

Beach Body of Christ—Broken?

Salem United Methodist Church

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Move me prayer

The Body of Christ!

What a beautiful Sunday School phrase. Something idyllic. Naïve. Simple.

Something that we like to say and want to believe but.... Do we see it? Do we have a vision for how it might work?

[pause]

If I were to talk about the body of Christ with most of my “unchurched” friends?

“Body of Christ? Yeah? Right. Whatever. When’s the last time *that* body moved?”

I have all kinds of things that I imagine they might think about our faith. Things I’ve heard, things I put together. Things I’ve thought at different times. I wonder if you’ve heard any of it, too.

- *Churches? They’re filled with hopeful hypocrites. Gullible ones!*

- *Our world is a mess. Where is this God of theirs? Why hasn't that God swooped down with that all-powerful might and made a difference? **Any** difference.*
- *I mean, come on. I've had a tough time recently. People I love, they've died. My job? It's a mess. My house is falling apart and I have no clue how I'll pay for it. Stimulus checks only go so far. What has God done for me?*
- *What about the world? I mean. Come on. Have you looked at our court system? Who gets arrested? The inequity in the charges? **Where is God?***
- *And what about this pandemic! And the vaccine rollout! And the hospitals getting overwhelmed!*
- *And what about the people who are hurting and don't even know how to protest or where to make change?*
- *Our world is **BROKEN**. If this is the body of Christ? Ha! Well, it's certainly not a powerful one. I mean, come on.*
- *Church people? They make it sound like God can do anything. Like if only I would **trust** everything would come together. Like **if only** I prayed **more** or went to church **more** that God would... I don't know, drop a bundle of grace on me or something. Then, poof! My problems would disappear.*
- *I grew up in the church. I went to youth group. I prayed. I asked God to help me. I did all the right things. What did it get me? [0!] **Nothing**. I*

got sick of the promises. God never showed up. I got tired of being blamed for it. Like I can control God!

Does any of this sound familiar to you? People you know? Things you've seen on facebook or other social media? On news articles? I've seen some of this in surveys. That people are spiritual but not religious because they *want to know God but don't see God in the church.*

This all sounds **broken** to me.

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Broken.

What does it mean to be broken?

A cup that falls off a table and smashes into many pieces is broken.

Can a person be broken?

Can a system be broken?

Is the church broken? This body of Christ?

Can a living body be broken?

In today's scripture, we see an iconic moment. This is often called the Doubting Thomas story. The day of Jesus resurrection, Easter evening, he shows up to the disciples who were gathered in a home with locked doors. He shows up and shows them his injuries. **Once they see them**, they recognize Jesus and rejoice. Jesus gives them instructions: receive the Holy Spirit, forgive sins. During the week, Thomas, who wasn't with the others, hears about this miraculous moment. He basically says, when I've seen it like you have, then I'll believe. And, I guess he believes enough, because rather than abandoning the other disciples as crazy, he joins them in the room the next week.

And here's where it gets really interesting for me, Jesus shows up again and shows them his wounds again.

Is anyone else surprised that Jesus still has wounds? It's a week later yes, but *he's in his resurrection body!*

I mean, the morning that Mary goes to find Jesus in the garden... **she doesn't recognize him** until he says her name. she's spent years in his company! She's spent years watching him, following him. How could she (**of all people!**) not recognize him?

Does he look different? Was she just not expecting to see him?

There's another story where Jesus is walking along with two disciples and talking with them, and they don't recognize him either! We have these stories that make me

think he must look different! Some may say he has a fancy resurrection body! You know, acne gone, his hair: shiny and smooth, and (ooh!) he's 4 inches taller!

[shrug] Maybe.

Or, maybe his injuries have left their mark.

Maybe his body looks broken.

They only recognize him by his words and his wounds. Not his face, his stature, his bearing. The disciples don't rejoice at seeing him until after he shows them his hands and side. Check v. 20 if you don't believe me. I won't be offended!

From this text, I am convinced that Jesus' body is still broken after his resurrection.

Isn't that... kind of weird to anyone else? Jesus was famous for healing the unhealable.

Sight to the blind.

Demons banished.

Leprosy wiped away.

...Can't he heal his own injuries?

So, when we say "we are the Body of Christ" ... What does that mean?

The image Christ gave us was of the **broken** bread and **poured out** wine. Even that image isn't of something whole.

What if that's because his actual body is broken? What if that's what makes it possible for us to be part of it?

We have to ask: When we say we are the body of Christ... what body are we trying to look like? To be like? Is our Christ-body an able-bodied, self-sufficient white man with a strong following? Decisive and risk-taking? Wise and loving? Peaceful to hold children and lambs?

If that's our model, if **that body** is our Jesus body, **then no matter the attributes we assign**, (loving, wise, decisive, peaceful, whatever) *it will always be out of shape.*

As long as we picture Jesus as able-bodied, white, and self-sufficient, we cannot understand what it means to be the body of Christ.

And I'm serious about this. This is not semantics. This is not me looking too closely at the texts and drawing conclusions that aren't there for the sake of having an interesting sermon. *This is what I'm seeing in the text. If I could find something easier to share, I would. If I could find something more important to share, I would. But I can't. This is what I'm seeing. This is what God pushed me towards this week.*

Here's the deal. Injuries from crucifixion left the body with permanent disabilities. The nails went through nerves and tendons and perhaps bones in ways that could not be fully repaired naturally and even now the surgical outcomes would be dicey.

I did some research on just the likely hand injuries to share with you. If you want my sources, I'll have them in the end of the sermon that will be posted online. Keep in mind that this is me reading through medical journals and wading through terminology I don't know, so take it with a grain of salt and do your own reading!

When the nails went through Jesus' hands, it didn't go through the palm. It went through the wrist, right by or on the median nerve. This part I'm very sure of. We're all likely pretty familiar with the median nerve, actually. That nerve is the same one that hurts when you have carpal tunnel. If you have carpal tunnel, go ahead and clutch your wrists in solidarity! Carpal tunnel is caused by too much pressure on the median nerve. It can be dealt with by surgery or by being more gentle with your wrists and hands. I feel this. I have tendonitis in my wrists that shoots up to my elbows. I've had it since high school and have had to completely relearn all kinds of typing things. It's not the same, but the feeling is close enough that it gets mistakenly diagnosed as carpal tunnel. Relearning things was a huge pain. It took a ton of mental effort. But, it is mostly gone and I don't have to think about it anymore. Perhaps you have a similar story with hand injuries. Crucifixion, on the other hand, is an actual puncture through the nerve. So not pressure, but actually breaking through.

So, there's a ton of medical literature on healing median nerves! You medical people will have to help clarify things later. But, here's what I learned. If the median nerve is severed, the person can develop something called "amputation neuromas" ... this sounds horrible. It's when the nerve tries to grow back but runs

into scar tissue and develops a mass around it instead. That mass gets super sensitive to pain. So even the smallest, lightest touch sends super strong pain signals to your brain.

Even now, even with the best doctors working on surgical responses to injuries around the median nerve, the literature I read said healing attempts aren't always successful. Even if they can fix the nerves, they may not gain full use of their hand again. **Without surgical treatment they can have chronic pain from within, poor motor function, and inability to recognize important external pain, like touching fire.**

So, it sounds to me like Jesus' hands would have been nerve centers where the smallest touch would have been excruciating. I've seen people with carpal tunnel have to give up all kinds of things like love, like picking up their children, because the pain is too much. I've had moments where I've looked at a sink handle and thought, "this is going to hurt." And that's just from nerve pressure! Not even from these horrible neuromas.

So, it sounds like Jesus probably couldn't use his hands very well anymore. Perhaps grabbing door handles, utensils, tools, food... perhaps that all became part of a chronic pain response. I can't believe he'd offer to let Thomas touch it! Especially if he had that sensitive touch pain.

And this isn't even talking about the side stab wound, and the arches of his feet. This isn't talking about the whipping or beating. This is just **one piece** of his recovery.

Why would Jesus keep this broken body in the resurrection?

And what does that have to do with my beach body! Excuse me, **our** Beach Body.

Listen.

Christ is perfect. The Body of Christ is perfect.

Christ is *broken*. The Body of Christ is broken.

Both are true. This is a tension that we hold. We are striving to be like Christ, but we've got some holes and some pain that we don't know how to heal.

So the question, I think, is how do we care for our broken bits? How do we live with chronic pain? If our nervous system is reacting to old injuries that didn't heal well?

I know this all sounds so abstract. How about this.

Imagine someone who insulted you once. Perhaps it was overt and in your face. Perhaps it was behind your back. Perhaps it was snide and dressed up like a back handed compliment.

I'll never forget the first time someone I thought was a friend cursed me out. It was shocking. It hurt. Its part of my mental memory, and my body memory. I remember the shock spreading through my body. I remember that I started to cry before I was aware that my feelings were hurt. It wasn't just my mind. My whole body was part of the experience.

And I remember it with my mind, but my body also remembers what that shock felt like.

Before that moment, I have wonderful, positive memories with this friend. Many more positive than negative. Yet, when I think of her, especially since we never became friends again afterwards, my body only remembers the shock.

Our communities have memory, too. We remember the positive and negative things that happen. We remember moments of trauma and moments of triumph. I bet the towns around Sandy Hook Elementary and Virginia Tech have traumatic memories. Not everyone in town will know everything that happened. But sometimes things happen that trigger that memory, and the community will respond. Right? We've seen this happen.

*****This church has experienced it.** When I got here, I started to hear stories about some of the different loss that this community has walked through together. I can see that even the people who didn't directly feel each loss still feel it with their siblings in Christ. Someone told me that one of the beautiful things about Salem is that you may not know the person sitting a few pews away, but if they need something, you'll respond because you're all family here. You feel their need in your heart and in your body-even if you don't know them.

That's part of how the Body of Christ responds to things. We are part of the world and we pay attention to when our hands are too close to the fire, too close to what hurts.

This is where the Sunday school answer becomes true again. We are the Body of Christ. We do get to care for each other as the hands and the feet of the world.

The part that's missing, that we need to learn, is that many parts of the body are hurting. Not just in our church, but in the whole world. Being a Christian may mean having chronic pain in your heart for people you've never met. It means not closing yourself off to others when their pain is too much. And I'm not necessarily talking about individuals. I'm also thinking about groups that are crying out. Do we feel the pain of refugees who grew up hunting and fishing until the game was gone and the waters were polluted? They lost the home and livelihood their family has relied on for generations and now they have no place to go. What does it mean for them to be part of our nervous system? Can you feel them?

We won't be able to solve every problem in the world. But, if it's part of our body, we'll be able to have compassion for it. We'll be able to have empathy.

If your Jesus is self-sufficient and walking upright with a confident swagger, you've missed the mark. There is too much that hurts.

And so, if our church, in trying to be followers of Christ; in trying to be the Body of Christ, is trying to do that with self-sufficiency, upright, with a swagger, we've missed the mark. That means we are missing what hurts. *It means we can't feel what is happening in our body.*

Now, I'm not trying to make chronic pain sound cool. I'm not trying to say that we all need to be in pain all the time. A book that has formed me is called, "The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability" by Nancy L. Eiesland. If you want to read something incredible about God, the church, and disabilities, I highly recommend it. She writes that acting as though virtuous suffering is a good thing is not helpful or lifegiving for people with disabilities or pain. However, she also writes that while it is normal to "quest for a better body" having respect for the body you're in is an act of resistance and liberation. For those of us who can use our bodies, who aren't feeling the chronic pain all the time, part of our role can be in learning about those who are and doing what we can to make it better while also loving our body in all it's brokenness.

If we are the body of Christ, we may need to install ramps and electric doors. Both metaphorically and literally! We already have some! Our church building is very accessible, physically.

Is it accessible emotionally or spiritually? Are we people who ask for help? Are we people who depend on others? Are we people who look for other broken people and ask them what kinds of ramps they need, what kind of support they want? Do we assume everyone will benefit from the same access as we've wanted?

I don't have a list of solutions for us this week.

What I have is a certainty that Christ's body is broken. And if Christ's body is broken, then there's room for a whole lot of broken people.

Perhaps our brokenness, perhaps Jesus' brokenness is what makes it possible for us to see the problems that need solutions. If our Jesus were self-sufficient, and able-bodied, and looked like us, then we could shut our eyes and hearts to everything that looked and felt different. But Jesus has felt the worst. So now, if we see him, we can see that, too.

Perhaps that doesn't feel like a blessing. Perhaps you're so tired of seeing the pain in the world that you just want to stick your head in the sand. I've certainly felt that. That's our call to do this together. We can't change the world alone. We can't recognize and heal all the world's hurt alone. We are a whole body. We need to go together.

And that is the good news.

Amen.

References:

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