

The Dignity of Bodies

This morning's sermon contains very few of my own words. The unnamed woman who encountered Jesus at the well as told in John 4:5-42 came to draw water at a time when no one else was around. She may have been trying to avoid personal attacks or social rejection. Her story is similar to most of the stories told in the February issue of *The Mennonite*. I even took the title of my sermon from the headline on the front cover of the magazine. I know some of you have already read these stories, but I think they are worth hearing again.

The editor introduces the stories by noting that Scripture reminds us of the dignity of bodies.¹ 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 says "your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you," and we are to "glorify God in [our] body."

In the first story, Cindy and Herm Weaver write about how they navigate grief in their bodies over their daughter Cloe's death.² *One of the reasons we hold grief, anxiety and stress in our bodies is that we are trying to navigate our experience of loss in a way that is acceptable to those around us. We feel our friends and family wanting us to heal, wanting to help us heal and be happy again, and so we hide, hold the grief inside, and it takes up residence in our bodies.*

The Weavers found healing in nature. *Along with the Spirit and family and friends, the earth has been our primary healer. We touch the water, feel its life and watch as it finds its way, listen as it sings through all the vicissitudes of its travels. We lie on the earth, breathe, sink deeper into its arms, feel the immense support it offers. The air connects us with the Spirit and encourages us to walk through the world more lightly, feeling held. We have released from our cells the places that hold anxiety and grief, and we have softened. Better health is emerging. The healing journey continues.*

Jon Stanton relates the shame he's had to overcome for being fat.³ *It's hard for someone who is 100 pounds or more overweight to feel anything but shame regarding their body. The weight becomes a filter through which every aspect of life is screened. Will that chair hold me up? Will I fit in that booth at the restaurant? Will people assume I'm lazy and not hire me for a job I want? Does God hate me because I'm fat?*

I am not in denial about the health issues related to my obesity, and know I have a responsibility to address them. It's a daily challenge, and I am grateful for accountability partners who ask me to go on a walk with them or inquire about my eating habits.

The church has also become a pivotal part of my healing and journey toward acceptance of my body. After moving to Nebraska, I was a nervous wreck the first several weeks, expecting to be judged by the healthy and lithe Mennonites I saw in the pews around me. But that didn't happen. Instead the church celebrated and encouraged my musical and speaking gifts.

I pray that across all our churches we reach out in the same loving way to those who are different from us. Jesus instructed us to love our neighbors and didn't add any caveats for body issues or size. Are we up to the challenge?

¹ *The Mennonite*, February 2020, Vol.23, No. 2, p. 5.

² *The Mennonite*, February 2020, Vol.23, No. 2, pp. 10-13.

³ *The Mennonite*, February 2020, Vol.23, No. 2, pp. 14-16.

Kevin Ressler testifies about the stress of being a black body in America.⁴ *To be a black or brown body in 2020 is to be in a constant state of apprehension. Fear of being the next John Crawford, shot dead in a Walmart aisle for the crime of being an innocent black customer. Or to be afraid your own child is receiving culture war junk related to your pigmentation that says you or they do not fully belong.*

For me and my family of origin, as well as my family of choice, we exist in a less “normal” reality of race. My father is white. My mother is black. The linguistic descriptor (and one-time official census term) for my brothers and me is “mulatto.” For my daughters, whose mother is white, the term would be quadroon, even though they present as white. If they marry white men and have children, they would historically be called “octoroons.” The terminology of our very existence is a racial epithet. It impacts a person to know that society looks at you in such aberrant ways that the name they have for you is racist.

Anecdotally, I can say in many ways being black today can feel more targeted in the media but less so in my daily, interpersonal life. [During my childhood,] every time we went out to eat as a family we were treated like a sideshow. People of any and all races gawked at us. That happens much less frequently (though not never) in today’s Lancaster, Pa. But while restaurants and movie theaters have improved, churches have a longer way to go.

Aimee Reid shares lessons she’s learned from Fred Rogers about God liking us as we are.⁵ *Rogers opposed anything that would demean someone who was created in God’s image. As a child, he had been bullied and was often sick. He benefitted from the unconditional and explicit affirmation of his grandfather McFeely, who told him, “There’s no person in the whole world like you, and I like you just the way you are.”*

Those words became so important to Rogers that at the close of his television program, he would look right into the camera and pass them along to viewers. They represented the heart of Mister Rogers’ message. “You are valuable. You are important. You are worthy, just because you are you.”

Katie Smith tells about the travails of living with disabilities in a normative society.⁶ *She tells about shopping for a swimsuit when she was 11 and then the awkwardness of sitting by the pool at summer church camp with strict instructions to not submerge her scars in the chlorinated water.*

It’s been almost 20 years since [that experience], and I still find myself going back to it as a way to understand how society views the disabled body and how that societal gaze has affected my own self-image. In a culture that equates a scarred body with pain, not medically necessary healing, it can be difficult to embrace a body that is different and often viewed with a sheen of negativity or, at the very least, awe. A body with scars invites a commentary, and perhaps in an effort to soothe the minds of those with normative bodies, to quell the questions and remarks from others, I have hidden my own body.

There is no right answer as to how to reconcile oneself to a body that is different. There is no happy ending in which I am completely satisfied with my disability and my body. I realize that in most narratives on the disabled body, there is an expectation that the disabled body, if it cannot be healed, should be accepted by its owner. However, there are days when I am in pain, there are days when I’m angry at the way my body chooses to function, and there are days when I am proud of my body. Perhaps one of the most important realizations I have made about my

⁴ *The Mennonite*, February 2020, Vol.23, No. 2, pp. 17-19.

⁵ *The Mennonite*, February 2020, Vol.23, No. 2, pp. 22-23.

⁶ *The Mennonite*, February 2020, Vol.23, No. 2, pp. 24-25.

body is that it is just that, a body—something that allows me to live my life, regardless of the labels that I or society applies to it.

Peter Marty, publisher of *Christian Century* magazine, recently contrasted the actions of some abusive adoptive parents with those of some loving, kind adoptive parents.⁷ He used the stories to illustrate God’s beneficence toward us. This reminds me of what the woman must have felt after her encounter at the well with Jesus

Marty writes: *That God would want us or love us just as we are, and not as God might wish we were, is astonishing. It’s unconditional love akin to what the best adoptive parents embody.*

When a friend of mine bought an inexpensive used car a couple years ago, we chuckled over the AS IS sticker he left on the window for a few days. His translation of those two words—“This may be a lemon, so consider yourself paying for a surprise”—wasn’t far off from my own interpretation of their meaning: “You may be a sucker, but what are your options?”

If I want to contemplate one of the biggest mysteries of faith, all I have to do is imagine an AS IS sticker on my back and the Lord willing and desirously loving me in my condition. Biblical faith insists that God doesn’t love us because we’re worthy; we have worth and value because God loves us. The ordering is critically important. It’s an ordering that faithful adoptive parents never lose sight of.

My hope is that all the stories I’ve related today remind you of the dignity of all bodies, yours included. And that they help you in being able to say to yourself and to your neighbor: You are valuable. You are important. You are worthy, just because you are you.”

Thanks be to God, our creator. Amen.

⁷ *Christian Century*, January 29, 2020, Vol. 137, No. 3, p. 3.