

From the Pastor's Desk:
A Sermon for Sunday, May 21, 2023 - Ascension Sunday

I'm going to have to talk some deep theology today. But before you lay down in the pew and settle in for a 20-minute catnap, let me explain by using a *Peanuts* cartoon. As you can see, Lucy and Linus are stuck indoors on a rainy day. Clearly depressed by this fact, Lucy – you know, the one who routinely offers psychological services for a nickel – begins to worry that the rain might never stop and that it might flood the entire world. Linus, the seemingly psychologically weaker of the two as evidenced by his perpetual need for a security blanket, calmly remarks that this is impossible because God has promised to never do that again and has given us the rainbow as a sign of this promise. Lucy remarks that this makes her feel better to which Linus then replies, “Sound theology has a way of doing that!”

Be careful with this comic strip, though, for the minute you start thinking to yourself, “Yeah! Sound theology *does* have a way of doing that!,” well, that’s the beginning to finding yourself going to seminary and becoming a pastor! Also, quick aside, it is significant that Linus doesn’t have his blankie with him in this strip. Just like in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, where Linus drops his blanket when he recites the nativity story for Luke’s gospel, whenever Linus is preaching, is exercising his theologian-in-residence role, his security blanket is nowhere to be found. What a lovely little nuance Charles Schultz has blessed us with!

Like my Peanut-y predecessor, Linus, I’m also going to put on my theologian-in-residence mantle and take us into some deep theology. This is done not as some exercise of ego, not in honor of ivory towers everywhere, but because the deeper the theology, then the deeper the comfort. And today’s deep theology centers on the Ascension of Jesus Christ from this world to the right hand of God the Father in heaven.

The Ascension, as an event, is both the culmination and re-commencement of the Incarnation. The Incarnation, which which you might better know by its street name “Christmas,” is that moment of God’s history with God’s people that God voluntarily transcends the barrier between spirit and flesh, transcends the barrier between Creator and creation, by becoming human in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. To be sure, Israel had anthropomorphized God in some of their metaphors throughout their scriptures, but no one literally believed that God had a real body – a body that needed to eat and sleep and could be measured in height, weight, blood pressure, and BMI. No one thought that possible; they even thought such a notion heretical. But then comes Christmas and all of the sudden God has a body.

And we know what God did with that body. Jesus walked and talked, He healed and comforted, He felt physical pain and emotional anguish. He was, in a word, human. All that we know, experience, suffer, and enjoy, God has experienced in God’s self too. And the miracle of this all, of course, is not lost on us. It’s why we dedicate a

season called “Advent” to anticipating this miracle and its why we gather our bodies next to the bodies of all those we love at Christmas to celebrate and rejoice.

But now is the time when Jesus is going to leave His disciples. And how does Jesus leave? Well, the same way He was born, the same way He lived, the same way He died, the same way He was raised from the dead – that is, He does it bodily. Jesus’ body ascends into heaven and, as the Apostles Creed teaches us, “sits at the right hand of God the Father, judging the quick and the dead.” And this is where the deep theology really kicks in because just in the same way that earth is shot through with the presence of the divine, so in heaven now is a representation of the same flesh that you and I share. No one had ever thought this possible prior to the Ascension.

Okay, so, at this point you’re probably thinking that I only flashed that cartoon to dupe you into thinking that this deep theology would bring deep comfort, but so far I’m only speaking in these broad, sweeping philosophical terms. So, let’s make that turn to finding our deep comfort in this story.

Your body is important. Yes. Yours. Your body. The one whose blood pressure is too high, whose cholesterol is being monitored every three months. That one. The one that has the scar from falling off your bike at 11-years-old and that other scar from your appendectomy. As well as all those emotional scars you’ve accumulated because, as the popular book title reveals, *The Body Keeps the Score*. Yep, your body. The one whose reflection in the mirror after a shower smuggles in feelings of discontent and insecurity. Yes, that body. It is important. And the reason I know it is important is because the story that runs from incarnation to ascension is a story about how even our lowly flesh can hold the dignity, power, might, and glory of God. Bodies, as a category, are more esteemed than even our “spirits” or “souls” because God was already Spirit, but chose a body.

Of course, that’s not how we walk through the world much of the time, but what if it was? What if we passed every body on the street and thought, “Wow! A representation of God!” I mean, if you’re single, that could be your pick-up line. “Dang, Boo! Your body looks like a reflection of the Creator of the universe. When’s a good time to pick you up tonight?” Yeah, so definitely try that if you hope *not* to go on any dates.

Okay, creepy applications put aside, what would it mean to see the huddled masses at the border as not 10,000 or 100,000 (depending upon which fear-mongering link you click on) amassed job-stealing, social-wrecking, “aliens,” but as 10,000 or 100,000 representations of God? What would it mean to see a body with Downs Syndrome not for its genetic abnormality, but as the presentation of God to your very eyes? Prior to the incarnation and ascension, which serve as the first and last Word on the dignity of our embodied lives,

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we could not – maybe even should not – think this. But now, because Christ has ascended in bodily form, it should be the only thing we think. Human bodies are full of dignity and due honor because humanity is already present in heaven. Yes, our bodies are capable of even that.

I suspect that I'm not alone in spending at least some time looking at my body for all the ways I feel like it is failing me. It gets sleepy when I'd rather it keep working. It gets tingly with anxiety when life feels like too much. It bulges in certain t-shirts in a way that society has taught me is unflattering and unattractive. It gives me every reason to dislike it, to regard it as a burden to bear until such time as I might be rid of it. But all of that thinking fails to recognize the deep meaning, the deep theology, and – yes – the deep comfort of recognizing the God-blessedness of bodies.

The ascension teaches us that our bodies are more than meat wagons that our souls ride in until such time as we die, and our souls can go to heaven. Our souls do not go to heaven because it isn't a soul that goes to heaven in Jesus' ascension, but rather His body. And this is a really, really radical message because I think the vast majority of people – maybe even the vast majority of *Christians* – think too little of our bodies. Our society and our bad theology have taught us that bodies are just meat wagons. Some of us get sleek, shiny, sexy meat wagons and others of us get meat wagons that look like a 60s-era Volkswagen bus, but it's all meat wagons for all. As an extension of this flawed thinking, we get a little too dismissive about other peoples' meat wagons – especially those meat wagons that come in colors different from our own. As an extension of our bad, *discomforting* atheology around bodies, we ignore the cries of the hungry, the enslavement of the imprisoned, the bodily fleeing of bodily torture that drives some bodies hundreds of miles from their home to a strange land that, well, doesn't really love bodies all that well, but might – *might!* – be better than where they're coming from.

The reality is bleak: Most of the worst injustices in our society take place in bodies. Even scandals like the train wreck in East Palestine, Ohio is only a scandal because the toxins released threaten the health and well-being of so many bodies. No, our society is no good at caring for bodies. If your body is murdered tomorrow, you statistically have only a coin-flip's chance of the murderer being arrested. And if a 50-percent clearance rate seems tragically low, then don't investigate the clearance rate for sexual assault and rape, which hovers closer to only one-in-three odds (and that's only amongst *reported* assaults! The best researchers can determine, only 16-40% of rapes are even reported. One-third of 16-percent would be 5-percent; one-third of 40-percent would be 14-percent clearance rate). No, our society is no good with bodies. We root fundamental body-care – like housing, health-care, food, and water – to something as tumultuous as employment and

money. I mean, jobs come and jobs go – the economy goes up and the economy goes down – but the one constant in all that flux is the persistence of bodies. Why should the persistent be subject to the whims of the fluctuating?

But here's the Good News: Where the world fails us, God has given us the Church. God has given us a place to place our bodies where they can be tended to and nurtured, where they can be fed and – at least according to our Deacons Shop – even clothed. God has given us the Church so that when we need the comfort of a reassuring pat on our hand or a warm embrace, we have a place to receive that too. God has given us the Church so that trans bodies and non-binary bodies can be addressed as they are and not on the basis of a legal document called a "birth certificate" – as if all of life can be accurately summed up in birth and not living, as if those little birthed bodies aren't going to change and grow. Most of all, God has given us the clarifying insights of good theology to spur us forward to doing all that we're called to do, to be a place where our bodies can be put to work loving the bodies of our neighbors. And, again, all of this because God's body ascended into heaven. This is why Jesus left. Thanks be to God!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.