

SESSION TWO : EMBODIMENT – YOUR BODY, GOD’S TEMPLE

Opening Prayer

Creator God, help us through our study together to befriend our own bodies and to see them as part of your good creation. Help us know how to use them to your glory and to build up your church on earth. Amen.

Jumpstart

Name one thing you do without using any part of your body.

Embodiment Theology

Our bodies are involved in everything we do. While we tend to think of them as separate from who we really are, our bodies shape how we perceive the world, because everything comes to us through our senses and is processed by our brain, all of which are body parts. Our bodies are also what connect us to other humans and to all living creatures — every living thing has a body.

Over the years, our bodies have gotten a bad rap, especially from the church. We see them as something that distracts us from our true experience of God, which comes through spiritual channels. In recent decades, some theologians have tried to describe just how important our bodies are to our faith. Many believe that our embodiment and sexuality are the very qualities that allow us to form relationships with each other and with God. The importance of the body to our Christian faith is affirmed in the fact that God took bodily form in Jesus, and in the image of the church as the body of Christ.

Read through the following quotes and discuss them together.

“Sexuality is our self-understanding and way of being in the world as male and female. . . . The mystery of our sexuality is the mystery of our need to reach out to embrace others both physically and spiritually. Sexuality thus expresses God’s intention that we find our authentic humanness in relationship. But such humanizing relationship cannot occur on the human dimension alone. Sexuality, we must also say, is intrinsic to our relationship with God. . . . Sexuality involves much more than what we do with our genitals. More fundamentally, it is who we are as body-selves who experience the emotional, cognitive, physical, and spiritual need for intimate communion — human and divine.”
— James Nelson,
from *Embodiment*, pp. 17-18

“Christianity, understood not primarily as a nexus of ideas but as concrete participation in a body — the ‘body of Christ’ — provides a strong formulation of the centrality and significance of physical existence, in which human life itself is understood as given in physical existence — creation — and fulfilled only in physical existence — resurrection of the body.”
— Margaret Miles,
from *Image as Insight*, p. 36

Discussion Questions

- ?How long do you think these ideas have been around?
- ?On what points do you agree or disagree with the authors’ ideas?

A Temple of God

Read aloud 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 and discuss the following questions.

? How does it make you feel to think of your body as a member of Christ's body?

? How often do you think of your body as belonging to God? How does that affect what you do with or to your body?

Exercise

Warning! Danger Ahead

Read the following warnings aloud.

- “Warning: The Surgeon General has determined that smoking can be hazardous to your health.”

- “This is your brain. This is your brain on drugs. Any questions?”

- “Diets low in saturated fat and cholesterol may reduce the risk of heart disease.”

- “Using condoms correctly every time you have sex reduces the risk of HIV infection.”

? Can you think of other warnings that we hear everyday?

? How much do we really hear them, and how much do they blend into the background?

? How much do such warnings make you think about what goes into your body?

Purity and Danger

People in the ancient world were very concerned with purity. Since they saw the body as a commingling of elements,

they believed it could be endangered by external pollutants or by internal imbalance. It became very important to guard against any impurities. The Jewish law, detailed in the books of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, defined what was clean, or pure, and what was unclean.

We are not as aware of notions of purity in our own culture, but they are present. Sometimes cleanliness is related to something being in the right place: coffee in the cup is clean; coffee on your sweater is dirt. Purity also affects what we eat. We think nothing of eating cows, pigs, or chickens, but most Americans would be revolted by the idea of eating horses, dogs, or cats. First-century Jews had equally strong notions of purity, which were spelled out in Levitical law.

Much of the conflict in the Corinthian church came from the fact that some of the members came out of this Jewish heritage with strict purity laws, while others were Gentiles with no such restrictions. Paul addresses several issues that relate to food and meal etiquette — what we eat and how it goes into our bodies. Of special concern was whether Christians should eat meat from animals that had been sacrificed to Roman idols, which would have been available for purchase in local markets.

Another point of conflict for the Corinthians related to fellowship meals. When early Christians celebrated the Lord's Supper, they really celebrated — apparently with a full meal in which everyone brought food to share, much like our potluck meals. This was very much in keeping with the Jewish meal tradition and with Jesus' practice of eating and drinking with his friends, and of feeding those who were hungry. The Corinthians, though, seem to have lost the sense of communal sharing.

Exercise

You Are What You Eat

Divide the class into three groups and have each group look at one of the following passages. Discuss the questions within your group, then share briefly with the whole class.

- 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 (whether to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols)
- 1 Corinthians 10:14-22 (idolatry versus the Eucharist)
- 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 (abuses at the Eucharist)

? What does this passage suggest about how our body is affected by what we eat?

? What issues of purity are at stake here?

? What are some ways this passage relates to our food and meal choices today?

What Does it Mean for Us?

We have a different understanding of our bodies than the early Christians had. We tend to think our bodies belong to us and we can do whatever we want to with them. But in fact, we don't have bodies, we are bodies. Our bodies are not a separate possession, but they are who we are — and we belong to God.

? How does your body image change if you see your body through God's eyes instead of society's?

? What kind of emphasis does our society place on food and eating? What is the effect of being constantly bombarded by ads for food and ads for weight loss programs?

? Think of the prevalence of eating disorders in our culture. Think of people you know people who use food as a crutch or as a substitute for God. What is the difference in going out for ice cream to celebrate doing well on a test versus going home and eating a pint of Ben and Jerry's triple fudge because you did lousy on a test?

? Compare Paul's discussion of eating idol meat in 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 to reasons people might have for not eating meat today.

Closing

Close the group session with prayer for this time of study together, including any issues of praise or concern that group members want to share. Then sing together the first verse of "They Will Know We Are Christians by Our Love."

We are one in the spirit,
We are one in the Lord,
We are one in the spirit,
We are one in the Lord,
And we pray that our unity
May one day be restored.
And they'll know we are Christians
By our love, by our love,
Yes they'll know we are Christians
By our love.