

# Honoring the Body

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I once served as a Lamaze partner for a friend in my church. Together we attended weekly birthing classes, practiced panting and deep breathing, and learned massage techniques. When my friend's water broke one morning, we met at the hospital with great excitement. We soon learned, however, that things would not go according to the plan we had prepared in our classes. Although the bag of waters cushioning the baby had broken, my friend's body did not respond with the contractions necessary for the baby to be delivered. She walked up and down the halls of the hospital, trying to encourage labor through exercise, but her body did not respond. Finally, she agreed to an induced labor.

*For it was you who formed my inward parts;  
you knit me together in my mother's womb.  
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.*  
PSALM 139:13—14

The breathing exercises we had learned to help my friend through a natural childbirth seemed superfluous now. The regular ebb and flow of labor pains was replaced by relentless drug-induced contractions that barely left her time enough to catch her breath. The baby's father and I stayed with her through the night, massaging her sore body, giving her our hands to grip as she suffered contraction after contraction, holding her in our arms during the rare moments free of struggle. I had difficulty remembering, at times, that a baby was coming, that my friend was laboring to bring new life into the world.

After a long and difficult night, my friend began pushing the baby out. The nurse, the midwife, the baby's father, and I all gathered around her, holding her legs, rubbing her arms, urging her on with our voices. As exhausted as she was, seeing the baby's head appear allowed my friend to reach for the strength she needed. And when, with one final, powerful act of loving will, she pushed her daughter out into the midwife's waiting hands, we all burst into tears of joy and relief and wonder. I remember thinking, over and over, as we stood there half-weeping, half-laughing: this must be the way God made the world, this must be the way God made the world . . .

For those who have been present at the moment when a new human being emerges entire from the body of another, such a reaction will not seem surprising. The wondrous act of one person giving birth to another can easily lead us to think of divine creativity. My friend's courageous and difficult laboring for her daughter re-called for me the words of Paul in which he speaks of the labor of each person, and indeed of all creation, to be re-formed in God's image: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies" (Romans 8:22-23).

The Christian practice of honoring the body is born of the confidence that our bodies are made in the image of God's own goodness. "Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you,"

Paul wrote to the church at Corinth (1 Corinthians 6:19). As the place where the divine presence dwells, our bodies are worthy of care and blessing and ought never to be degraded or exploited. It is through our bodies that we participate in God's activity in the world, just as my friend united her creativity to God's own during the birth of her child. And it is through daily bodily acts—bathing, dressing, touching—that we might live more fully into the sacredness of our bodies and the bodies of others.

## SHARED VULNERABILITY

To hold a newborn child in one's arms is to know both the sacredness and the vulnerability of the body; indeed, it is to know that there is an intimate connection between sacredness and vulnerability. But although it is easy to sense that connection at the moment of birth, and even at the moment of death, between those liminal moments can come days and years of great confusion.

The poet Jane Kenyon speaks of our "long struggle to be at home in the body, this difficult friendship." Part of the difficulty is that any practice that honors the body's sacredness can also be used to demean it. Adorning our bodies with beautiful clothing can shape our identities as individuals, help us delight a beloved, and mark important passages in our lives, but it can also be practiced in ways that perpetuate oppressively limited ideas of beauty. Our sexuality can nourish relationships and lead us into an intimacy that itself speaks of God's presence, but it can also be deployed in selfish or violent ways. Ascetic religious practices can awaken a desire for God in our bodies and bring us into solidarity with our suffering neighbor, but they can also be used to deny the goodness of the body.

The practice of honoring the body challenges us to remember the sacredness of the body in every moment of our lives. We cannot do this alone. Because our bodies are so vulnerable, we need each other to protect and care for them. A woman giving birth needs others to help her; adolescents struggling with sexual pressure need a community that insists on the autonomy of bodies made in God's image; those living with bodily illness need others to care for them and touch them in ways that heal and soothe. Our fragile bodies require communal attention, and so honoring the body is a shared practice, one that requires the participation of all.

The practice of honoring the body comes to life not only in relationships with those we know and love. It also makes inescapably visible the world's wounded bodies. It makes us notice and care about the bodies of children murdered in our cities, the bodies of women and girls raped in Bosnia, the bodies of people living with AIDS. The practice of honoring the body keeps these wounded bodies visible not as objects but as persons made in God's image. The practice of honoring the body leads us to prophetic action by forming us as persons who love every human body and the ravaged body of the earth itself. Shaped by the things we do with and for one another every day—eating and drinking, bathing and touching, dressing and undressing—the practice of honoring the body allows us to rediscover the sacredness of our own bodies and to shape communities committed to protecting the bodies of others.

When we honor the bodies of others, we are also drawn into God's work, as Matthew's Gospel affirms when Jesus tells his followers that whenever they feed the hungry and clothe the naked, they minister also to him. Embodiment is central to the Christian faith. The Christian emphasis on the incarnation of God's presence in Jesus and the Christian understanding of community, which describes the church as the body of Christ, both put embodiment at the center of Christian meaning. Jesus' command that we love our neighbor as we love ourselves makes it

clear that our faith has everything to do with how we live as embodied people. And when we gather to worship, we do things together that bring this command to life: in the meal of communion, we eat and drink, gathered together by Christ's own wounded body; in baptism, it is our bodies that are bathed in cleansing water; in the passing of the peace, we touch one another in love and hope.

## RETRIEVING AN AMBIGUOUS LEGACY

This is not to say that Christianity's history in regard to the body has been untroubled. Unfortunately, that history can pose serious problems for people who turn to Christian faith for guidance in this practice. From its origins, there have always been Christians who have found the human body scandalous and repugnant. Some early Christians believed that Jesus' own body must have been an illusion, since a mortal human body surely could not bear within it something as precious as divinity.

Such perplexity about the body continued as Christianity developed. Early Christians looked for clues about humanity's relationship to God in the body's most vulnerable moments: the moment of sexual desire and the moment of death. Some believed that death revealed our separation from God most fully, and that sexuality represented God's sympathy for our mortality because it offered a remedy, through procreation, for death. Others thought that sexuality itself was the clearest sign of our distance from God, because sexual desire can assert itself insistently even when the individual wills otherwise. The Christian practice of honoring the body thus took shape within the very human concern over how the basic physical realities of death and sexual desire can rob us of our freedom. At its best, the early Christians' difficult friendship with human embodiment aimed to restore human freedom in the face of these powerful forces.

With their commitment to freedom came a profound sense of responsibility for the protection and nourishment of other bodies. Bodily vulnerability is something we all share—rich and poor, male and female, slave and free. Many early Christians preached that knowledge of such shared vulnerability must lead us to solidarity with every other human body, especially the bodies of the poor. These Christians knew that what is suffered by one can be suffered by all, and that every body is a fragile temple of God's Spirit and worthy of care.

Early Christians teach us to pay attention to the ways in which our bodies are central to our freedom and to our life in God's presence. They also call us to solidarity with others—especially those

*He whom we look down upon, whom we cannot bear to see, the  
very sight of whom causes us to vomit, is the same as we are, formed  
with us from the self-same clay, compacted of the same elements.  
Whatever he suffers, we also can suffer.*

SAINT JEROME

who suffer. Unfortunately, a destructive fear of women and suspicion of the goodness of sexuality are often bound up with that legacy. Like any powerful practice, the practice of honoring the body can be deformed.

It is our task to retrieve and reinterpret the practice of honoring the body for our own age. We must do this in a way that corrects the deformations of the practice in the past and helps us

honor the body in the future. There are so many forces in society that dishonor the body. If we are unable to shape a way of life that honors the body in every moment, we will lose something vital to human flourishing. We can receive help for this task both from the long history of Christian tradition and from the lives of those who are giving this tradition new life in our time. From our ancestors and our neighbors, we learn to glimpse the sacredness of the body in the most ordinary rituals of our daily lives—bathing, dressing, touching.

## BATHING

Bathing is one of the most fundamental ways we honor our bodies. Whether we shower or soak in the tub, bathing requires an intimacy with our own bodies. Bath time is also a time of vulnerability, as we cannot offer our bodies this care without stripping them of the clothing that usually affords them a kind of protection. Times of bathing are opportunities to bless and honor the body and to perceive the sacredness at the heart of its vulnerability, as Gospel stories about bathing show.

Luke's Gospel tells a story about an unnamed woman, identified only as "a sinner," who entered a house where Jesus was having supper and began bathing his feet with her tears and wiping them dry with her hair. She goes on to kiss his feet and anoint them with ointment. The host is embarrassed and wonders what kind of prophet Jesus could be if he doesn't resist the touch of a sinful woman.

It is the woman herself, however, who seems to be the prophet in this story. Through the bold extravagance of her actions, the woman turns the simple act of bathing another's feet into a prophetic act. Her loose hair, which the host interpreted as a sign of her sinfulness, becomes a sign of loving intimacy. The bath she gives to Jesus becomes a sign of God's Spirit who

*Then turning toward the woman, [Jesus] said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love."*

LUKE 7:44–47

wrenches from us our most passionate offerings. As the woman bathes him, a sense of recognition seems to pass between Jesus and the woman. He recognizes her as one whose sins have been forgiven. She recognizes him as dangerously vulnerable, leading her to give tender attention to a body that will soon be brutalized.

In John's Gospel, we see Jesus on his knees, bathing the feet of his friends. Again, this is seen as a shocking act, one normally required only of non-Jewish slaves, and Peter at first wishes to resist. Jesus responds by explaining that their community must be shaped by such acts of generosity: "If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet" (John 13:14). Here, bathing becomes a sign of community in which each member takes responsibility for the well-being of every other.

Attention to our bodies during bathing can help to nurture a sense of the body as worthy of love and care by reminding us of our creation in God's image. A mother of two daughters remembers that, as a teenager, she was plagued by outbreaks of acne. One day, when she felt unable to leave the house because of anguish over her face, her father led her to the bathroom and asked if he could teach her a new way to wash. He leaned over the sink and splashed water over his face, telling her, "On the first splash, say, 'In the name of the Father'; on the second, 'in the name of the Son'; and on the third, 'in the name of the Holy Spirit.' Then look up into the mirror and remember that you are a child of God, full of grace and beauty." This woman has integrated her father's reverence for the body into her own daughters' bath time, making each bath a baptismal act. While they wash, they sing blessings over each part of their bodies, remembering that they are children of God, made in God's image.

Not long after the birth of my friend's daughter, our church community gathered on the feast of Epiphany for her baptism. As we remembered the magi whose gifts had no other purpose than to delight the senses, we welcomed this child into the household of God through the ancient ritual of baptism. Having been present at her birth, I felt I understood for the first time the magi's desire to offer extravagant gifts to a baby who was full of possibility and to a woman who had blessed us all by struggling to bring a new life into being.

The ritual of baptism welcomes the body along with the spirit into the community of faith. By giving the community an opportunity to bless the body, baptism undergirds the practice of honoring the body, a practice that can shape a way of life that protects the body, that delights in the body, that cherishes the body as part of God's good creation. It was a privilege to be present as this child was bathed in the waters of new life.

## ADORNMENT

Clothing our bodies not only offers a way of protecting ourselves from the gaze of others, but has long been a source of delight for human beings. Graduates adorn themselves in academic robes that distinguish them as students who have completed a program of study. Brides and grooms adorn themselves gloriously for one another to prepare for and heighten the moment when they exchange their vows. The more special the occasion, the more careful we are about how we dress ourselves and what our dress says about us.

Adornment is not just a secular practice. In the Book of Exodus (28:2), God commands Moses to "make sacred vestments for the glorious adornment of your brother Aaron." The newly baptized are often dressed in white robes symbolizing their new life in Christ. Members of some religious orders wear simple garments that bear witness to their vocation. Members of Amish communities dress simply out of a commitment to direct their attention toward

*As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.*

COLOSSIANS 3:12—14

God and one another rather than fashion. The practice of wearing "Sunday-go-to-meeting" clothes to church is born of the ancient impulse to take special care with one's appearance when entering God's presence. How and with what we adorn ourselves can help shape our identity and heighten our experience of worshipping God.

Adornment can also be overemphasized in ways that obscure that experience. Sometimes it becomes a symptom of what is wrong with Christian communities. Wearing nice clothes to church may appear to be more important to some Christians than practicing the Gospel values of hospitality to the stranger, solidarity with the poor, and inclusion of those cast out by society. It is all too easy to satisfy the impulse to adorn ourselves, even to adorn ourselves for God, in wholly commercial ways.

Some families who want to resist such consumerism have begun to include creative ways of "dressing for church" as part of their preparation for worship. Rather than allowing the fashion industry to dictate what it means to "dress up," these families encourage their children to ready themselves for worship by adorning themselves with some garment or object that is special to them—perhaps a piece of jewelry made by a friend or an outfit that reflects and heightens the child's own sense of self. This approach to adornment helps children learn to resist the pressures of an industry that tries to dictate the dress of even the very young. Intentional, shared attention to adornment also allows children to develop their own sense of what is beautiful and pleasing. By helping children use their own developing aesthetic sense and sense of self to worship God, we encourage children to see their own uniqueness, and not some imposed notion of beauty, as intrinsic to what it means to be made in God's image.

Our relationship to bodily adornment not only allows us and our children the freedom to decide what is beautiful, but it also has implications for the literal freedom of others. News reports in 1995 of Thai garment workers enslaved in the United States in a barbedwire-encased apartment where they were forced to sew around the clock made that very clear. Enslavement to the commodification of adornment makes this other, more terrible slavery possible. God intends all of us to be free. The practice of honoring the body requires habits of adornment that make us vigilant about the effects our choices have on others.

## TOUCHING

The boundary of skin that our bodies place between us can be bridged through the touch of another. Our culture cries out for ways of understanding and teaching what is and is not an appropriate way of touching, what are and are not loving, generous ways of moving back and forth across the boundaries that our bodies establish between us.

The stories about bathing give us some insight into how we might teach ourselves and our children about appropriate touch. Indeed, in touching ourselves as we bathe, we can learn to touch others with love and care. The mother who sings joyfully with her children about the blessedness of the body as they bathe teaches them that appropriate touch seeks to honor, not diminish, another. The woman who weeps over Jesus' feet shows that, although touch can be extravagant and surprising, its power lies in its gentleness. Jesus' own washing of the feet of his disciples teaches us that it is appropriate to cross the boundaries between us only from motives of generosity and not from a desire to please ourselves alone.

Ritual acts of touching, such as foot washing and exchanging signs of peace in worship, offer us opportunities to learn to touch one another in peace and love. A student living alone in Italy for a year reports that she attended mass every evening in the small town where she lived, to

worship God not only through word and sacrament but through touch. Living alone, she often went all day with-out feeling a human touch. The ritual moment of passing the peace

*The capacity to give one's attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing; it is almost a miracle; it is a miracle.*

SIMONE WEIL, *Waiting for God*

was the high point of the service for her, because it provided a safe space for her to touch and be touched by other people—even people whom she did not know.

The longing to be touched reminds us again of our shared vulnerability and how we need one another in order to honor the body. We are perhaps never more aware of our shared bodily vulnerability than when we are ill or when we are in the presence of those who are ill. Because of this, it is all too easy to render the ill invisible, because to be truly present to those who suffer, we have to remember our own capacity for suffering.

It is understandable that those who are ill often feel that their bodies have betrayed them. A group of friends in a Chicago church responded to this reality when one of them became terminally ill. As he grew sicker, his body first became a stranger and then an enemy to him, a source of nothing but anguish. In the last months of his life, he told his friends of his feeling of having been abandoned by his body. They began reading about and training themselves in therapeutic touch. They began to gather regularly in his home, to stroke his hands and feet, to touch his skin, to gently offer him a sense of his body as a source of comfort, not of pain alone. Through these sessions of therapeutic touching, he found himself more able to speak freely about his illness and his inevitable death. Through the practice of touching, his friends found themselves able to respond with compassion rather than fear, with openness rather than denial. And when their friend died, they found comfort in their grief through the healing touch of one another.

The group has since gone on to offer the gift of therapeutic touch to others in need of compassionate attention. Through this practice, they find themselves able to be present to those who are suffering, to experience the vulnerability of their own bodies, and to offer comfort that is rooted in a fragility that is shared by us all.

## SEXUALITY

The practice of honoring the body is perhaps nowhere more urgently needed than in the realm of sexuality. As early Christians knew, our sexuality is a source of both great pleasure and great vulnerability. Because of this, honoring the body means that we will be always moving between affirmation and renunciation, between, as another chapter in this volume puts it, saying yes and saying no.

A few years ago, a "posse" of high school boys was discovered to have been competing for "points" by having sex with girls in their classes. When interviewed, many of the girls said they had felt obliged to participate. Our young people desperately need ways of resisting the coercive power of others over their sexuality. They need communities that honor the body by nurturing the powerful sense of self required for such resistance. They, and we, need to find ways of nourishing among us a sense of reverence for our own and others' bodies.

Such reverence can flourish only in homes and religious communities where sexuality is

discussed and celebrated. When families and communities honor the body, people are formed in freedom, solidarity, and love rather than anger and frustration. Our efforts to help young people refuse others' demands on their bodies and to postpone their own gratification must be taken out of the context of "dos and don'ts" and put into the context of our hope that they will have the ability to love well and to find deep satisfaction in their sexuality as adults. This is most possible in communities where loving, committed partners model reverence toward and delight in one another's bodies. Rituals that mark the growth and development of young people can undergird the practice of honoring the body by providing community affirmations of the goodness of the body and the changes that occur in the course of its sexual development.

Jewish biblical scholar Tikva Frymer-Kensky has begun to end the silence around such changes in her collection of prayers for pregnant women and women seeking to become pregnant. She begins her book with prayers about menstruation, linking women's monthly cycle to the spiritual cycles of faith communities and the cycles of history and of lifetimes. She rejects the interpretation of menstrual blood as unclean and instead embraces it as an agent of cleansing, just as blood was used by Aaron and his sons to purify the altar in biblical Israel. Her prayers about menstruation celebrate God's covenant with women as bearers of life and the ways in which women are united by their monthly cycle to women of every time and place.

Churches and families can use such prayers to affirm the changes in sexually developing bodies. Even just a few words of acknowledgment can contribute to a sense of reverence about these changes. One woman remembers that on the evening of the onset of her first menstrual period, her father came into her room, sat on the edge of the bed, and told her how proud he was of her. She remembers feeling embarrassed and now realizes that her father was probably equally embarrassed. His willingness to speak in spite of their mutual discomfort, however, left her with a sense of the blessedness of her body that has persisted throughout her life. She hopes to have children herself and to pass on to them the reverence for the body that her father showed for her own.

As we move between affirmation of the goodness of the body and refusal of anything that diminishes or degrades the body, we must learn to repudiate the ways in which our culture values and protects some bodies more than others because of race or gender or sexual identity. When we renounce the privilege that attaches to some bodies and makes possible the denigration and violation of others, we proclaim that all bodies are reflections of God's good creation, deserving of reverence and care.

## WORSHIP

Increasing our awareness of the sacredness of the body promises to deepen our relationship to others and help us respond to one another's suffering with genuine compassion. Such awareness can also open paths for us to explore our relationship to God as embodied creatures. The flesh that was formed and shaped and loved by God is the same flesh that longs for God. "O God, you are my God, I seek you," the psalmist writes. "My soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water" (Psalm 63:1). Our desire for God is not only a desire of the spirit, but also of the body.

For Christians, communal worship provides opportunities to honor the body through rituals that deepen our experience of the body's sacredness in everyday life. The Lord's Supper reminds us that every time we gather with others to nourish our bodies, we have an opportunity to draw closer to one another and to God. Exchanging signs of peace with our bodies reminds us



that we must touch others only in peace and love. Adorning ourselves for worship, kneeling in prayer, drawing our breath in song all remind us that we come to God as embodied people.

The movement of the liturgical year also honors the body as central to our search for God. The liturgical calendar is a record of embodiment, as it takes shape around the life of Jesus and the community he called into being. Fasting during Lent, foot washing on Maundy Thursday, celebrating the Easter Vigil at midnight unite us with Christians of every age who have sought to enter bodily into the narrative of Jesus' life and death.

During Easter, it is Jesus' resurrected body that teaches us, perhaps more than any other image in Christianity, that bodies matter. In the resurrection narratives of the New Testament, Jesus insists on his body: "Look at my hands and my feet," he says in Luke's Gospel. "See that it is I myself. Touch me and see." Offering his hands and feet for inspection, Jesus gives his followers the foundation of the new vision that will be required of them as they strive to follow him when he is no longer walking and talking by their side. "Touch me," he says, "and *see*." Jesus offers his body as the lens

*She seemed to see Jesus Christ, so glorious that no human  
heart could conceive of it.... This glorious body was so noble  
and so transparent that one could clearly see the soul inside of it.  
This body was so noble that one could see oneself reflected in it more  
clearly than in a mirror. This body was so beautiful that one could  
see the angels and the saints, as if they were painted on it.*

MARGARET OF OINGT, *Mirror*

through which the disciples must look if they—and we—are to respond to the world's needs with love.

The Christian practice of honoring the body requires that we view the world through the lens of Jesus' wounded but resurrected body. His broken body brings into focus the bodies of the sick and the wounded and the exploited. His resurrection shows us the beauty God intends for all bodies. As we love and suffer, as we seek God and each other, with our bodies, we remember that every body is blessed by God, deserving of protection and care.