

1 Corinthians 15:50-58
August 28, 2011

South Plains

Meditation on Our Bodies

I think it's John Steinbeck who gives us a marvelous description of a homeless man waking up in the morning after a good night's rest. He stretches, rises to his feet, tightens his belt so his pants stay up, and tends to his bodily needs. He greets the new day, glad to be alive. That image has stayed with me, reminding me of the physical pleasures of this life, the refreshment of sleep, the play of muscle and blood when I move, the complex performance of systems that not only maintain, but enrich my personal consciousness of the gift of life. The psalmist is right. "I am fearfully and wonderfully made (139:14)."

Despite the joys of living, the wear and tear of time takes a toll on our bodies; and we human beings may eventually ask ourselves a question: Is this all there is? Do we enjoy life for fifteen minutes or at most a double handful of decades, and then disappear completely? Or, is there something more beyond death? That's the question the Apostle Paul turns to at the end of First Corinthians. In this letter, it is not a theoretical issue. It's not a mere theological dispute over what different Christians believe about immortality. No, it's at the heart of a deadly serious ethical disagreement about the way Christian people choose to live their lives.

The church in Corinth is having moral and ethical problems. Let me remind you of two of them. Sexual immorality is rampant. One man is living with his father's wife. Prostitution comes up again and again in Paul's letter. The other issue is the lack of compassion among some church members. Prosperous Christians are stuffing their faces with food at the Lord's Table while poor Christians at the same table do not have enough to keep body and soul together.

The assumption on the part of many Corinthian Christians is that body and soul don't have anything to do with one another. These people believe they can treat their own bodies and the bodies of other people any way they please, and it has little to do with God. Paul writes to counter such dangerous notions. In First Corinthians, chapters 5-14, he gives very specific guidance about these and other issues. And in chapter fifteen, he turns to the resurrection of the body as the linchpin holding together all these ethical problems. To sum up his argument: If there was no resurrection of Christ, then there is no resurrection for us; and that means that the whole of Christianity is a house of cards that will fall apart at death, if not sooner than death.

It's not likely that all the Corinthian church members disbelieved in the resurrection. But enough of them rejected that doctrine that Paul was aroused to write this long letter that reaches a climax in his ringing affirmation of faith in the resurrection of the body. For some of us, it may seem incredible that these new

Christians, who lived only a generation or so after Jesus had been raised from the grave, would reject such a central part of the faith. A little historical background may help us to understand.

Remember that Corinth was as sophisticated a city as Charlottesville, a major shipping hub like New Orleans and the site of popular athletic events. The better educated Christians would have taken pride in their philosophical knowledge of the immortality of the soul. Some thought the soul meant everything and that the body was unimportant or at least of less value. If the Christian idea of resurrection simply reiterates the life of the soul or spirit, that was fine with them. However, believing in a bodily resurrection is different from believing that the spirit of a Christian continues to live. The Greek for 'resurrection of the dead' literally means the 'rising of the corpses,' a ghoulish prospect. The only horror movie I really like is "The Night of the Living Dead" where rotting corpses come out of the cemeteries. The doctrine of the resurrection of the body may have sounded like that to some Corinthians.

Therefore, Paul has his work cut out for him. His first point is that our resurrection bodies are different from the earthly bodies we now enjoy. He says,

We will all be changed....

the dead will be raised imperishable....

this perishable body must put on imperishability,

and this mortal body must put on immortality.

In other words, there's no decaying flesh in heaven.

Those are poetic words, and the bottom line is that we don't really know what they mean. We cannot know. Paul's attempt to describe how our resurrection bodies will be related to our earthly bodies begins with this assertion of ignorance: "Listen, I will tell you a mystery (15:51)!" The only hint we have about how this mystery will work are his words in verse 44. This body, he says, "is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body." One scholar that I read does not like the translation of that last sentence. He prefers the translation of the Jerusalem Bible which I have printed in your bulletin:

When it (*that is our present body*) is sown it embodies the soul, when it is raised it embodies the spirit (15:44 Jerusalem Bible)

I don't know what either an "embodied spirit" or a "spiritual body" is going to look like. Words fail. What seems clear, however, is that Paul expects the self to endure. In the resurrection of the body, we're going to still be ourselves. That's a comfort when we have lost a loved one. It does not diminish the loss. It does not deny the awful reality of dying. What it does is promise a new life, different from this present life because it's transformed beyond our understanding.

We need to remember, however, that Paul's letter to the Corinthians is not written to comfort them in the face of death. He writes to confirm them in a lifestyle that honors the resurrected Christ. He writes to guide them to

morality, integrity, and love. He writes to say, “God cares about the way you treat your bodies.” This bundle of flesh and blood matters to your Creator. It matters so much that the Lord of heaven and earth is going to redeem your body. We may abuse it; God’s going to heal it. We may suffer abuse at the hands of other people, abuse that twists our souls. God’s going to make us whole again, more whole than we’ve ever been. Disease and old age can do their worst. God is working to transform these bodies into a new creation. This is good news for all of us; and especially good news for athletes as we age, and are no longer in action.

Earlier, he has told us that our bodies are members of Christ as he plays with the double meaning of the word “member.” We are members of the church, the body of Christ; and we are members, hands and feet for Christ. He also says, our bodies are a temple or a sanctuary of the Holy Spirit. Not only should this remind us to avoid unhealthy activities, it also underlines the good we can do by using our strength for kindness and love. When we are blessed with good health and tangible blessings from God, these are opportunities to help others.

With the arrival of the recession, most of us have entered a strange world. We have known prosperity for most of our lives. Many of us are better off today than our parents ever dreamed. We are surrounded by conveniences and luxuries as never before. But, the prospect of a slow economy for the foreseeable future

makes us nervous. Some of us may outlive our resources. Two opposite responses to this uncertain world are possible, both negative and positive. On the negative side, some adopt the ancient attitude summed up in Isaiah 22:13, “Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die.” Others will become fearful and selfish, clutching what little they have ever closer to themselves. On the positive side, people are working together to help those who suffer and to insure that our society treats the poor with fairness and dignity.

A college vice president retired several years ago to North Carolina. His pension and health insurance are generous, but the North Carolina legislature has talked about cutting some benefits. He has been a public servant all his life and that attitude is still with him. “My wife and I grew up in very modest circumstances,” he told me. “If we have to scale back our standard of living, we know how to do that. We’ll be all right.”

His confidence is grounded in two Christian affirmations: God loves this world and God will take care of the creatures God has made. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians builds on that faith with his affirmation of the resurrection of the body. God will redeem these frail bodies we have. That’s a promise. The down payment on that promise is the resurrection of Jesus.

Jesus said he would “undergo great suffering... be killed, and on the third day be raised (Matthew 16:21).” That’s what happened. Scripture makes no attempt to

tell us how the resurrection took place. That God did it simply affirms the value placed on human life when God became flesh. It affirms the love Jesus lavished on ordinary people. It affirms the necessity of all those teachings from the Old Testament about loving our neighbor. The physical stuff of creation mattered to Jesus because it matters to God.

When we get up in the morning, whether we are rich or poor, young or old, healthy or sick, giving thanks for the gift of life reflects the image of God in us. When we care for ourselves and others, we imitate Jesus, the Son of God. When we hope in the resurrection of the body, we hope in Father, Son and Holy Spirit who promise to redeem our lives, including the joy we take in these bodies God gave us.