

*"Skin in the Game"*  
1 John 4:7-12, 19-21 and Luke 22:14-23  
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In her book, *An Altar in the World*, Episcopalian priest Barbara Brown Taylor tells a story about visiting a beautiful old church in Alabama.<sup>1</sup> Having arrived for the service too early, she stood for a while in front of the altar, admiring a mural of Jesus emerging from the tomb. Though the painting was impressive, Taylor felt that something was off; Jesus looked too ethereal. After gazing at the mural for several seconds, she realized what was missing: Jesus had no body hair.

Without thinking, she turned and shared her realization with the nearest parishioner, a polite, put-together woman with expensive clothes and a flawless manicure. "He has the arms of a six-year-old. His chest is as smooth as a peach." The parishioner's smile froze, and she stared at Taylor in abject horror. "'I can't believe you're saying this to me,' she said without moving her red lips. 'I just can't believe you're saying this to me.'"

Christians, Taylor concludes, often find themselves "in the peculiar position of being followers of the Word Made Flesh who neglect our own flesh or worse — who treat our bodies with shame and scorn." "Here we sit," says Taylor, "with our souls tucked away in this marvelous luggage, mostly insensible to the ways in which every spiritual practice begins with the body."

How often we forget that we worship the One who called our bodies good, the God who crafted us in the divine image, affirming that we are fearfully and wonderfully made. Scripture tells us that God breathed us into life and knit us together in our mother's wombs. The stories of our faith bear witness to the sacred worth of our bodies.

But sometimes I wonder whether God really knew what God was getting into. On one hand, our bodies are resilient, miraculous, and awe-inspiring. They can run marathons, heal or regenerate missing or damaged parts of themselves, and even combine their DNA to grow an entire human being. On the other hand, our bodies can be so weird and messy, and honestly, just gross that it's hard to see them as holy. I mean, seriously, was God thinking of hemorrhoids or acne or phlegm when God exalted the goodness of the human body? Because if so, I have questions.

But here's what I know for sure: God was so enamored with creation, so sure of the goodness of the body, that God decided to try one on for size. In Jesus Christ, God put on flesh and dwelt among us. The life of Christ bore witness to the fact that love

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor, Barbara Brown. *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*. HarperOne, 2010.

cannot be lived abstractly; it is always and unavoidably embodied, enfleshed, and incarnate.

Recently, I heard a story that really drove home the importance of love taking on flesh. Tara Brach, a psychologist and meditation teacher in Washington, DC, tells a relatable story of a little boy, awoken in the middle of the night by a massive thunderstorm, begging to sleep in his parents' room. "He would call out to his father and say, 'Please can I come into your room?' And each time, his father would say, 'You don't have to. God is with you. Then, twenty-five minutes later, he heard his son calling again, and he would come and say, 'God is with you. You are okay.' Finally, the third time, the little boy said to his dad, 'I know God is with me. But I [could really use] someone with skin on.'"<sup>2</sup>

As the Rev. M. Barclay writes, "In this world where there are too many aching bodies, too many needs unmet, and too many [challenges] for life to thrive, Love lives in our hearts, but it will never be content to stay there. Love must bear flesh."<sup>3</sup> Love must be clothed in skin and sinew, muscle and bone. Love must come alive.

I think this is exactly what Jesus had in mind when he sat down for one last meal with his friends, broke apart a loaf of bread, and explained, "This is my body, given for you." As sacred as this moment was, I can't imagine it would have been a new concept for the disciples. If they'd been paying any attention at all, they would have seen the myriad of ways that Jesus had already used his body to bring hope and healing to so many in need.

The gospels are full of healing stories, moments where skin meets skin and grace abounds. Like any good doctor, Jesus isn't even the slightest bit squeamish. His touch cleanses lepers, staunches the flow of blood, and even raises the dead. His hands bring sight to the blind, his embrace welcomes the little children, his tears reveal his love for his friends, his body bends down to wash his followers' feet.

Jesus' ministry shows us not only the sacred goodness of our bodies, but their power to give life, to heal, to nourish, to offer comfort. "This is my body, given for you." It's more than a metaphor; it's an invitation to use our bodies to glorify God through our service to others.

What would it be like if we saw our bodies through this same lens? What would it be like if we looked past what we perceive as flaws or imperfections to see the inherent goodness and divine possibilities that our bodies hold?

As Rev. Debie Thomas writes, "We are the product of a culture that treats bodies with scorn and shame. Most of the time, we see our bodies as something to shrink, starve, conquer, or tame. Rarely — so rarely — do we see our bodies as vehicles for

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<sup>2</sup> Brach, Tara. Healing Trauma: The Light Shines Through the Broken Places. Insight Meditation Community of Washington, 8 Mar. 2017, <https://www.tarabrach.com/healing-trauma-transcription/>.

<sup>3</sup> Barclay, M. "Putting the Flesh Back on Love." *Enfleshed: Bringing What Matters Back to the Gospel for Justice, Liberation, and Delight*, <https://enfleshed.com/blogs/mfcn/putting-the-flesh-back-on-love>.

worship, love, hospitality, and grace. But if we can't see our own bodies as God's temple, if we won't embrace them as pleasing and delightful to our Creator, how will we ever see or embrace others?"<sup>4</sup> How can we respond to Christ's invitation to glorify God in our bodies if we're inhibited by shame or self-consciousness?

The thing is, "we are people of the Incarnation, [people] called to look, to see, to break bread, share wine, and wash feet. Can we learn to see our embodied lives, our sensory lives, as fully implicated in our lives with God? Can we move past contempt, squeamishness, and fear, and offer Christ our whole selves?"<sup>5</sup>

In my hospice work, I'm fortunate enough to see examples of people responding to this invitation every day. Nurses who bend, lift, clean, and bandage show me, over and over again, what it looks like when love takes on flesh.

Their touch conveys compassion, the gentle squeeze of their patient's hand affirming human dignity in the face of a life-limiting illness. At the end of a long day, their backs ache, their feet are sore, and the skin on their hands is dried out and chapped from countless washings, but they'll be the first to tell you that the opportunity to serve others, to make a difference in someone's day, makes it all worth it.

But nurses aren't the only ones who know what it means to embody God's love. Consider the little girl whose hug takes the sting out of her friend's boo-boo or the college student who leaves the party early to ensure a friend gets home safely, or the mother who uses her body to give life and nourishment to her infant, the father who lifts his daughter onto his shoulders when her little toddler legs just can't walk any further.

Think of the activist who uses their body to protest against injustice – marching-with, sitting-in, and standing-alongside those on the margins, or the gardener whose dirty hands and sun-burnt brow help put healthy food on their family's table, or the neighbor who mows your lawn while you're recovering from knee surgery, and today, in particular, we remember our mission co-workers, whose hands bring healing, whose presence brings hope, whose touch conveys compassion. All of these people have skin in the game. They live out their commitment to service even if it requires a degree of sacrifice.

Thankfully, we don't have to look very far to find these servant leaders; our church is chock-full of just these sorts of folks. We're people who value service, people who are willing to roll up our sleeves and get to work, because we know that faith is more than an intellectual exercise – it's a daily, embodied practice.

As we celebrate BPC's commitment to Peace, Justice, and Global Mission, we give thanks for people both here in our community and around the world whose lives bear witness to Christ's words, "This is my body, given for you."

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas, Debie. "What the Body Knows." *Journey with Jesus: A Weekly Webzine for the Global Church*, 5 June 2016, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/1002-what-the-body-knows>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Whether partnering with CEDEPCA to provide disaster relief and clean drinking water to Guatemala, or supporting Malawi's Mulanje Presbyterian Hospital and College of Nursing, or working alongside the Church of Bangladesh to offer much-needed health services, we turn faith into action and love into embodied service.

But whether we live here in Blacksburg or halfway around the world, like a fearful child in the midst of a thunderstorm, sometimes we all need someone with skin on to come alongside us with a reassuring presence or a helping hand. Jesus Christ – God with us, the One who took on flesh – has shown us what it means to embody divine love, to give of ourselves, to glorify God in our bodies. And so, as people made in the divine image, may we know the love of God deep in the marrow of our bones, and may we devote our lives to sharing that love in service to others. Amen.