

## **Every Body**

*A Sermon by Rev. Katherine Schofield*

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How are we to meet and experience God? Where do we go to gain insight and guidance for our days? When we are uncertain how we should live, where do we turn to seek out Divine direction?

For our Faith Ancestors the Israelites the answer was quite clear. As they journeyed through the wilderness from captivity to liberation and promise they were led by God as a pillar of cloud and flame, off in the distance, leading them forward. But on the first day of the month, they would set up the tall smooth beams of acacia wood, drape the curtains of finely twisted linen and blue, purple and scarlet yarn, with cherubim woven into them, and there in the tabernacle - right in the center - in a special place called the Holy of Holies - God would descend and be present among the people, alighting upon the golden mercy seat. The High Priest - and only the High Priest - would enter that inner sanctum to discern the guidance and will of God for the people.

But as the composer of the Letter to the Hebrews notes - Jesus becomes that High Priest for us, opening a new and living way for us through the curtain. God incarnate in the world, the Living Word, fully human and fully divine, and accessible to all people in an entirely new way.

As Chris Stead writes in his book, "Mindfulness and Christian Spirituality" What incarnation means for us is that we humans can actually know and experience God in the flesh - in our material bodies and through the material world. - We have no way of experiencing anything at all, let alone God, other than in our bodies.

You are utterly common. And you are miraculous. Somehow, after millions of years of evolution, the stuff of your body got organized into the most complex organism on the face of the earth. Your stuff can recognize a trillion different smells. Your blood vessels can circle the earth four times. Your brain contains 86 billion nerve cells joined by 100 trillion connections. If

all of the DNA in the 23 pairs chromosomes in every cell in your body were uncoiled and laid end to end it would stretch 34 billion miles—to Pluto and back 3 times! Our fully human bodies are miraculous and point directly to the Divine - the Holy Creator.

So if, as St. Paul teaches, our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, then we have to recognize that our whole bodies, our whole selves, are sacred, are blessed, and are to be used to worship God. But for some reason, all too often we sterilize our faith - we talk about the body in a detached way, as a metaphor - our favorite being that the Church is one body, united in Christ. But we don't often think about our actual physical bodies as instruments of worship and religious experience.

But Jesus knew better. He recognized the sacred in the eyes of a man born blind. He was touched by the righteousness of a woman who suffered many years with an issue of blood. Even those who lost hope and lost their grip on reality, Even those whose hearts were hardened, Those who were as good as dead to the world - Jesus knew them as friends, as neighbors, as blessed siblings deserving of love and grace.

And Jesus knows us in this way too. Too often and for far too long, religious teaching has caused us to feel shame about our bodies, or about the parts of ourselves that don't seem to measure up. But Jesus loves all of us, not just our believing minds and faithful hearts. Jesus is our friend and helper, not because of our abilities or gifts. Jesus loves all that makes us up -- bum tickers and miss-firing synapses, mobility issues and anxiety disorders, doubt and family baggage. While we may not want to give thanks for the challenges we face, still these parts of us are sacred, because they make us who we are - honest, humble, created.

This understanding should be a foundation on which we stand to fight against all forms of ableism in our society. While all bodies function differently, that difference in function does not equate to a difference in value. A body with more function is not better, or more sacred, than a body with less or different function.

Now, if our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, if God is as close as our very heart beat, our very breath, you may ask yourself - why get up and out of my jammies early on a Sunday morning and go to church? Why log onto the virtual worship service when I'm in the middle of binge-watching Mare of Eastdown?

The author of Hebrews says we must "provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together." We must "encourage one another". Because - beloved - we need every BODY. Though we can each access the Holy Sacred through Christ who is our friend, we grow stronger, and wiser, more spiritually attuned and better equipped to articulate our faith in the world when we are in relationship with one another. The wider the welcome, the closer we come to truly being whole as the one body of Christ, whole as the embodiment of God's love in the world.

This is also why we must make a confession, that in many ways for far too long our theology and how we have lived as a faith community, has not been entirely accessible for all people. We must be continually about the work doing accessibility assessments of our church's building and programs, our verbal and written language, and be proactive about welcoming all people fully into the life of our congregation. Being an anti-ableist, just like being "anti-racist" is not the church's work alone. We must be willing to evaluate the whole of our society and root out ableism wherever we find it. In the educational system, on the job market, in healthcare, media, -- everywhere. While it may make us uncomfortable to face these sins, this is what "provoking to love" looks like. It is exactly the work of the church to provoke one another to love in just this way, and this kind of provoking only happens when we gather together - every body.

One of my favorite phrases that Pastor Nancy sometimes uses to welcome us into worship is this -- "If you seek to live in love and fellowship with God and all God's people, welcome to Old South Church for that is our guiding star ... though it is far from us and we have not yet arrived." We are

seekers, we are provokers, we are bodies with ailments and abilities, and we need one another because together we are so much possibility.