

## Returning to Our Senses

Lent is a very physical season. The stories and practices of Lent can make us acutely aware of our bodies. I don't mean the vain or self-conscious ways that reflect our culture. Rather, this is season of going without comfort and taking on discipline, of embracing mortality, of stories of suffering and miracle told in vivid sensory detail.

If you've given up sweets and find a piece of chocolate cake waved before your eyes, you know what I'm talking about. If you've begun to feel the physical exhaustion of Holy Week, then you know what I'm talking about. If you have listened closely to the lectionary, to gospel stories marked by graphic detail and epistles that speak of spirit and flesh, then you know what I'm talking about.

Now, don't let anyone tell you that the body is bad, that God created it for anything other than goodness. The words of scripture and the rituals of our faith tell otherwise. Even the words of the Epistles in Lent, written either by Paul or by his disciples – can be misinterpreted to tell a dualistic story, that our bodies are profane vessels that contain and constrain our spirits. The Celts have long seen this as precisely backwards – that the Body is in fact in the soul – but even so let's not get stuck misreading Paul as so many have done. Our readings in Lent have spoken of a division between living in death and living in life, true, but the point has been that *setting our minds* on the flesh, not the flesh itself, leads us away from God.

Jesus cared on this evening not just for the souls of his friends; indeed, he washed their very bodies. The washing of feet would not have been the exotic ritual that it seems to many of us today, of course. It would have been customary, if not expected, to have a basin of water by the door for visitors to wash after a dusty journey. The remarkable thing here was that Jesus, the host himself, would be the one to do the washing, taking the place of the servant. Even in the simple act of disrobing Jesus sets aside any trappings of power or status or comfort in order to serve those he loved.

The simple acts of this evening – washing, eating, drinking – speak of an embodied holiness that is at the heart of our faith. The postcommunion prayer from the Rite I liturgy addresses God with the bold claim that

We are very members incorporate in the mystical body of thy Son, the blessed company of all faithful people; and are also heirs, through hope, of they everlasting kingdom.<sup>i</sup>

We are *members incorporate* in the Body of Christ: a phrase with “corpus/body” right at the heart of it. Each touch is an act of love, of recognition of the divine presence in one another, of honoring the dignity in the body and spirit of each person.

How can we as Christians regard the body as anything less than holy, when our two primary rituals of baptism and Eucharist are really nothing more than washing, and feeding?

Paul, of course, warns us not to set our minds on the flesh. (Again, it isn’t the flesh itself, but how we regard it). We all know the temptation to objectify the body, using the senses as conduits away from God, as pathways towards a more intoxicated way of living our lives, as a means of escape from the holy into a frightening and alienated interiority. But Jesus instead draws us through our senses into a deeper sense of what is true.

Maundy Thursday can be understood – and I know I’m going to get in trouble for this – as a feast of Christian Sensuality. We might hear that in a vulgar way, but think about the fullness of that word: of receiving the world through our senses. I draw that word from something that James Baldwin wrote in *The Fire Next Time*. He wasn’t writing about sexuality. Instead, he writes,

I am referring to something much simpler and much less fanciful. To be sensual, I think, is to respect and rejoice in the force of life, of life itself, and to be *present* in all that one does, from the effort to loving to the breaking of bread.<sup>ii</sup>

When Jesus removes his outer robe to wrap it around his waist, it is an act, an almost ritualistic one, of presence and deep intention. When he takes the feet of his friends in his hands, it is an act of incredible openness and vulnerability for all involved. He then breaks the bread and drinks wine with his friends. These are sensual acts, meant to tend to the souls of his friends by caring for their bodies. They were there simply to respect and rejoice in the force of life, and in sharing Eucharist we do the same thing.

Sadly, we know all too well what it looks like when human beings fail to do this. Curiously, this kind of un-joy-fulness tends to result in harm done to *bodies*, and usually it’s someone else’s body that gets damaged. I can think of no better example than the terrible Palm Sunday massacre last week, in which dozens of Coptic Christians were killed by suicide bombers in Egypt. Images of a church nave covered in blood betray a terrible disrespect for these clay vessels that God

gives us: to use one's own body as a weapon, to take the lives of others so violently, is the complete opposite of what we celebrate this evening. To shed blood in the very space where bodies are regularly washed and fed, and where once a year feet are washed, shows the terrible contrast between loving one another as Jesus loves us, and a violent hatred of the things that God has created.

This grieves us. The indifference that leads to folk going without food and shelter grieves us. The objectivization of our bodies by a shallow and sex-crazed culture grieves us...or at least, it should grieve us a lot more than it does. And so as we look beyond our doors, as we watch the news, as we hear the stories and our hearts break, we cry out and we think, "will we ever come to our senses?"

Jesus wraps the towel around his waist as if to say, you will come to your senses by returning to your senses. As John O'Donohue writes,

A renewal, indeed a complete transformation of your life, can come through attention to your senses. Your senses are the guides to take you deep into the inner world of your heart...The senses are our bridges to the world...Human skin is porous; the world flows through you...By being attuned to the wisdom of your senses, you will never become an exile in your own life, an outsider lost in an external spiritual place that your will and intellect have constructed. <sup>iii</sup>

We can only return to our senses by using them. Through the feel of water, the taste of bread and wine, the smell of incense and smoke, the sight of veiled crosses and the bare altar and the sounds of song, we step away from the disembodied places that we've created in our minds, and enter instead the sanctuary of God's presence. It is as grand as incense rising to heaven, and as simple as warm water on our tired feet.

*The Rev. Bernard J. Owens, The Second Sunday in Lent, Year A, March 12, 2017, St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Greensboro, North Carolina*

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<sup>i</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 339

<sup>ii</sup> James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 43

<sup>iii</sup> John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara*, 58