



THE EPISCOPAL CENTER FOR EMBODIED FAITH
PRESENTS
*Theological Reflections on Embodied Faith: **Body Talk***

Claiming Our Flesh
Ellie Roscher

My feet were still painfully swollen a week after my son was born. The skin stretched taut, it looked like someone else's feet were attached to my legs. While Simon napped, Dan, my spouse, brought a small tub of warm, soapy water over to the couch. He gently placed my feet in the tub. At his first touch, I crumbled in tears. I had endured two miscarriages and a hard pregnancy. I labored for fifty-eight hours before birthing a nine and a half pound baby via cesarean section. My body and spirit were tired. The emotion kept coming out of my body in waves. Surrendering to my fatigue, I wondered if I would ever reach the bottom of my grief.

Dan slowly, deliberately dabbed my feet dry, then massaged and rubbed lotion into each bulging foot. The gentle, affectionate attention felt like mercy. It reminded me that I had a body. After sharing my body for so long, it belonged to me again. I had to take stock of this new version of me, with new scars and memories, new milk and primal feelings of mother love surging through me. I thought of the woman who anointed Jesus' feet. How grateful he must have felt, in all his humanity, that someone finally touched him back with compassion and care and reminded him that he had a body, too.

Dan rose and kissed me twice. "Thank you," I whispered, still crying softly. He unlocked a clog that was holding my sorrow hostage. I was unstuck. The next morning he glanced down and said, "Look, your feet. They're back."

Bodies Matter to God

In an arguably disembodied society and church, our Creator calls us to respect and use the bodies we were given. How can we claim and celebrate our bodies, and how can the church encourage and equip us to journey inward? These questions are timely and venture us toward human-made walls that are holding us back. On our path to higher consciousness as individuals and societies, our disembodiment is limiting our potential.

Our bodies are brilliant, often smarter than we give them credit for. Consider athletes and actors who work to suspend thought in order to clear up room for more pure, unencumbered physical genius. Consider the communication that happens between a baby's body and a mother's body during pregnancy and breastfeeding. Or the body's ability to warn us of danger, maintain homeostasis, stay alive with numerous involuntary and continuous actions. Bodies are nothing short of astounding.

We comprehend and apply meaning to the world because of our bodies, our senses. We know that we are individuals dwelling among others. With skin as a boundary, our bodies are homes to experiences, memories and beliefs. We experience the world as part of the world, as in the world. It is our bodies that exist in the world and inform the inner self.

Our bodies are not a hindrance to knowledge, but the vehicles with which the self exists and acquires knowledge. I can approach my body with reverence, curiosity, honesty, and awe. I can see my body clearly as an instrument of knowledge. Taking the posture of reverence and wonder honors ourselves and our Creator.

Bodies matter to God. The creation of our bodies took time and contemplation, mud and breath. God works with Adam over time to create a suitable partner. Then God took on a body. Now nothing – not even the death of our bodies – can separate us from the love of God. There is a tenderness in God’s knowledge of our bodies, yet there is a pervasive ignoring of those bodies in our church. Bodies are a gift from God. How we talk to our bodies, treat them, and care for them is how we answer that gift. It’s a form of prayer. Our bodies are powerful if we stay awake to them. I take my body seriously. God takes my body seriously, too.

Being out of touch with our bodies plays a role in some forms of obesity, as well as eating disorders, unhealthy sexual behaviors, and addictions. To address racism, misogyny and homophobia, we must acknowledge our bodies. What is hindering us from the awe and appreciation of our bodies that stewardship requires?

Dangerous Dualism

The book called the Song of Songs (or Song of Solomon) from the Old Testament, gives a sense of how bodies were celebrated in Pre-Christian Hebrew life. The Greeks, however, embraced a mind-body dualism. Plato distinguished between the sacredness of love that comes from the soul and the profanity of love that comes from the body. The mind is pure, while the body is dirty.

Leaders in the early church thought the end times were near, and wanted to differentiate itself from the rest of society. Virginity, chastity, purity, piety, and ultimately martyrdom were all virtues of the early church. Suspicious of his libido, Augustine tied sex to original sin. Dualism then thrived in the Middle Ages as physical penance punished the body for its ability to override logic and reason. Aquinas, Calvin, and Luther connected bodily pleasure to the Fall. The mind was holy, bringing us closer to God. The body was sinful, tugging us toward hell.

Dualism today includes physical deprivation as religious practice, supposedly God-ordained, Bible-backed misogyny and homophobia, and standing still in worship. We

take communion, the body of Christ, without letting that nourishment transform how we treat our bodies.

The church's disembodiment reflects societal struggles. We eat our food without tasting it, we buy gym memberships but don't go, we ignore headaches by popping more Advil, and we relax to hours of television every night. I have to imagine God's vision for our lives incorporates our bodies. Won't body wellness contribute to us becoming our best, most faithful selves?

We in the church today have an opportunity to be the leaders in body stewardship. We are free to deny mind-body dualism because we don't worship Augustine or Luther. We worship Jesus. And bodies matter to Jesus.

God, Embodied

In life, by bringing sight to the blind, stopping the flow of blood, and bringing people back to life, Jesus restored not only people's health but their status. He brought people on the margins back into the center of society. He healed with a gentle human touch that many must have craved in a society that shunned and blamed them for their afflictions.

In death, Jesus' body was disrobed, whipped, spat upon, and put to death. Jesus cried out to God, feeling abandonment in his body. Taking on the darkness of humanity, experiencing death as a slave and enduring it, he handed divinity over to us, the very ones who deserve it the least. We believe that Jesus, fully God and fully human, suffered and died and rose again. At the center of our faith is suffering, so that at the center of our faith can be love. God took on a body so that we could fall in love with Christ. In communion we are reminded of this gift, sustained by Jesus' body and blood.

And then, after resurrection, came the lovely moment when Jesus allowed Thomas to touch his wounds. I'm grateful for Thomas' desire for evidence. It's such a human reaction, so that we too can witness Jesus' resurrected body. His body, with wounds still fresh, rose from the dead. His resurrected body radiates with good news.

We can get back to the sense that our bodies are a gift from God. Claiming and loving our bodies as beautiful and powerful is the response to this gift. Our bodies are ours to enjoy. Ours with which to serve. We in the church today have an opportunity to be the leaders, the spokespeople for truth and healing. In order to do so, we have to acknowledge our history of dualism and privilege. We have to talk about the color of our skin and our sexuality.

As followers of Jesus, as worshipers of God, as students of the Song of Songs, we the church can lead the way back to our bodies. This courageous journey can bring healing and reconciliation, abounding with wonder and awe.

When my son was a few months old, I would bring him into bed with me each morning and watch him wake up. I loved the stretch of time when he was discovering his hands. He held his hands right in front of his unblinking eyes, rotating them slowly to study each finger in a way that invited me into the revelry.

“I know Simon, I know,” I’d coo. “Aren't your hands amazing? Aren't we just so lucky to have hands? You are going to do amazing things with those hands in your life. You have feet, too! And a whole body, and another day in that body to play, play, play. Isn't it grand?”

My eyes filled with tears.
I believe it for him. I believe it for me.

Reflection Questions

- 1) What is your favorite thing to do in your body?
- 2) With which negative views of your body would God disagree?
- 3) What does it look like when you are ignoring your body?
- 4) How do you see minds being respected more than bodies in our culture?
- 5) What would it require to prioritize, tend to, and celebrate your body in your life?

For Further Exploration

- 1) Watch the documentary *Embrace* and think about how your family, friends, church, and society either encourage or discourage you from embracing your body.
- 2) Read through one of the gospels and take note of the role bodies play in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.
- 3) Read *Embodiment* by James B. Nelson to explore the history of dualism in the church more fully.
- 4) Read *Pascalian Meditations* by Pierre Bourdieu. His idea of habits is very helpful in thinking about why privileged people can get away with being disembodied.

Note: A longer version of this essay can be found in Beyond The Offering Plate in a chapter about stewardship of the body called “On Flesh.”

About the Author: Ellie Roscher writes, edits and teaches at the crossroads of faith, simplicity, gender, sexuality and justice education. Author of *Play Like a Girl* and *How Coffee Saved My Life*, she lives in Minneapolis with her spouse and two sons.