

Sermon: “The Body of Christ”

4/18/2021

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

A few days ago, my wife, Mallory, heard our oldest son, Thane, crying in his room. Upon entering, she asked him what was wrong. “Mom,” he replied, tears streaming down his face, “I’m sad because I won’t get to take my Legos with me to heaven.” Ever since our dog, Sam, died just over a month ago, Thane has been asking us a lot of questions about death. “Why did Sam die?” “Where is he now?” “What is it like in heaven?” “Will I get to see him again?” In these and other questions, I can hear Thane trying to process his grief. I can also hear him attempting to wrap his mind around what will happen to him, and to us, after death. Now, Mallory and I have done our best to answer his questions, telling him about heaven and eternal life. Since we’ve never died or been to heaven, though, there comes a point at which we have to admit that we just don’t know. There are some things that we believe, that we believe with all our hearts, but we just can’t know with absolute certainty in this life, and what happens after death is one of them. What happens after resurrection is another.

Imagine with me for a moment that you are one of the disciples in today’s Gospel lesson. For just over two days you’ve been mourning the death of your Lord and Savior, not to mention filled with fear and doubt over what the future might hold. Then Mary Magdalene and two of your fellow disciples come and tell you that they’ve seen the risen Lord. Instantly, your mind is filled with questions about life, death, and resurrection, much like has been the case with Thane; questions that you cannot answer and which consume you so much that when Jesus appears in your midst, what you feel is not peace and thanksgiving, but surprise and fear. “What if he’s a ghost,” you immediately think to yourself. “I mean, how do we know that he’s really here, body

and soul, just like you and me?” As Jesus looked around the room, he could see this question on the disciples’ minds, and in response he gave not just one proof of his earthly body but two.

“Look at my hands and feet,” he begins. “Look at where the Romans drove the nails through my flesh and blood. Look at these scars. Look at my hands, the hands which you witnessed heal the hurting, feed the five thousand, break the bread and pass the cup, and wash your feet three nights ago. See and feel my hands and feet for yourselves, and know that I am no ghost.” In response to these words the disciples felt joy. Their questions and doubts, however, they still couldn’t quite shake. So Jesus asked them for something to eat. After three days in the tomb, my guess is that Jesus must have been starving. He didn’t ask them for a piece of broiled fish, though, simply out of hunger. That feeling, the need for food in your stomach, is something that requires a body. Jesus took and ate the fish in their presence because doing so was further evidence that he was present among them. It was one more proof that he was no ghost, but a person, body and soul, just like them.

During this Easter season we as the church make a bold claim, that claim being that we believe in the resurrection of the body. We believe that Jesus’ body mattered to God and that our bodies matter to God as well, both in this life and in the next. Now, as some of us surely know better than others, and some of you surely better than me, there are times when our bodies fail us. Last week, after working late several nights in a row, my body decided that it had been pushed one step too far. I spent all of Saturday sore and in a daze, before finally falling asleep on the couch mere minutes after laying Tyler down in his crib. We all have people we know and love whose bodies have failed them. One of my grandfathers struggled with Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s in his later years, while another was left bedridden by a stroke. For these and other people, including myself, there is comfort in knowing that we are more than our bodies, more

than what others can see and touch. And yet, even as we are more than our bodies, our bodies are very much who we are.

Our bodies are and always will be a gift from God. They are what allow us to experience the joy of a long-awaited hug, to look deeply into someone else's eyes, to feel the warmth of the sun on our face, and to enjoy the taste of a German chocolate cake. They also tell the story of who we are and from where we have come. This scar on my forehead, for example, is from the time when I was riding my bike as a child and the front wheel of my bike hit the back wheel of my sister's, flipping me off head first. A brother-in-law of mine has the letters KPS tattooed on his wrist, the initials of his brother, who died in childbirth nearly 32 years ago. One of the many reasons why we love the people we do is because of all the quirky little things they do and say. How they smile when they see us, the sound of their laugh, and the warmth of their presence by our side. Gifts that we can give and receive because we live embodied lives. Gifts that we're not able to give to so many of the people we love right now because of our need to remain apart.

Our belief in the resurrection of the body makes us feel called to worship alongside one another and to share food and conversation with one another during fellowship, much like Jesus did with the disciples so long ago. That we cannot at this moment is frustrating and heartbreaking, both to us and to God. But here's the thing about our belief in the resurrection of the body: just as we are called to gather together as the body of Christ, so too are we called to love, respect, and take care of our bodies. God created us body and soul, and loves all that we are. That is why God grieves whenever our bodies are mistreated. God grieves whenever any body does not have enough food to eat, whenever any body struggles with drugs or alcohol, whenever any body endures sexual abuse or violence, and whenever any body is sick or dying.

And yes, that includes people sick and dying from the coronavirus, and places on each of us a call to help make sure that we and those around us don't get sick as well.

When Jesus first appeared to the disciples, they were filled with questions and doubts. So he showed them his hands and feet, his God-given body, before sharing a meal with them. He gave them the proof they needed to believe that he was not a ghost, but their risen Lord and Savior, body and soul. Then he opened up the scriptures to them. He reminded them of God's relationship to Israel, of how God had called on the Israelites to repent of and seek forgiveness for their sins, and of how Jesus' death and resurrection were necessary to fulfill all that had been written about him. He said and did these things so that the disciples might come to understand and believe in the miracle that had happened that day, so that they might be witnesses, both for their sake and for the sake of the entire world.

“Because you are witnesses,” we hear Jesus say to the disciples, “the next chapter of my story will be up to you. I have given my hands and feet to you. The time has come for you to give your hands and feet to others; for you to be my body, the body of Christ. Going forward, it will be you that bears witness to my love and concern for every body. It will be you that embodies my life in this world by taking care of one another as I have taken care of you. You will be the ones who go out and feed the hungry, heal the sick, bring hope to the downtrodden, and stand for justice and mercy. The time of my ascension is nearly at hand, but do not fear and do not doubt, for you are not and never will be alone. For through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, I am and ever will be with you.”

Around 1980, at Christ the King Catholic Church in San Diego, vandals broke the hands off a statue of Jesus. Rather than try to repair the damage, the church put a plaque on its base that reads, “I have no hands but yours.” The plaque is a reference to a poem by St. Teresa of Avila,

the sixteenth-century Spanish nun, mystic, and theologian, a poem in which she writes, “Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which to look at Christ’s compassion to the world. Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which he is to bless us now.” May we, as Christ’s body, seek to share that blessing with every body we meet, in whatever way we can, now and forevermore. Amen.