt and that dead bodies were especially creepy, this belief in the resurrection of the body seemed both embarrassing as well as gross. Instead of being a source of hope, the resurrection of the body struck some Christians as a terrifying zombie horror story. And so some of them, specifically members of the church in Corinth, began denying this idea of the resurrection of the body.

At the heart of their discomfort seems to be this question: what would resurrected bodies look like? This is an understandable question and one we are likely to ask today. What about old bodies, sick bodies, injured bodies? What about bodies who were mangled or disfigured at the time of death? What would the resurrection of the body look like?

The apostle Paul writes to this church community to enlighten them and their thinking. This matter is very crucial to him because it lies at the core of Christian belief. The resurrection is not just something that happened to Jesus. It is the hope we have for ourselves. Paul

emphasizes that the resurrection of Jesus is God's triumph over death and underscores the meaningfulness God places on the body. We are not souls or spirits imprisoned in our bodies. We are embodied beings. Everything we do, we do in bodies. We know one another as embodied beings. It is our embodied selves who fix our children a grilled cheese sandwich and who drive our neighbor to the doctor. It is our toes that tap out the beat and our hips that swing to the rhythm of the song we hear on the radio. It is our bodies that make love, and that load groceries on the food pantry shelves, and type out term papers. We cannot be known apart from our bodies. It's not just our spirits that matter to God or to other people, but our bodies and what we do with them. If your teen-aged daughter told you she had decided to go out with her friends instead of attending the big family celebration of her grandmother's 80th birthday, but that she'd be with everyone in spirit, I very much doubt that the presence of her "spirit" would satisfy the expectations of your family. The body matters.

The body and the soul are not separate entities but are intertwined. We know the terrible damage that is inflicted upon people who were abused by others--children abused by parents, spouses abused by a partner, women who are forced into sex trafficking--and how the injury inflicted upon them hurts not only their bodies but also their souls. We know that the way we use our bodies to care for other people helps not only their bodies but also their souls. A person given shelter and warm food after becoming homeless after a natural disaster will find not only support for the body but hope for the soul. We are not just spirits inhabiting bodies. We are both body and soul. And God loves all who we are.

Paul stresses to the Corinthian church that denying the resurrection of the body denies that God loves our flawed bodies, just as God loves our flawed souls, and that through the resurrection God plans to redeem *all* of who we are, not just part of who we are. God doesn't abandon the bodies God has given us. All of who we are will be redeemed.

But of course, this is hard to wrap our minds around. What will this body look like? Paul addresses this question while also allowing for the existence of mystery. He states that we don't know what exactly what our resurrected bodies will look like but he adds that they will somehow be transformed, given some new kind of form or shape we just cannot possibly imagine. He offers an analogy. Just as you cannot possibly guess by looking at a small seed what the mature plant will look like, neither can we know what our transformed selves will look like in the resurrection. Surely something will come from the seed, but the new life will be completely transformed. So it is with our resurrected bodies. Whether we like our current bodies or whether we would welcome some other body, Paul tells us that all of us will receive a new, transformed, spiritual body. But it will be a body.

This notion that God loves our bodies has transforming power in our lives right now. If we accept the idea that our bodies are holy and precious to God, then that might change how we treat our bodies and care for our bodies and what we do with our bodies while we are still living. And if we accept that our bodies are holy and precious to God, that could very well change the way we think about other people and their bodies and the concern we might have for others while *they* are still living. And accepting that God loves the material as well as the spiritual deepens our appreciation for the natural world we live in, inviting us to care for the created world with deeper reverence.

Paul wanted those early Christians to understand that the Resurrection is not just something that happened to Jesus. The Resurrection is offered to us as well because God loves you, *all* of you, body and soul.