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Body Language

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Luke 9:28-36

The disciples don't really know who Jesus is- a prophet? A teacher? Peter has guessed he's the Messiah, and all signs seem to point in that direction. But, the disciples can't quite grasp it yet- frankly, Jesus doesn't check all the boxes. He seems a little too gentle toward the nobodies, a little too surprising and complex in his positions on politics, a little too harsh toward the religious leaders of the day. And, Jesus is human, and humans are messy, and whatever idea the disciples had conjured for who he would be is not necessarily coming to fruition.

God becoming human, or incarnation, is unique to Christianity. And, it makes sense given how most humans are- God in a body is dicey territory. In some ways it's easier to imagine God as Spirit or Divine, because then we can use beautiful metaphors and descriptions of eternity that transcend mere mortality. But bodies, they change. They get broken, they let us down, they age, they form cancer cells, they inexplicably keep some of us from having children, they give us strength and they make us weak. Bodies

have needs and desires. Certain bodies have authority and power. Others don't. Bodies can be unwieldy, and it's hard to fathom that God could be all powerful and also not in control, all at the same time... And, bodies die.

Jesus knew maybe better than anyone else that we are really very talented, as human beings, at making assumptions about people based on their bodies. We judge people on skin color, height, weight, maleness or femaleness. Our ability to navigate the world changes based on perceptions about whose body is more worthy or likeable or less confusing. The hemorrhaging woman clung to Jesus' body so her own might be healed and she could be [quote/unquote] "normal" again and treated with dignity. Jesus gathered children near to him, in their little vulnerable bodies, to say something about how we treat the least of these. Jesus touched those bodies that were supposedly untouchable, and worked his own body on the Sabbath, to break down the barriers that kept some bodies in and other bodies out. Jesus also rested his body, even when there was more work to be done. The implications for God being in a body are huge.

In today's story from Luke, Jesus takes three disciples with him up on a mountain and he is transfigured before them. Luke says Jesus' face changes and his clothes turn a dazzling white.

Commentator Dorothy Lee says, in more descriptive words, that "the presence of such beauty at the transfiguration is palpable in the body of Jesus as it becomes translucent, redolent with light, depicting the union of... glory and flesh. The transfiguration is

the epitome of incarnate beauty. To describe a body, like his, is to describe what the Kingdom of God looks like.”

The Greek word used for Jesus’ body changing, suggests a metamorphosis of sorts- a literal body alteration. But, it’s not until Elijah and Moses show up on the scene that we know what is really going here. You see, Elijah was responsible for resurrection miracles- for bringing bodies back to life. He is often named in Jewish tradition along with Moses when remembering the Exodus. Their bodies are there because they brought people out of slavery and gave them new life. Alongside Jesus they appear before the disciples declaring the power and importance of bodies and their freedom, wonder, and worth. Jesus’ face and clothes change in an act of transformation and love- it’s an affirmation that all bodies are sacred. As commenter Cary Howie says, “To be transfigured is to implicate others in your own transfiguration... Jesus’ transfiguration is a social transformation.”

Peter, of course, eager as he always is, wants to stay there, up on the mountain, and set up house so he can enjoy this moment forever. If you’ve ever had a mountaintop experience of God you understand the feeling. But, just as he starts making plans, Jesus shushes him up, and God pipes in to tell them all to be quiet and listen for now.

Rev. Katie Omberg writes that Jesus’ silencing of the disciples is telling. It’s his way of saying, “Hey, guys, until you understand this fully, I’m going to make this really clear for you: what happened here, with me and my body, it’s not up for public

consumption.” Jesus’ body will be up for public consumption at some point. He will be betrayed, mocked, flogged, and hung. But he decides when. He says what happens with his body at the point he is ready. In the transfiguration and subsequent moments, he not only calls for dignity and respect of his selfhood, he claims the right to define himself and tell his own story.

Unfortunately, our bodies are up for public consumption all of the time. If we gain weight people assume we are lazy. If we get thinner we’re rewarded with compliments. If our bodies look like the gender we were assigned at birth- girls who appear to be feminine, and boys that look masculine, people know how to define us. Our bodies can offer us privilege if they are normative. If our bodies aren’t white, or wrinkled, or not aged enough, or too confusing, or differently abled, or too much or little of anything, we will surely be judged.

Well-known writer Roxane Gay recently authored a book called Hunger, and she describes the work as a “memoir of my body.” She is African American, tall at six foot three, and, at one point, weighed nearly 600 pounds. At the age of 12 she was a victim of sexual violence, and in her book describes her weight gain as a way for her to protect herself from further interest in, or trauma to her body. She writes about the complexity of becoming bigger in presence but feeling like she was disappearing in a world where people presumed the kind of person she was because of her weight. Her story is complicated, and she writes both defensively and hopefully about it- wanting to be proud, to be taken seriously in whatever kind of body she is in, to seek justice

for her body and what she experienced, while also naming the hardships and shame that surround it. She writes, “I don’t want to think of my body as something gone horribly wrong... [But] I am marked, in so many ways, by what I went through. I survived it, but that isn’t the whole of my story.”

The transfiguration embodies the complexity of the human experience. Bodies are important, but they aren’t all that we are. Bodies should be our to define and no one else’s. Our bodies are beloved and diverse and all created in God’s exact image. And yet, we live in a world where certain bodies have decided for us not only what the ideal body looks like, but what our insides must look like, as well.

The hurtful decisions made in the United Methodist Church this week, about gender and sexual identity, specifically if same sex couples can be married in the church or if LGBTQ folks can be ordained, have made so many of God’s beloved children ashamed of their bodies and hearts. Presbyterians know well from our own recent history that these bodies have been put up for public consumption, their very selves dismantled by votes that cast them as less than human or unworthy of the fullness of God’s love. In the light of the transfiguration, though, we can decipher a way forward. God’s own body is transfigured. There is a diversity of being even within God’s self. God, Christ, Spirit. Three-in-one. God in community. God changing. As Cary Howie said, Jesus’ transfiguration implicates us all in the need for social transformation.

I think, though, this is more than about mere inclusion- as if to say the transfiguration tells us to welcome all the “different” people into “our” world.

David Treuer, an American Indian who grew up on the Leech Lake reservation in Northern Minnesota recently wrote a book about this idea. He re-tells the story of the Battle of Wounded Knee, and in it he seeks to reclaim the native body. He wants us to understand that American Indians are not all victims and do not want our pity or patronization. Much like Roxane Gay, Treuer names that in their bodies there are marks of the struggles of their past. Alcoholism and diabetes are harming native bodies. But, that’s not all of who they are. They are a people of strength and pride- beautiful bodies that are to be admired, and not simply put up for public consumption in images of headdresses or violent athletic mascots. Thankfully, the Transfiguration shatters these myths, and so many others. We are not always the way we appear, or the way others have defined us.

I realize that, in my own body, I am able to make my way through the world with relative ease. I’m tall. I’m white. I think I’m old enough to be taken seriously. But what you see here isn’t all that I am. But, God knows and loves and affirms all of who I am, which is an unwieldy, fleshy, wonderful, broken yet strong body and heart, who is worthy of dignity and freedom. This is the story of the Transfiguration, not just for me, but for all of us. The Kingdom of God looks like beloved people who know their depth and their worth as much as Jesus does.

As we gather at the table today, we come face to face with Jesus' body, our own, and the bodies of all who make up this messy, wonderful body we call the Church. It's here we can trust that in Jesus' broken, poured out body, we are loved, every last one of us, for all and everything that we are. Thanks be to God for that.

Amen.

Pastoral Prayer ~10:30 am Worship

David Shinn

Holy God, loving and immortal, you are beyond our knowing, yet we see your glory in the face and body of Jesus Christ, whose compassion illumines the world. For you are the light that separate the darkness in creation. From the watery chaos, you set order into the world. You called the celestial bodies into motion and revolution that give forth the day and night, and thus seasons and time. From the watery unknown, you separated the land from the sea and brought forth vegetations, and then creatures that swim, crawl, slither, and fly. To fully give your light of your image, you created us in your likeness. Form of the earth, our bodies were made by you and you called the entire created world, good. In goodness, you intended for the world. Yet we broke your covenant and order by our self-serving desires and blindness. To give us sights to see your truth, you sent your prophets to show us the way time and time again.

Then in the fullness of time, your light came from your Son as Jesus walked among us to show us the light once more from the darkness of our ways. As we pray this day, we ask for you light to shine brightly as it transforms us in the likeness of the love of Christ, who renews the whole humanity so that we may share in Christ's divinity.

O God, as your Son drew apart to be in prayer with you, we offer our prayers for the transformation of the world and the church. We pray this day for all the bodies who are grieving for the death

of their dream and loved ones. May your comfort surround them and their tears not be the only food. We pray for all the bodies recovering from recent surgery, chemo and radiation treatment and rehab. May your strength abide with them in their journeys. We pray for all the bodies going through changes and transition of life beyond their control. May you guide their steps and lead them with your rod and staff. We pray for United Methodist Church as they walk the difficult steps in front of them. We pray for all the bodies at the border, refugee camps, and detention centers. May you protect their bodies and dignity in the suffering they are facing. Shine your light on who may be discouraged, dejected, and desponded. Shine your lights on our world broken by environmental disasters of our own making.

As we share this table of feast this day, show us where your glory is to be found, not only on the mountaintop, but on the plain among your people. Implicate us to your transformation. Lead us to share the joy of working with all people as we seek to embody your glory and light.

Show us, Oh God, how to live our daily lives that we may glorify you in the common tasks of life. Let us focus on the radiance of Jesus' transfigured presence, and work for a world transfigured in the glory of Jesus' justice and love. And now, let us all join our voices to pray the prayer that Jesus has taught us all to pray, Our Father...