

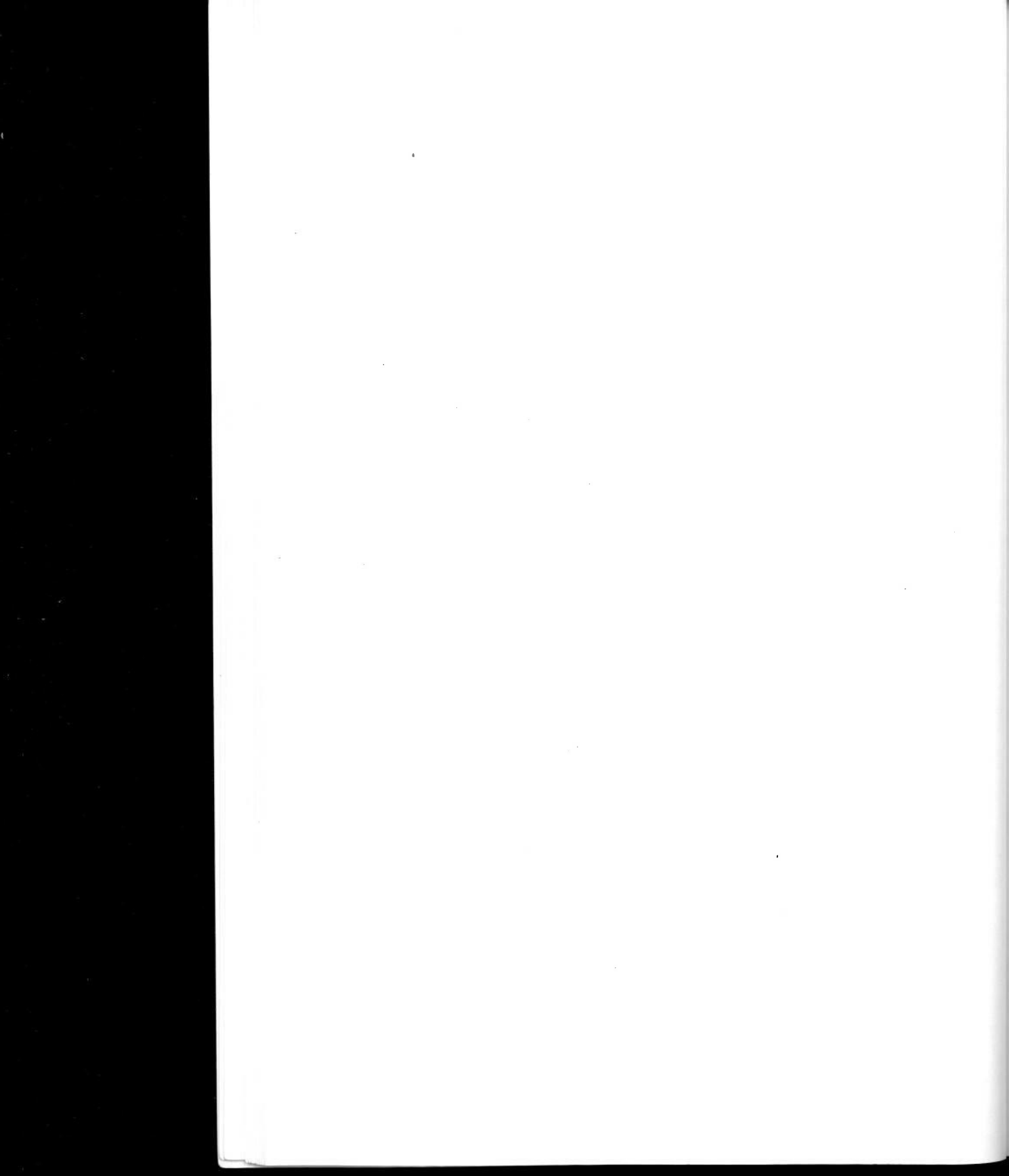
# HONORING — *the* — BODY



THE  
PRACTICES  
OF FAITH  
SERIES

Meditations on a Christian Practice

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## Chapter 1

# AWAKENING TO SACRED VULNERABILITY

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**M**y desire for a practice of honoring the body was awakened the day I crossed the threshold of the hospital to the world outside after the birth of my daughter.

For two nights, nurses had purposefully entered and exited my room, bathing my daughter, weighing her, swaddling her. While I clumsily tried to feed her at my breast, crying from the pain of it, unsure of how to hold her properly, the nurses amazed me by how expertly they fit her into the crook of their arms, how tightly yet comfortably they wrapped her in a blanket, with what sureness they bathed and dressed her. The whole universe of the hospital seemed to lean attentively toward her and every other baby on the floor, watching them carefully, monitoring their weight, keeping their small bodies clean and dry. Inside the hospital everything seemed geared

toward protecting and caring for the most vulnerable of human beings.

When the time came to leave, a nurse carried my baby to the door that separated the hospital from the parking garage. There, she handed my daughter to me and bid me farewell and good luck. Even with my mother on one side of me and my husband on the other, I found the prospect of walking out of the hospital terrifying. My ability to feed and care for this tiny stranger seemed to me very much in doubt. My hands were not as practiced as those of the nurses, my touch not as sure.

I also knew, with sudden clarity, that I was bringing my daughter into a world more complicated than the maternity ward, a world that was not organized solely for the care of children's bodies. Outside, on a snowy, cold Chicago day, cars were zooming by, exhaust was being expelled, ice had formed on the sidewalks. So many dangers to a little body. We settled her in the infant car seat, and I leaned across her for extra protection. With the emergency blinkers flashing, my husband drove us through the icy streets toward home.

The world my daughter entered that day is infinitely more interesting than the hospital. In this world, she is a body, but she is also more than a body. In this world, there is more to honoring the body than keeping it clean and dry. In this world, my daughter will need not only to be bathed and fed but also to be embraced and respected, offered freedom and love. In this world, when the body is honored, the whole person is honored. And when the body is dishonored, the whole person is harmed.

The threshold between the hospital and the world outside is only one of many thresholds my daughter will cross that will illuminate the vulnerability of her body. She has ahead of her the thresholds of adolescence and adulthood, of sexual awakening, of birth, perhaps, and certainly of death. My dearest hope is that as she crosses these thresholds, she will know her body not only as vulnerable but as sacred.

What I desire with all my heart is to be able to invite her into a way of living that teaches her, through the countless bodily gestures of everyday life, to cherish and honor her body and the bodies of others. I want her bathing and her dressing, her eating and her drinking, to remind her that her body is a sacred gift and nurture within her a profound compassion for the vulnerabilities of all bodies. I want her to have such reverence for the body, and to know her own body as so deeply cherished, that she is able, if she wishes, to enter joyfully one day into a long and loving intimacy with another person, an intimacy in which she both receives and gives pleasure and deep, sustaining comfort.

You don't have to have given birth to a child to feel daunted by the task of caring for the body of another. Adoptive parents know what this feels like every bit as much as birth parents do. So do new teachers confronted by a roomful of preschoolers who want to climb everything in sight. So do those who attend to aging relatives. So does anyone who has ever cared for those whose lives have been interrupted by violence, accident, or serious illness.

And you certainly don't have to have given birth to a child to feel unsure of how to honor the body in a world in which some bodies are held up as perfect and desirable while others are despised. It's no wonder we are confused about how to honor the body when, all around us, bodies are used to sell products, and our anxieties about the appearance of our bodies are manipulated to sell even more. You don't have to have given birth to a child to desire a new way of life that honors our bodies, that chooses reverence over exploitation and anxiety.

### FAITH AND THE WISDOM OF THE BODY

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Where can we turn for help? Where can we go to learn the sacredness of the body? Where might we discover practices that can give shape to a way of life that honors the body? How can we resist the dishonoring of our bodies and intervene against the dishonoring of the bodies of others?

We can begin by looking to our neighbors. Every day, often without any grand theories to guide them, ordinary people honor their bodies and the bodies of those around them. The family that makes time to share a meal together, in the midst of everyone's busy schedule. The man who gives his beloved a daily bath, when his beloved is living with AIDS and can no longer bathe himself. The teacher who brings music to her classroom and invites her students to dance. The teenager who

gives up smoking. Women who gather in a church basement to learn techniques of self-defense. Workers who organize so that they can insist on regular breaks from repetitive manual labor. Lovers who reverence each other's nakedness. If we look, we will see all around us people honoring the body in ways that are sometimes simple, sometimes playful, sometimes heroic. But in all of these gestures and activities, however spontaneous or improvised, the sacredness of the body is encountered and clarified.

To use the word *sacred*, of course, is to imply that we can turn to religious traditions for wisdom about the body. But what do religious traditions have to offer the lover, the worker, the caregiver, the child? As a Christian, I believe that there is a long history of honoring the body in Christian traditions, an accumulated wisdom with which we might fashion a contemporary practice of honoring the body. But I also have to acknowledge that Christians have inherited an ambiguous legacy about the body. Christianity has long struggled with an uneasiness about the body, even as it affirms the goodness of the body in its bedrock beliefs. Many people have experienced religious traditions not as repositories of wisdom about how to honor the body but as repressive institutions that deny the goodness of the body and its pleasures, or as beliefs that nurture animosity toward particular bodies. If the man bathing his incapacitated beloved has seen Christian demonstrators on the evening news shouting "God hates queers" at the funeral of a gay man murdered because of his sexual orientation, it is understandable that

he might not think Christianity has anything to offer him. If the newly married couple remember a childhood filled with sermons about the evils of sex, they might not think to turn to Christianity to find language for their gratitude for the delight their sexuality brings them.

Theologian Kathryn Tanner defines Christian practices as doorways through which we enter an argument. Through Christian practices, she says, we participate in an argument over how best to live as disciples of Christ and learn to live our way into new and unexpected answers. I wish, in this book, to join an argument about the body that has been going on for centuries. I wish to argue that it is possible to discover in scripture, history, and contemporary life the contours of a distinctively Christian practice of honoring the body that has wisdom to offer our culture. The practice of honoring the body reflects the ways Christians have responded to the needs that all human beings share—the need to be sheltered and nourished, protected and loved—in a way that bears witness to God. It is a practice not meant to be hidden within a Christian society separated from the wider world but to be shared with all God's people. Indeed, it is a practice shaped by all God's people.

But this practice is not just lying on the surface of scripture and history, like a stone in the road. It has to be excavated, argued for, and put into dialogue with all the ways that contemporary people do and do not honor the body. Tanner reminds us that Christian identity is an ongoing task that demands our creativity, our eagerness to place our faith and our lives in conversation, our will-



ingness to be challenged and changed. The fashioning of life-giving practices from the wisdom of the past and the present is a sign of the creativity of the life of faith itself.

## TOUCHSTONES FOR THE PRACTICE OF HONORING THE BODY

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The convictions, wonderments, and hopes that orient Christians to God and the world form the bedrock upon which the Christian practice of honoring the body is built. As both Jews and Christians affirm, God judged creation good, and so everything God created, including bodies of all sorts, is good. The opening chapter of the book of Genesis bears witness to this, and to another conviction about the body—that God created human beings, male and female, in God’s image. For Jews and Christians alike, the body reflects God’s own goodness.

The affirmation that every body is made in the image of God is supplemented in Christianity by the belief that God was somehow fully present in a particular human body that lived in a particular time and place, the body of Jesus of Nazareth. The church has used the word *incarnation* to describe the conviction that God was *incarnate*, enfleshed in a body that ate and drank, slept and woke, touched and received touch. This body also suffered a death as painful and degrading as any human beings have devised. Early Christian testimony that this

body also lived again after death shapes a profound Christian hope that undergirds the practice of honoring the body. Whatever else it means, the Resurrection of Jesus suggests that bodies matter to God. And they ought to matter to us, too.

Convictions about creation, incarnation, and resurrection hold the body at the center of Christian life, where it influences how Christians worship and how Christians understand themselves. Christians regularly gather in worship for the Lord's Supper, a meal modeled on the last meal Jesus ever ate with his closest friends and followers. The Lord's Supper reminds us that every meal can be a time to draw closer to one another and to God. But this particular meal nourishes us with bread and wine, the same simple food that Jesus shared with his disciples during their last meal together, food of which he said, This is my body. This is my blood. It is Jesus' wounded body that gathers us for the Lord's Supper, Jesus' wounded body that makes inescapably visible all wounded bodies and nourishes compassion for them.

In worship, we sit, we stand, we kneel. We bow our heads, we stretch out our hands. In worship our bodies are taught to praise and to plead, to make and receive offerings of care and forgiveness. In the Lord's Supper, God offers us food and drink. In baptism, our bodies are washed clean. In the passing of the peace, we touch one another in love and hope. In worship, our bodies are disclosed as God's gracious gift.

Early Christians even thought of themselves, the fledgling church, as the body of Christ. Unlike many

other religions of the day, Christianity was not an association solely of free men. A gathering of Christians was a gathering of diverse bodies, including women's bodies and enslaved bodies. All of these bodies were members of Christ's own body, the early church believed, and "members one of another" (Romans 12:5).

Just as the different members of a human body all have different functions, so do members of the body of Christ possess particular gifts that enable them to take on the work of Christ in particular ways—often in ways that disrupt society's expectations about how certain bodies ought to behave. By choosing the metaphor of the body to describe themselves, early Christians acknowledged that it is through our bodies that we love and serve God and one another. Although early Christians sometimes seemed to mistrust the body by opposing the body to the spirit, they did not call themselves the spirit of Christ. They called themselves the body of Christ, taking up the work of Christ's own hands and feet, head and heart, with their bodies—healing, preaching, caring for the outcast and the defenseless, suffering imprisonment and worse.

These, then, are the touchstones for a contemporary Christian practice of honoring the body. That God created our bodies good. That God dwelled fully in a vulnerable human body. That in death God gathers us up, body and all. That through our bodies we participate in God's activity in the world.

In one of his most challenging teachings, Jesus claimed that when we honor the bodies of others, we

honor him. And when we dishonor the bodies of others, it is him we wound. Jesus taught that we encounter him in all who hunger or thirst, in the stranger and the prisoner, in those who are ill and those who are unclothed and unsheltered. So every time we offer food and drink to someone who is hungry and thirsty, or receive a stranger with kindness, or visit a prisoner, we tend to Christ himself. And every time we withhold our help, it is Christ we refuse (Matthew 25:31–46). This is the distinctive Christian contribution to a contemporary practice of honoring the body: the conviction that every body is worthy of blessing and care and that through the needs of the body, we are invited into relationship with God.

### EMBODYING SPIRITUALITY

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The practice of honoring the body is a vital aspect of Christian spirituality. But spirituality is often understood as being made up solely of what individuals do alone, like solitary prayer, meditation, and spiritual reading. And because what is “spiritual” is often opposed to what is “bodily,” these activities are often understood as somehow disembodied, as if they engaged the mind and spirit alone.

In fact, disciplines like prayer and reading and meditation are deeply embodied activities that are indispensable to the cultivation of our life with God. But life with God is shaped both in silence and in conversation, in soli-

tude and in community. The important thing is to be able to find paths that lead us back and forth between our prayer and our work, our meditation and our world. Our attention to God and one another can and must be shaped in communal ways as well as in solitary ways, through worship with others, through action on behalf of others, and in the ordinary stuff of our daily lives with others. Without practices that help us seek God's presence in the ordinary moments of our lives, we will miss countless opportunities to draw near to the God who made us.

Honoring the body is a practice that cuts across the boundaries between the individual and the community. The body marks our individuality, to be sure. Our bodies are separate from all other bodies in a profound way. In spite of what the book of Genesis says about lovers becoming "one flesh," we never truly become one flesh with another, no matter how intimate our relationship. We cannot fully know another's inner life. We can keep secrets from one another. But our bodies also make it inescapably clear that we cannot do without one another.

This is so because of the profound vulnerability of every human body, a vulnerability born, in part, from our separateness. We cannot feel pain in another's body, nor can others experience firsthand pain in our own. When we are in pain, we must rely on the ability of others to imagine that pain. And we must hope that imagination will lead to compassion.

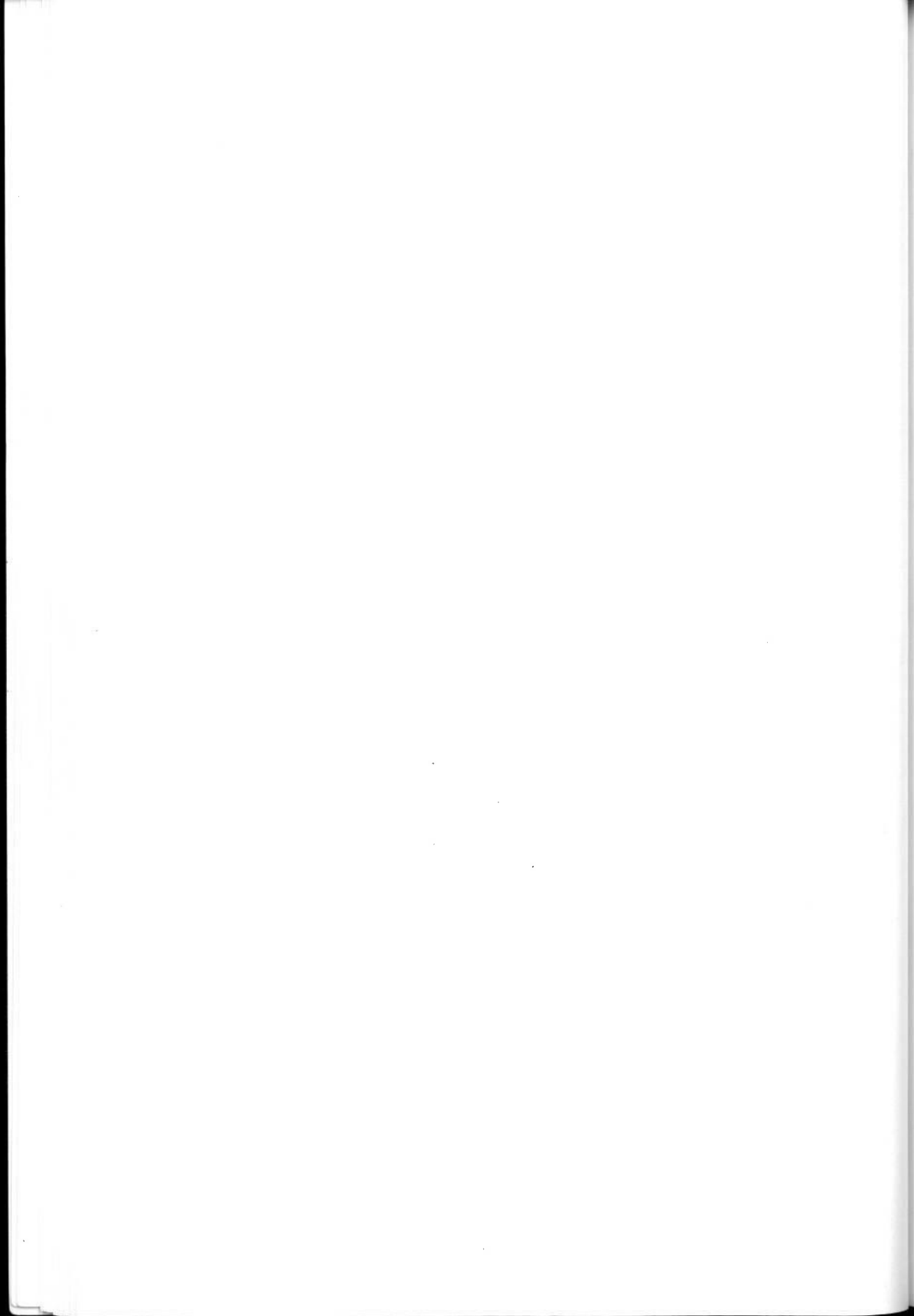
Our bodies are vulnerable in other ways as well. If we have an abnormal pap smear, find a lump in our

groin or breast, or feel pain when we urinate, we cannot ignore the vulnerability of our body, no matter how well we eat or how much we exercise. If we are worried about the appearance of our body—our weight, or the condition of our skin, then we know all too well the many ways we are rendered vulnerable by our body. If we desire the love and touch of another person, we are made vulnerable by our hope to be desired in return.

Our fragile bodies require communal attention, and so honoring the body is a shared practice, one for which we need each other in profound ways. Think of all the times you have needed someone to care for your body, or times when you offered care to another. It takes a village, as the saying goes, to raise a child. And certainly, children need caregivers who will touch them with love, shield them from harm, and feed them nourishing food. But young people encountering the pleasures and pains of sexual desire for the first time also need a village. They need guidance and support from communities that openly articulate sexuality as a good gift. People who are so sick that they feel their bodies have betrayed them need to be touched by those who believe deeply in the goodness of the body. When I was in labor, I needed my husband to press ice to my lips, to cradle me during contractions. I needed the midwife to hold my face in her two strong hands and say, “Oh *yes*, you can do this. Women have done this for *centuries*.”

Christian conviction about the goodness of the body, coupled with a recognition of the body’s vulnerabilities, has nurtured a profound sense of responsibility for the

protection and nourishment of bodies throughout the history of the church. The fourth-century Christian scholar Jerome taught that the body was the great equalizer of persons: “He whom we look down upon, whom we cannot bear to see, the very sight of whom causes us to vomit, is the same as we are, formed with us from the self-same clay, compacted of the same elements. Whatever he suffers, we also can suffer.” Bodily vulnerability is something we all share—rich and poor, male and female, enslaved and free. Early Christians preached that knowledge of such shared vulnerability must lead us to solidarity with every other human body, especially the bodies of the poor. These Christians knew that what is suffered by one can be suffered by all, and that every body is a fragile temple of God’s Spirit and worthy of care.





## Chapter 2

# PONDERING THE MYSTERY OF THE BODY

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**A**s we search for resources in scripture, history, and contemporary experience, we will find much that will answer our desire for a way of life that honors the body. But we can also expect to find a set of tensions about the body that illustrates our need for the practice: tensions between being a body and having a body, between integrity and relationality, between freedom and constraint, and between sacredness and vulnerability. It is essential that we meditate on these tensions. Not only do they remind us of how much we need a practice of honoring the body, they also caution us to guard against the ways this practice might be corrupted.

## BEING A BODY AND HAVING A BODY

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What is this body we wish to honor? There seem to be as many descriptions of the body as there are people to describe it. The body is a friend or a traitor. A gift or a task. Something precious knit together by God's own hands or the prison house of the soul, which, according to Plato, is trapped in the body like an oyster in a shell. Most descriptions of the body tend to fall into one of two camps: some suggest that the essence of who we are is merely encased, temporarily, in a body. In other words, a body is something we *have*. Others suggest that what is essential about human being cannot be separated from our bodies. In other words, we *are* our bodies in a very fundamental way.

Although these are two very distinct ways of understanding the body, the truth is, most of us do not seize once and for all on one description or the other, but rather move and back and forth between the two. When, during vigorous exercise, we find ourselves drawing on hidden reserves of energy and stamina, it is easy to feel that our body is an integral, irreplaceable part of our self. If we have been diagnosed with cancer, however, it is just as easy to feel that our body has become our enemy, that it is an inadequate container for the person we truly are. In the course of our daily lives, we probably operate with a double understanding. We can feel, in some moments, that our body is a deeply integrated part of ourselves. In other moments, we can feel deeply alienated from it. The fact that we can feel both

ways—in the course of a single day, even perhaps in a single moment—points to the difficulty of defining just what the body is.

This tension exists in religious traditions as well. In the Hebrew Bible, the human person is never described as made up of separable parts like “body” and “soul.” Rather, the whole human person *is* both soul and body. Being human means being both strong and fragile, full of both life and death. According to the Hebrew Scriptures, we *are* our bodies, just as we *are* our souls. One is not better than the other; both are irreplaceable parts of the human person.

In the New Testament, this wholistic understanding of the human person enters into conversation—and sometimes into conflict—with the classical Greek notion that the soul is the highest, finest aspect of human being. In the world in which Christianity took shape, the body was often regarded as the prison cell in which the soul is trapped, a temporary aspect of one’s identity. But even though this vision of the human being was so powerful in the world from which Christianity emerged, Christian notions of incarnation and resurrection constantly called it into question. There were some early Christians who tried to argue that Christ’s humanity must only have been an illusion, since something as precious as divinity could never dwell in a vulnerable human body. But that notion never gathered enough strength to persist in Christian communities. The basic Christian conviction that God had indeed been present in a human body endured, subverting all

attempts to deny the goodness of the body and its integral place in the human person.

The tension between being a body and having a body is perhaps most apparent in the writings of the early Christian teacher, Paul. Longing for the freedom God offers, he feels constrained from embracing that freedom by the unruly desires of his body. "For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:22-24). This cry of the heart reflects the very human frustration over the way the body's frailties render us "captive." But Paul also believed that we draw near to God with our bodies. Indeed, he believed that the body is a holy place within which God might come to dwell: "Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you," he wrote to the members of the church at Corinth. "Glorify God in your body."

Do we inhabit a body, or is a body who we truly are? Both views of the body have profound implications. If we believe that we *are* our bodies, we might give greater value to the human body than if we thought it was only the shell that our true self inhabited. But we might also place the fulfillment of our bodily desires above every other consideration, or we might allow ourselves to be defined wholly by our bodies. If we believe that we simply *have* a body, we might resist such constraining self-definition. But we might also come to view the body as somehow distinct from who we are. And we

might gradually come to see the body as a hindrance or, at the worst, something to despise.

I have been helped, in pondering what the body is, by the poetry of Mark Doty—especially his poems about the illness and death of his partner, Wally Roberts, from AIDS. It is when the body's vulnerability is most fully exposed, as it is in illness, that the question about what the body is becomes so acute. Doty's poem "Atlantis" is in part a meditation on this question. Here is the third section of that poem, entitled "Michael's Dream."

Michael writes to tell me his dream:

*I was helping Randy out of bed,  
supporting him on one side  
with another friend on the other,*

*and as we stood him up, he stepped out  
of the body I was holding and became  
a shining body, brilliant light  
held in the form I first knew him in.*

*This is what I imagine will happen,  
the spirit's release. Michael,  
when we support our friends,  
one of us on either side, our arms*

*under the man or woman's arms,  
what is it we're holding? Vessel,  
shadow, hurrying light? All those years  
I made love to a man without thinking*

*how little his body had to do with me;  
now, diminished, he's never been so plainly  
himself—remote and unguarded,  
an otherness I can't know*

the first thing about. I said,  
*You need to drink more water  
or you're going to turn into  
an old dry leaf.* And he said,

*Maybe I want to be an old leaf.*

In the dream Randy's leaping into  
the future, and still here; Michael's holding him  
and releasing at once. Just as Steve's

holding Jerry, though he's already gone,  
Marie holding John, gone, Maggie holding  
her John, gone, Carlos and Darren  
holding another Michael, gone,

and I'm holding Wally, who's going.

*Where* isn't the question,  
though we think it is;

we don't even know where the living are,

in this raddled and unraveling "here."

What is the body? Rain on a window,  
a clear movement over whose gaze?  
Husk, leaf, little boat of paper

and wood to mark the speed of the stream?

Randy and Jerry, Michael and Wally  
and John: lucky we don't have to know  
what something is in order to hold it.

Such is the mystery of the body. Sometimes we  
know that we are our bodies, that our capacity for life  
and death makes us who we are. At other times, we feel  
that we simply inhabit a vessel that is inadequate to con-  
tain all that we are. But at all times, it is the body that al-  
lows us to reach out for one another, to steady each other

on our feet when we are weak, to embrace one another in joy and in despair. Thank God we don't have to know what something is in order to hold it.

## INTEGRITY AND RELATIONALITY

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Our bodies help us draw near to one another, but they also keep us separate from one another. Only when we are in our mother's womb are we truly one flesh with another, and that time is short. When, after hours of laboring and pushing, my daughter slipped out of my body into the world, my first thought was, *Who are you?* I had a sudden sense of her otherness, the uncountable ways in which she was not me. At the same time, when I saw her knees and elbows and tiny round heels, I recognized her; I knew what she had felt like pressing against the inside of me. Now that our bodies had taken up separate spaces in the world, a new moment in our relationship began. But this new relationship was mediated by our bodies every bit as much as was the relationship we developed when she was still living inside my womb. Just as we had begun to know each other through her flutters and kicks and turns, our knowledge of one another deepened as I slept curled around her, as she pressed her face against my breast, as I bathed her head to toe, memorizing her. I remember waking up one morning to the delicious smell of her nestled against me. Almost without thinking, I licked her forehead. So hungry to know her, I tasted her skin.

In such moments, it is easy to see that our bodies exist both in relation to other bodies and in the integrity of their own boundedness. Even in the most intimate of relationships, secrets can be kept, held in the body. Even in the most intimate of relationships, one can never know fully the inner life of another, nor can one share another's bodily experiences. We cannot respond to another's bodily needs and desires with compassion unless we have the capacity to imagine those needs and desires. But even though our bodies are distinct from the bodies of those closest to us, it is through our bodies that we are also able to enter into relationship with others.

Sometimes the tension between the integrity and the relationality of the body is made manifest in terrible ways. Jamie Kalven writes in his book *Working with Available Light: A Family's World After Violence* of his struggle to understand the pain and the irrevocable knowledge about the world that his wife, Patsy Evans, held in her body after being raped and badly beaten while out for a run one autumn afternoon. Patsy had come to know what those who have not endured such violence can perhaps only understand theoretically: that it is possible to be ripped out of the world in a second, unmoored from the web of relations from which we take our identity. That the same body that connects us with spouse and child can be reduced in a moment to the object of another's cruelties. "There is knowing, and there is *knowing*," Patsy said. Even a loving, intimate couple cannot share the knowledge each holds in her or his body without deliberate acts of attention, imagination, and



compassion. Jamie's story is the story of a husband's strenuous attempt to share somehow in the terrible knowledge that his wife carries in her body.

Survivors of violence understand in a profound way the tension between the body's integrity and its relation to others. To be held in the grasp of a cruel, violent person is to know what it is to be isolated in your own body and yet to be bound to another, against your will, through your body. We occupy our bodies separately, but our bodies bring us into relation with others. Everything depends on how those relations are formed—with gentleness or cruelty, attention or disdain. Reaching out for the body of his wounded beloved, Jamie ponders with despair that “tenderness and cruelty can occupy the same space in the world. All it takes is two bodies.”

For Patsy, the relationality of the body provided a point of resistance to the violence inflicted on her. In the midst of the attack, she caught a glimpse of a cyclist on the path where her assailant had grabbed her. “She looked like an angel,” Patsy remembers. The sight of another human being broke into the unbearable isolation into which the rapist had forced her with the intensity of revelation: “When I saw the woman on the bike path, I thought, oh God, I'm not dead yet. The world is still out there.” She broke away and ran toward the woman on the bicycle, toward another human being, toward all that connects us with the world and one another. Although Patsy resists any easy consolation, including narratives that identify her as courageous, I am in awe of her courage.

The integrity of the body is another point of resistance to violence and oppression. In our culture, some bodies are constructed to be more relational than others. Women socialized into being endlessly hospitable, endlessly welcoming, are one example. Although hospitality can be a powerful practice for the good, those whose bodily and psychic boundaries are too permeable can easily fall prey to those who would transgress that openness to inflict harm. If an abused spouse understands herself only as a body in relation, the integrity of her body is vulnerable to repeated trespass. If adolescents experiencing the first stirrings of desire can only see their bodies in relation to the bodies of others, they are vulnerable to coercion by those who would make selfish use of their bodies. Maintaining a strong sense of the body's integrity in the midst of the body's many relations is a crucial aspect of the practice of honoring the body.

Another important aspect of the practice is to recognize that our bodies bring us into relation not only with those nearby but also with those far off in ways we rarely acknowledge in the course of everyday life. The air conditioners we use to keep cool in the summer eat away at the ozone layer we all need to survive. The meat for some of the quick, convenient fast foods we consume comes from cattle raised on large stretches of land in impoverished countries which might have been used for local people to grow needed food. Choices we make about our individual bodies can have effects on the bodies of others we will never meet. Truly, we are members one of another.

Such is the wisdom of the Christian tradition on the integrity and relationality of our bodies. God made us separate from one another, but with the potential to be in relationship with one another. The integrity of our bodies is a gift from God, but the meaning of our bodies does not stop at the boundaries of our skin. For we belong to one another, and so we are called to attend to the effects of our choices. We belong to one another, and so we have a share in one another's joy and a responsibility to help one another bear grief and pain. The cultivation of the practice of honoring the body can help us remember that in both our integrity and our relations with other bodies, we belong to God.

## FREEDOM AND CONSTRAINT

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Jews and Christians have often sought freedom through practices that seem at first to constrain the body. The laws contained in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy give instructions about what to eat and what not to eat, what to wear and what not to wear, when to bathe, when to work, when to rest. To an outsider, these laws may seem terribly constraining, an impediment to the freedom of the individual. To many practitioners, however, a life lived according to the law is a life ordered toward freedom.

As an example, we might take the commandment to keep the sabbath holy. The observance of the sabbath

can seem a great constraint on freedom. Martin Luther, for example, famously wrote, "If anywhere the day is made holy for the mere day's sake, then I order you to work on it, to ride on it, to feast on it, to do anything to remove this reproach from Christian liberty." In our own culture, it seems at the least bad time management to refrain one day each week from work and commerce, and at the most a severe constraint on our freedom to make or spend more money. But the sabbath commandment is not a reflection of God's desire for the limitation of our lives; rather, it reflects God's care for us, God's intention that we all be free. As any faithful sabbath keeper can tell you, refraining from work and worry, making and spending, frees us to taste and see that God and the life God offers us are very, very good. The practice of sabbath keeping teaches us that the world can do without our work for one day and that God is the ultimate source of our work's energies. It also teaches us to desire and work for a world in which everyone has both enough work and enough time off. Dorothy Bass, a contemporary Christian sabbath keeper, reminds us that only free people can take a day off. The commandment to keep the sabbath holy is an enduring testimony against slavery and reflects the freedom that God desires for all people.

Christian practices involving the body often reflect the same tension. Practices that seem to constrain the body often have freedom as their motive. Early Christians, for example, looked for clues about humanity's relationship to God in the moments when the body seems stripped of freedom—in sexual desire and in death.

Some believed that death revealed our separation from God most fully. Many of these Christians understood sexuality as God's gracious gift, offered in sympathy for our mortality because it offered a remedy for it, through procreation. Others thought that sexuality itself was the clearest sign of our distance from God, because sexual desire can assert itself insistently even when the individual wills otherwise. The Christian practice of honoring the body took shape within the very human concern over how the basic physical realities of death and sexual desire can rob us of our freedom. At their best, early Christians aimed to restore human freedom in the face of those powerful forces.

Early Christians shocked their fellow citizens and the leaders of the Roman Empire when some chose sexual abstinence over family life. Marriage and procreation were highly valued by the Roman Empire, because families generated more citizens, more soldiers, more cities. The body was a commodity that ensured the empire's growth. When some early Christians abstained from marriage, they claimed that their bodies belonged not to the empire but to God. Later, as some Christians formed celibate communities dedicated to prayer, sexual abstinence also offered freedom, particularly to women. Rather than marrying at an early age, giving birth to many children, and perhaps dying young as a result, some Christian women found, through the sexual abstinence practiced in women's monasteries, the freedom to become educated, to be leaders, to write, and to preach and teach.

In our own day, it is not sexual abstinence but sexual fidelity that can seem to constrain human freedom. And, indeed, pledging oneself to remain faithful to one person for a lifetime is no small thing. It means saying no to other potential sexual relationships, even when other relationships seem to promise a heightened sense of excitement and joy. But it can also mean saying yes to sexual pleasure that deepens and intensifies over time and to intimacy spacious and elastic enough to hold the lifelong hopes and struggles of two people who are both united and kept separate by their bodies. The practice of honoring the body will not make questions of sexual expression less complicated but will help us hear in those questions a call for discernment in matters of freedom, pleasure, and love.

Fasting is another constraining practice that can offer freedom. As part of keeping the season of Lent, for example, Christians often fast from certain pleasures—chocolate, caffeine, and alcohol are favorite renunciations—in order to prepare an unencumbered space for receiving the good news of Easter. Like pregnant women who deny themselves small comforts—a cup of coffee, a glass of wine—in order to offer their developing child the most freedom possible in which to thrive, observers of Lenten renunciations give up certain bodily pleasures to sharpen their attention to the story of life and death that Lent and Easter embody. In a body newly attentive to its needs and hungers, the story of Lent and Easter has the freedom to unfurl as year after year the story yields new meanings.

Of course, any powerful practice, like sexual abstinence or sexual fidelity or fasting, can be used for good or ill, for freedom or for constraint. The same practice that allowed early Christians to claim the autonomy of bodies made in God's image was also used to deny the goodness of God's gift of sexuality. The same practice that allowed women freedom for learning and leadership was used to support a fear and even hatred of women and women's bodies. Fidelity is wielded like a weapon when it is used to keep someone in an abusive or deadening relationship. Renunciation of food and drink becomes destructive when it is used not to sharpen attention but to punish oneself. Because any powerful practice can be corrupted, we must be attentive, as we fashion a contemporary practice of honoring the body, to the ways in which our choices about our bodies can lead us toward the freedom that God intends for all of us, as well as how they might dishonor the body and cause harm.

## SACREDNESS AND VULNERABILITY

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In the Free Will Baptist churches of my home town, the quarterly communion service always includes the intimate work of foot washing. The whole church gathers in the sanctuary for prayers and the Lord's Supper, and then the community separates, women into one room, men into another.

When I was in high school, I sometimes attended these services with friends. I can't say for sure what went on in the men's gathering, but I imagine it was very similar to the ritual enacted among the women. After receiving communion, we would leave the sanctuary in twos and threes, trying, I will admit, to link up with a good friend whose feet we would wash and who would in turn wash ours. Once we had all gathered, the older women would begin singing "Amazing Grace." We would all join in, singing it over and over until everyone's feet had been washed.

Each pair of women was given a basin of water and a long towel, long enough to tie around your waist, long enough to gird yourself, as the Gospel of John says Jesus did when he knelt to wash the feet of his disciples. One woman would sit in a chair, take off her shoes, and place her feet in the basin. The other woman would kneel down in front of her, wash her feet in the water, and then dry them off with the ends of the towel. To me, the drying seemed more intimate than the washing. The washing was simply a matter of swirling water around the top of the foot that rested in the basin. To dry this foot, however, you had to take it in both your hands, prop it on your knee, and rub it, top and bottom, with the towel.

Unlike the Free Will Baptists, most churches have not made the washing of feet a sacrament to be enacted regularly within the community. The lesson of the act, exemplified by the story of Jesus washing the feet of his followers in the thirteenth chapter of John's Gospel, is emphasized instead. And certainly, it is not in ritually



washing the nice clean feet of our best friends that we most truly follow Jesus, but in doing justice and seeking to live compassionately among all people.

But when we focus on the interpretation of the act without participating in the practice of it, we miss some important things. We miss, for instance, the startling, excessively intimate experience of handling the feet of another and putting our own feet in another's hands. Even those churches that do sacramentalize foot washing try to mitigate the intimacy of the act, as the church I visited did when it separated the women from the men—as, in fact, we all did, when we scrubbed our feet thoroughly before leaving for church.

But it is precisely the scrupulous toenail clipping and prechurch scrubbing of feet that points to the real gift of foot washing. For our attempts to have clean, sweet-smelling feet to offer betray the many ways we are rendered vulnerable by our bodies. When you offer your feet to another to be washed and gently dried, it is impossible not to notice the difficult relationship between our bodies and our identities. And when you kneel to wash the feet of another, you glimpse the vulnerabilities that attention to the body can evoke. I have only participated in foot washing three or four times in my life. But I can imagine that, practiced over a lifetime, this ritual might nourish a new vision of the relationship between the sacredness and the vulnerability of the body.

The kind of new vision I'm talking about is the kind that is granted to first-time parents, who fear they will break their baby the first time he or she is put into

their arms. It is the vision that is bestowed upon new parents who are unsure of how to hold a baby, much less change a diaper or offer a breast. It is the new vision that comes when you are the only thing keeping the tiny, floppy baby you are bathing from drowning in the bath water, and you suddenly know, really *know*, how vulnerable children are in our hands, how utterly dependent they are on those who care for them. So every time you soap your child's back, or scoop the shampoo off her forehead, or turn her body in the tub, it is impossible not to remember that some children are in the care of persons who are not gentle, but who are angry and violent. And so bath time becomes a time of prayer, prayer for all children, not just your own.

The kind of vision I mean is the terrible vision inflicted on the woman who has been raped of the long history of the violation of human bodies. It is the vision of the woman whose agonized compassion for those in every time and place who have endured such violence interrupts her sleep and her appetites. It is the vision of her grieving husband, gently massaging her wounded body, and seeing, as if for the first time, how fragile the human body is.

All of these moments of new vision, the joyful and the terrible, are glimpses into God's view of us. In Psalm 103 we find that God's compassion for us is born of God's knowledge of our frailty. God knows how we were made, the psalmist writes. God remembers we are dust. The father lowering his baby into the bathroom sink, taking care not to nudge the hot water valve, sees his child the way God sees us. The woman grieving the

damage done to vulnerable human bodies sees others the way God sees us. The man urging a glass of water on his dying partner sees him the way God sees us.

And although she probably doesn't realize it, the teenage girl holding the foot of a friend in both her hands is being taught to see the way Jesus saw when he girded himself with a towel and knelt down to wash the feet of his friends. The Gospel says that Jesus filled his basin that evening as one who knew that he had come from God and that he was going to God. The girl with the foot in her hands is being taught to reverence all that God has given and will again gather up. Rubbing the dampness from the skin of that foot, she is being taught that the God who makes a claim on her is a God who cherishes bodies. She is being taught to honor the body as a holy creation of God, blessed in its strength and fragility, in its smoothness and roughness, in the way it both conceals and reveals who we truly are.

Whenever Jesus patted mud into the eyes of someone who could not see, or touched a leper, or sat at the bedside of the sick and dying, he taught those around him how God sees and honors the body. But in the course of his ministry, he also received care from those who could see as God sees. Once a woman entered a house where Jesus was having supper and began weeping over his feet and wiping them dry with her hair. His host wondered what sort of prophet Jesus could be if he didn't know what sort of woman this was, if he would allow himself to be touched by a woman whose long, loose hair announced her sin. And when Mary of

Bethany poured out a pound of perfume and rubbed it into Jesus' feet, Judas Iscariot was scandalized by what he believed to be the waste of resources. But these women did not see with the eyes of those who despise the bodies of the marginalized nor with the eyes of those for whom value could only be measured in money. They looked on Jesus' body with the eyes of God: they knew how he was made. They remembered he was dust. They knew that he had come from God and that he was going to God. And so they honored his body with perfume and revered his body's fragility with tears.

This is our task also: to learn to see our bodies and the bodies of others through the eyes of God. To learn to see the body as both fragile and deeply blessed. To remember the body's vulnerability and to rejoice in the body as a sign of God's gracious bounty.

## Chapter 3

# BATHING THE BODY

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**M**y best friend, Kay, recently gave her mother, who is dying of cancer, her last bath in a tub.

Both my friend and her mother, Thelma, love to bathe and have made a long, delicious ritual of it. Kay's earliest memory is of sitting on the bathroom floor each night, talking with her mother during her mother's nighttime bath. After a long day of teaching kindergarten and engaging her own three active daughters, Thelma would step into the tub, prop her head up in back, and relax into the water. "I was eye level with her," Kay remembers, "her body the mirror image of mine, simply twenty-seven years older."

Kay and her mother would talk about this and that, my friend making sure, while she had her to herself in the damp, warm intimacy of the bathroom, to tell her