

Becoming Human: Body/Image

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Ezekiel 37:1-14

John 11:17-45

Romans 8:6-11

One of the unearned privileges of my life is the ability to regard myself as “normal.” In the communities where I grew up and according to the media, I’m generally average. Average height and build, in the majority according to race and religion, and the proper gender and orientation to rule the world. Such considerations are usually under the surface. They mean that I do not feel out of place very many places; I feel entitled to go where I want to go and do what I want to do. My gender, race, orientation, size and appearance do not generally close doors for me.

I first started to recognize those unspoken privileges as a 19-year-old spending three months in Cote d’Ivoire. For half of my time there I could go a week without seeing another white face. I was acutely aware of differences in how I was treated, both because I was white and because I was a man. Though I was a minority, I was treated with disproportionate deference and respect. I saw that I did not deserve such positive treatment.

I appreciate living in a community now where I am anything but average. I think that there is one other Caucasian male on our block. And I was in Columbia Heights on Thursday with some time to do some people watching. There were all different ages, races, genders, orientations, styles and attitudes represented. It occurred to me that no one walking past on the busy street looked like me. And

the beautiful thing was that no one looked like anyone else, either — there was no average, no majority, no standard. It reminded me from a pair of rhetorical questions in the musical, *Rent*: “Is anyone out of the mainstream? Is anyone *in* the mainstream?”¹

I started thinking about the idea of normative bodies when I read the “Out in Scripture” commentary on this week’s lectionary passages. The Romans, Ezekiel and John stories all speak to the holiness of the body. It is something meant for life. Our spirit and soul are not complete without their home in the body — to be human is to be flesh and bone. The commentary makes a very interesting and amusing point. In Ezekiel, the dry bones receive sinew, flesh and skin, and eventually the breath of God enlivens them. But they receive no clothes. And in John, Jesus has the mourners remove the grave clothes from the risen Lazarus. What is he left with?

These are two of the unexpected scenes that make the Bible R-rated material. The implied nudity sharpened my perception of how the passages treat the body. It is something holy — something to be raised — something worthy to be a vessel for God’s own breath. It is a good and beautiful thing — an image of God.

Getting back to my musings on what it means to be normal, I had to reflect on how our hetero-normative society has taught me to regard nudity. A nude woman is alluring and sexual — an object to be possessed and lusted after. A nude male is either humorous or gross — generally the latter. I’m particularly struck by how much homophobia is reinforced through these learned negative

¹ Jonathan Larson, “La Vie Boheme,” *Rent*, 1996.

reactions to the male body. What do we say about God when we view those who bear God's image either as a sexual object or as disgusting? And yet this is the funny looking, hairless ape that God describes in the most affectionate terms!

You will notice that after all of this reflection on nudity I still stand before you fully clothed. I have not suddenly become the "Naked Anabaptist." My point is not to embrace your inner nudist. My point is that being human means being fully formed in God's image — even your elbows and toes, earlobes and noses. How do we treat these bodies? Each other's and our own? Do we treat them as vessels enlivened by God's breath, as Ezekiel describes it? Do we recognize something holy in the attachment of sinew to bone, muscle to sinew and skin to muscle? Can we "sing the body electric" and eclectic?

In some ways this is a sermon more at home in the season of Christmas than during Lent. I've preached before about Jesus becoming flesh — being incarnate — as a human. This embodied humanity is more than an identification with our fragile state. Jesus did not become human simply in order to be like us. Jesus became human so that we could become like him.

The raising of Lazarus is a preview of what Jesus will experience. Part of the fragility of human life is the experience of death. Everybody (and every body) dies — even God incarnate. Divinity did not render Jesus' human body invincible. Just as death was inevitable for his friend Lazarus — just as whatever healing Jesus could have offered for his illness would have been a temporary fix — Jesus was a human body that was subject to entropy and decay. Death was — and is — inevitable.

And yet God loves these fragile bodies. Being human means facing death, but becoming fully human — in the image of God — means that death does not define us. The breath of God blew over the bones in the desert and filled them with life. The breath of God brought Lazarus back from death. And the breath of God swept into the tomb where Jesus lay and gave us all life.

When people come back from the brink of death now, everybody seems to ask about their experience. What (or who) did you see? Was there a bright light? What did you feel?

Isn't it curious that none of today's stories even speculate about that? Why does nobody interview Lazarus about his time away from the land of the living? Did he walk the streets of gold? Was his dear departed grandma there? Did he ask God any deep theological questions?

Likewise, after Jesus was raised, no one recorded what he experienced for his three days of death. There are wonderful stories handed down by Christian tradition of Jesus going into hell and preaching to those bound there, unlocking the gates for anyone who cared to follow him out. But if something so interesting happened, why do the gospel writers not mention it?

If these stories were written by modern evangelicals I imagine that the focus would be almost exclusively on what happens after death. Matters of heaven and hell have become a litmus-test of Christian orthodoxy, so much so that to even question the literal, physical existence of either place is to risk being called a heretic.

If those matters were so essential to following Jesus, than the Gospel writers sure missed out in these resurrection stories! But maybe that isn't what we should be looking for. Being a follower of Christ is not simply preparation for what happens after death — it is what defines our very being in this life. Resurrection is for this world. Life in Christ is for these bodies, here and now. When we are filled with God's breath, it redefines us as if we have been raised from the dead. It is as though our dry bones are brought together anew. This is what it means to be human as God intends — body and spirit as one. And this is the new normative body — male and female, black and white, gay and straight, made in God's image and resurrected by the Spirit's breath.

As Paul says, “If the Spirit of God who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, God who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through the Spirit that dwells in you.” (Romans 8:11) Our bodies are holy, good things — dwelling places for God's Spirit, and beautiful gifts.