

“Worshipping with Body & Soul”

Isaiah 58.1–12 & Matthew 6.1–6

The Rev. Hal Chorprenning, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, Ash Wed. 2008

“From dust you came, to dust you shall return.” Those are weighty words Sharon and I speak each year on Ash Wednesday as we apply a smudge of ash to the foreheads of the people who form this congregation. It is a reminder of the mortality of our human bodies, which has its roots in the second chapter of Genesis¹: “Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life: and the man became a living being.” And we hear echoes of it throughout scripture. Isaiah² says, “We are the clay, and you are our potter.” And Paul wrote to the Corinthians about the immortality of the soul: “We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.”³ (Interestingly, the gospels don’t mention “clay” and the only time Jesus talks about “dust” is to remind us to brush it off our feet as a testimony against those who don’t welcome his disciples.)

It isn’t the case that we should hate the body and love the soul, as Paul – in very pagan Greek form – suggests. Our bodies are the homes we live in. As the Irish poet and philosopher John O’Donohue writes, “The human body is beautiful. It is such a privilege to be embodied. You have a relationship to a place through the body. It is no wonder that humans have always been fascinated by place. Place offers us a home here; without place we would literally have no where. Landscape is the ultimate where; and in landscape the house that we call *home* is our intimate place. The home is decorated and personalized; it takes on the soul of the person who lives there and becomes the mirror of the spirit. Yet in the deepest sense, the body is the most intimate place. Your body is your clay home; your body is the only home that you have in the universe. It is in and through your body that your soul becomes visible and real for you. Your body is the home of your soul on earth.”⁴

What we do with our bodies matters. And unlike what our Congregational forbears would have said, what we do with our bodies in worship matters. For our New England Puritan forbears, who were children of the Enlightenment, the life of the mind and the spirit were the focus of worship and religious experience. So, Puritan clergy would never have dreamed of imposing ashes on the foreheads of their members – that would have been far too Roman for their liking. In fact, fewer than 10 of us (in a congregation with more than a thousand members) came to our Ash Wednesday service in the church I belonged to in Windsor, Connecticut...so tradition persists.

It is meaningful for me both to place ash on your foreheads, and it is also meaningful for me to receive ash on my own, as a reminder – a bodily, physical, enfolded reminder – that I am human...made of the *humus*...the earth...the clay. And that this jar of clay is my only home in this lifetime.

It is interesting to me that if we Protestants take the incarnation either literally or metaphorically, we stress the important of God becoming flesh and dwelling among us. If our bodies didn’t matter, why would God have bothered to take human form?

¹ Genesis 2.7

² Isaiah 64.8

³ 2 Corinthians 4.7

⁴ John O’Donohue, *Anam Cara*. (NY: HarperPerennial, 1997), pp.44-45.

There has always been a strong sense of *doing* in the UCC, which stands almost in contrast to our way of worship, which has always had a strong element of *thinking*. Listen again to the words of Isaiah: “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?”

“Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?”

Congregationalists have loved this for centuries... putting our faith into working for justice is one of our hallmarks. But, if we don't have the solid root structure of faith, practice, and community underneath us, or if those roots run too near the surface, our tree of justice-action will topple over in a strong wind.

Most of us don't go around parading our piety – putting on a show of our religiosity. A few years back we talked at a Monday morning sermon talk-back about wearing crosses, which I don't find objectionable, by the way. I often wear a small one under my shirt, and it serves as a physical reminder of my faith. But, it's a reminder to *me*, not to anyone else. And for me it's a small, tangible way I involve my body in worship on a regular basis.

All of this leads to the idea Jesus espouses in Matthew's gospel that we shouldn't do: “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.” I hope you hear the whole sentence, including that very important clause: “before others in order to be seen by them.” Jesus isn't saying that we should have no form of spiritual practice. On the contrary, he advises, “whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

The analogy I've used in the past for making a show of piety is that it's akin to having a loud, public conversation on your cell phone in a restaurant. Sometimes, we overhear things in peoples' cell phone conversations we'd really rather not know. Sometimes, we'd be better off using a phone booth... kind of what Jesus describes as going into the room, shutting the door, and talking in secret.

My prayer for you during this 40-day journey of Lent is that you will create spaces in your schedule to “pray to your Father who is in secret” and that you will also find ways of being thankful for your body and use it in your worship and the practice of your faith. May your interior life and your enfleshed soul greet each other as gifts of God to you. Amen.

Benediction

in honor of – and with borrowings from – John O'Donohue

During the 40 days of this Lenten journey,

May your body be blessed.

May you realize that your body is a faithful and beautiful friend of your soul.

And may you be peaceful and joyful and recognize that your senses are sacred thresholds.

May you realize that holiness is mindful, gazing, feeling, and touching.

May your senses gather you and bring you home.

May your sense always enable you to celebrate the universe and the mystery and possibilities in your presence here.

And as you journey through Lent, may Christ accompany you and bless you richly.

Amen.