

Sermon July 12, 2020 7th Pentecost, Year A

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When newborn babies are in the hospital, either because they were born prematurely or because they have a serious medical problem, they are often given what's called "skin-to-skin care." That means what it sounds like: holding the infant directly against the skin of a family member or caregiver: cuddling, caressing. Skin-to-skin care is proven to help babies survive and thrive; touching, holding, and cuddling are good for them. And it's true not just of babies, of course. We all benefit from physical contact with others. It's built into our lives as embodied beings: we sit side-by-side, we hold hands, we hug, we embrace, we make love, we stand arm-in-arm. We do fellowship with our bodies, with our skin.

Except for now. One of the tragic ironies of the pandemic is that actions which normally are good for us, physically as well as spiritually, have suddenly become dangerous. Just when people are most in need of a hug, we dare not hug. Just when a neighbor needs the support of a strong handshake, we dare not shake hands. We try to avoid even incidental contact with strangers and even friends or family. Just when we all so need to be bodies in contact with bodies, we cannot.

So what does this have to do with the readings for today? Let's see. In Paul's letter to the Romans, he draws a sharp contrast between "flesh" on the one hand, and "spirit" on the other. He says, "Those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit." Moreover, he says, "to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace." Well, goodness! If flesh is death, is hostile to God, who would want to be flesh?

What we need to remember, however, is that when Paul talks about flesh versus Spirit, he isn't talking about life in bodies versus life outside of bodies. After all, salvation comes through Jesus Christ precisely as an incarnated, embodied person. Instead, for Paul the word "flesh" is shorthand for "sinfulness." In Galatians, for instance, Paul lists all sorts of sins as "works of the flesh" – especially idolatry, which isn't very fleshy, as sins go. One scholar describes "flesh" in Paul's work as meaning "life conditioned by worldly desires." Worldly desires—desires for power, success, satisfaction—are contrary to the desires to live by the will of God. So through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God makes it possible for embodied humans to live in

accordance with the Holy Spirit rather than under the rule of sin. So flesh versus Spirit means caught in sin versus caught by the Spirit.

Unfortunately, Christians have sometimes interpreted Paul's language of flesh versus Spirit as supporting the idea that our bodies, our physical bodies made of flesh, are bad. On this view, redemption is the release of our immaterial souls from our horrid, corrupt, material bodies. Bodies are the source of sin, and anyone considered more closely tied to their body is more sinful, and more dangerous to the faith. People regarded as more bodily or more "natural" usually include women as well as any people who seem "different" in some way. So St. Jerome famously wrote that "woman is the gate of the devil and the road to iniquity." Of course, such a view leads to very un-Christian and un-loving results, as history indicates over and over.

But the biblical view of bodies is quite different, as we can see from today's other scriptures. For instance, the reading from Isaiah emphasizes the joy of God's biophysical creation, and the created world itself celebrating the goodness and faithfulness of God. "The mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands" when the word of God is fulfilled, as it shall be.

Now look again at the psalm. The psalmist sings to God:

"You visit the earth and water it abundantly;
you make it very plenteous;
the river of God is full of water.

You prepare the grain,
for so you provide for the earth.

You drench the furrows and smooth out the ridges;

with heavy rain you soften the ground and bless its increase.

You crown the year with your goodness, and your paths overflow with plenty.

May the fields of the wilderness be rich for grazing, and the hills be clothed with joy.
May the meadows cover themselves with flocks, and the valleys cloak themselves with grain;

let them shout for joy and sing. ”

What the psalmist describes here is not a sort of grudging, minimal tending of the earth, but God’s exuberant, loving, gracious care of plants, animals, crops, seasons, and ecosystems.

But, you might say, of course God is looking after the planet, for it is God’s own creation. And that’s right. The planets, the universe, and time itself are all the work of the loving God.

However, it could have been otherwise. God was not compelled to create a biophysical universe. God did not have just a limited list of supplies, being stuck with earth and air and atoms. This is God we’re talking about, who could have created anything at all in any manner at all, beyond all our imaginings. God could have made us to be purely spiritual persons, little individual bubbles of being, floating around with no physical existence at all. God did not need to make the universe, or plants, or animals, or human bodies. But She did. God chose to make us and our home as physical things that have length and mass and texture and color and sound and taste. God chose to make us as beloved embodied beings with all our sweat and stickiness and vulnerability, and God declared that creation very good. All bodies are good; bodies are our way of being in the world, of being the body of Christ.

Now, the conviction that bodies are good does not mean that our fears and complaints are invalid. I’ve had a running argument with my left knee for almost two years now, and it is not always a civil discourse. And clearly now many, many human bodies are suffering severe illness and death. But the answer to the fragility and finitude of our bodies is not a wish that we could somehow cast them aside. Our weak, lumpy, varicolored, imperfect bodies are how we become the body of Christ. Our bodies are how we do fellowship. Our bodies are how we love. We’d better appreciate this way of being, for it is the only one available to us. And we need to look after every body, as God lovingly tends the whole creation. Returning to Paul’s language, tending bodies is part of life according to the Spirit.

So in this time of pandemic, when we cannot do skin-to-skin care, we share God’s love for bodies by protecting others: we wear masks, we keep a bit of distance, we exercise due care, we offer food, we pray. And we look forward to the day when the mountains burst into songs of praise, the trees clap their hands, when we can hug and kiss

and dance arm-in-arm with all the other bodies we encounter. For this we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.