

What's A Body For?

A Sermon by Reverend Benjamin Broadbent

January 25, 2009

I.

What's a body for? What's your body, my body, for?

I think this is the main question Elizabeth Alexander was trying to answer in the poem she read at the Inauguration earlier this week. The poem came across to me as Whitman-esque, a piece you might stumble across in *Leaves of Grass*. She names people in their bodies, in their life, in their work, in different stations, different places. And when she arrives at that intriguing line, "What if the mightiest word is love?," she invokes a Christian concept, that of *agape* love, which is love beyond marital, filial, and national.

In that setting, this was a striking phrase. And again, I think she's responding to the question, "What is a body for?" Her answer is that a body is for love, love that brings together body and spirit, an embodiment of the whole life of a person, wherever we find ourselves.

As I watched the Inauguration on the television, and as I looked forward to this Sunday, I meditated on the images of bodies presented to all of us, from Brother George getting onto that helicopter, looking quite older than when he started. Also tired, a little fallen, and a little relieved.

And the image of Dick Cheney in that wheelchair. I know many commented that it was a fitting metaphor: "out with old, in with the new," so to speak. But I also saw Dick Cheney, whom many have regarded as the true power behind the presidency, as a person, a human being who hurt himself while moving. How many of us have hurt ourselves and found ourselves laid up or in a wheelchair? This was the only image of a person with a disability, though I am sure many were among those two million.

Speaking of the two million, consider that collective body and all of those bodies who were there, including our very own Lynn Young and Nancy Henjum, who are here this morning. Consider the stories they are bringing back to us about people from all over the country and their responses to this historic event.

And then the image of the long-awaited Barack Obama, walking with youth and vigor and calm, and the euphoric response of those who came to witness. And the funny bumbled oath between him and John Roberts. I appreciated the way in which Obama did not lay blame upon the bumble. But, again, I thought, these are two imperfect human beings, two men in positions of great power and authority in the world, and they bumble an oath between them. These are not saviors. These are not incarnations of God. These are people, very much like you and me.

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Mostly, I fixated on that quartet, a Jewish-American, African-American, Asian-American, Latina-American playing together, and the joy with which they played, especially Yo Yo Ma.

Did you notice the look on Yo Yo Ma's face and the way in which he moved his body in concert with that cello and the way the wind kind of caught his bangs? He was dancing as much as a seated person could do. And the beauty that was conveyed, not just in the expert conveyance of that John Williams' piece of music, but in the joy on Yoyoma's face to be part of that ensemble at that moment, expressing those kinds of emotions. What is a body for? A body is for such as that. A body is for that kind of love.

II.

Well, Corinth is a long way from Washington. Well, maybe not so far away. In writing to the church at Corinth, it is with the body that the Apostle Paul is most concerned. You see, the church at Corinth was Paul's problem child. They were kind of a seamy bunch. Paul had two issues to discuss with the church. One was that many of its members, and I think he's speaking primarily to the men, come to church, are good community members, and in their off time are sleeping with temple prostitutes.

And secondly, the people of the Corinthian Church are eating food that gets offered at that same temple. And Paul, in this morning's passage, is quoting back to the Corinthian Church their own philosophy about why this is an okay thing to do. If you were following along in your Bible, you would have noticed that in quotes are, "All things are lawful for me." So the Corinthian Church's philosophy is "All things are lawful for me. Everything is just fine, because that's the body." But when I come to be part of this new community, I'm dealing with the spirit, and that is distinct from the body.

Keep in mind that Paul was going around preaching that Jesus' imminent return was at hand. It could happen at any time. And yet what the church resolved, therefore, was, "We should probably concern ourselves with the spirit, but let's get as much of that temple prostitution as possible, too. We don't have much time. You've got to take advantage of what you've got."

The other philosophy he quotes back to them is, "Food is meant for the stomach, and the stomach meant for food." In essence, it's just food. Paul is saying, "It's not just food." The way that we use our bodies in the world has everything to do with our relationship with God and everything to do with God's justice." Consider, for example, the exploitation of those very temple prostitutes.

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It all matters. The body is who we are. There is no us apart from the body. Paul, later on in that same passage, says “Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you.” He’s breaking down the dualism between the body and the Spirit. They are not merely coexisting. The spirit does not simply reside in the body, which will eventually be cast off. The body is the very temple for God’s Holy Spirit expressing itself through you. You don’t belong to yourself. Your body does not even belong to you. The Holy Spirit resides within you, and everything you do can be an expression of it. Therefore, Paul says, “Glorify God in you body.”

III.

I find myself, again, meditating on the body at this time of year. It may have been missed in the excitement about the Inauguration that Thursday was the anniversary of the historic Roe v Wade decision, which granted a woman, not the government or any other body, the right to make a decision about her own reproductive health.

A little over a year ago I visited Washington D.C. I was invited there by the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice. Yes, there is such an organization, an interfaith organization that’s been in existence since before Roe v Wade. They gathered a number of religious leaders from around the country to lobby legislators, not on behalf of a woman’s right to choose, though that’s certainly part of the platform of that organization, but to ask them to vote in favor of increasing funding for comprehensive sexuality education.

You might wonder what is the connection between a woman’s right to make a decision about whether or not to carry a pregnancy to full term and the effort to provide comprehensive sexuality education? I think they are one in the same issue. If you give people, and women are people too, the right information so that they can think through the consequences of their decisions, and if you trust them to make those decisions, and support them in their decision, that is the best we can do.

I made an appointment with Senator Salazar. I was able to meet with two of his aides and shook his hand as he was walked down the hallway. I also made an appointment with Congressman Doug Lamborn. He was not able to attend, but I met with one of his aides. We sat down and the aide said, “What are you here for?” I said, “I’m with an organization called the ‘Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice.’ I’m a Christian pastor from Colorado Springs, and I want to ask Congressman Lamborn to support increasing funding for abstinence-based, otherwise known as comprehensive sexuality education.” I think he only heard the word “abstinence,” because he said, “Well, Congressman Lamborn is all for abstinence, so if that’s what you’re talking about, he’s in support of it.”

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I said "There's a difference between abstinence-only and abstinence-based sexuality education. Abstinence-only presents abstinence as the only moral choice. Scientific studies have shown that this approach does not work. It can delay a first sexual experience but also increases the likelihood that no contraception will be used.

I continued, "Abstinence-based, otherwise known as comprehensive, presents abstinence as by far the best way to keep from getting pregnant and to keep from getting an STD, but it also offers the variety of options are available to keep people safe.

I think the aide finally figured out from which side of the cultural divide I was speaking, but he was a very respectful listener and told me that he would bring my concern to the Congressman, and I believe that he did.

When I consider comprehensive sexuality education, I think back to the summer of 2000, when Brooke and I and a few other youth leaders took a group of 15 teenagers to Russia. That's another story altogether, but on the way back, we stopped over in Amsterdam. Do you see where this is going?

We were in a hotel in Amsterdam. The kids were over there and the adults were over here. Each group was deciding what we were going to do with the evening, and there were clearly two very different ideas. We heard the phrase "red light district" whispered more than once. And we, the adults, had a choice. We could either try to get them to go do something else, in which case we would probably have incited them to sneak out and go see the red light district anyway. Or we could say, "Hey, we thought you guys might want to go see the red light district," which is exactly what we did. It was a high moment of youth ministry for me.

We walked through the red light district in Amsterdam with these teenagers, some of whom were clutching our arms. Some were quiet and others giggled the whole time at any number of people or products that they might have seen in the windows. Back at the hotel, we had the best conversation about all of this. They shared their reactions and feelings and asked questions like, "What is that?" and "What does that do?" Lots of times, we didn't know either.

But this is exactly why comprehensive sexuality education is important. Those kinds of experiences are out there. They're on the Internet, in conversations among teenagers, in many different places, and our young people are going to experience them. And our choice, as a community, as the adults in their lives, is whether we going to accompany them on the journey so we can laugh together at the humorous aspects of our sexuality and discuss the serious aspects. Or, are we going to close our eyes, grit our teeth, and hope they make the right decision? Are we going to moralize and say, "There's only one right decision for you to make."

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We can't be that naïve. They're going to make, just like adults have, any number of complicated life decisions. Adults need to be there to give them accurate information and to support them as they make their decisions. This is what you as a Congregation provide through the Our Whole Lives Sexuality and Faith program. This program could be offered in very few public schools, because not only is it matter of fact about the kinds of things that usually get talked around in our school programs, but it also necessarily offers sexuality as a normal, natural, and beautiful part of human living. It does not elevate one form of sexuality, for example heterosexuality, as more normal or preferred than any other. It presents a spectrum of human sexuality and the curriculum is organized a way that provides plenty of opportunity for feedback, for questions, and to make connections between anatomy and relationships and decisions that people are going to need to make in their life.

I know you've been hearing a lot of lullabies from me lately. It's because a lot of my life these days is spent singing lullabies. The latest one is a song that many of you know. We've been using it as a theme song for the OWL Program for the last few years. It's called "All For Love." I first heard it at a National Youth Event of the United Church of Christ. Christopher Grundy, who wrote it, introduced the song to about 4000 teenagers by saying, "You know that song on the radio, 'Come on baby, we ain't nothing but mammals, so let's do it like they do on the Discovery Channel?'" (I'm thinking this could be a hymn straight out of the Corinthian Church.)

Grundy said, "We the Church cannot be silent in response to this image of sexuality." I believe he was talking about *agape* love, which does not make that distinction between body and soul, but brings them together into our whole life, the way we live in all of our relationships. Then he invited these three teenage boys to sing with him. It moved me to hear three teenage boys sing about the body being all for love.

The other day I was changing my daughter, little Sophia, five months old. There she was, in a moment of nakedness with one diaper off and the next yet to go on, In that moment, I just beheld her, her round belly, her rosy cheeks, her tongue (which had a life of its own), her limbs. She's just starting to discover her body, finding her hand all of a sudden and staring at it, mystified. I started to sing the song:

You have given me this body. You have given me this heart.
You have given me these hands and all for love, all for love.
So to your dreams may I be faithful, to my own promises be true.
And may every kiss and touch and work become one more revelation of you.
One more revelation of the sweet and tender love that comes from you.

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It's a prayer. It's a prayer that acknowledges before God that every part of our body, even the parts that we dare not speak of in church, are there all for love. Our chests, all for love. Our cheeks, all for love. Our thighs, all for love. Our fingertips, all for love. Our lips, all for love. Our toes, all for love. All of it for love. All of us for love.

Amen.