

“This Beautiful Body”
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia
January 26, 2025

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a
Luke 4:14-21

As I hold the tiny form of baby Ayuni for her baptism, I am amazed at the wonder and gift of human life, and of how her beautiful body, marked with baptismal water, connects her to the larger, beautiful body— that is, the church, the body of Christ.

Thank you for all who came— or tried to come— to last night’s celebration. There were even people from the community who came; you may not know, but there are several in the community who don’t come to this church, but they feel connected to this church— through interfaith partnerships, through peace activism, through your wider church friendships and shared mission. And as all gathered, I was struck by what a beautiful body *you* are, and what a grace it has been for me to be part of this body. I know my body will be marked forever more, as it was in the moment of my baptism as an infant, by what it has meant to be part of *this* body, *this* church.

Paul uses the body as a metaphor for helping the early church in Corinth understand how precious they are to one another, how to respect the differences they bring as gifts, and how important it is for them to rely on one another to bring for the body of Christ in the world, continuing his works of compassion and love, of healing and peacemaking, of calling forth new life in broken places.

One thing this body has done especially well is it has found a way to show that each part of the body matters. Whether you are young or old, neurodivergent or neurotypical; whether your accent reveals *exactly* which exit on the New Jersey Turnpike you came from or whether your accent reveals that you have lived and loved far, far from here; whether you love the Yankees or you love the Mets or you are simply bored by baseball, whether you are queer, straight, or trying to figure it out, whatever your gender, I suspect that this church can show you pretty

quickly how valued you are, how you make *this* body more beautiful because what *you* add makes the church better reflect the body of Christ.

In his first public speech in Luke's gospel, Jesus tried to turn people's vision to other bodies as a way of seeing more completely what it must mean to join a body such as his. Last week, we read about Jesus' first public appearance and action in John's gospel. It was at a wedding party, and Jesus turned water into wine. Now Luke tells us that Jesus had traveled around the region of Galilee, preaching in their synagogues, and as the scripture tells us, the people praised him for it. Then, he came to his hometown synagogue, in Nazareth.

It occurs to me that when Jesus came to his hometown synagogue, he couldn't help but have a dialogue with the child and youth he once was. Last night during the farewell party, I was struck at how the children's bodies have changed and grown. It seems like yesterday I held Oliver's tiny body up in the air at his baptism, and now I don't think I could do that. For any of us who have moved away from the home where we grew up, returning is wonderful, but it can also be weird, because you bring with you the person you have become, and layer that on to the child you once were. I imagine there will come a day years from now, when Kai will come back to this church, and some of you will say, "Isn't that the girl who played her instruments for us in all her stages of learning, and ran through the Fireplace room playing tag, with all the younger kids chasing after her?" Or even now, when Wanangwa comes back to the church, all grown, a college educated man, those of us who knew him as a kid will say, "this was once the quiet, thoughtful boy who came to church new to this country, and smiled more than he spoke." If you have come here from another state, or even another country, and return home for a visit, you may wonder, "Will the people back home see me for who I was? Will they see who I have become? Will their love for me stretch, from one vision of me, to the next?"

As for Jesus, as much as his hometown crew was impressed and amazed with him, the people wondered if his love was just for them, or if it would stretch. So when the priest handed him the scroll of Isaiah, and the verses he picked were these, and we could say that this was his inaugural address:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and

recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Maybe it occurred to the Nazareth crowd that Jesus was not going to stick around, to continue the stories they had already built upon, and share some miracles just for them. Their amazement turned to anger. I won't be preaching next week, but in the lectionary for Feb. 2, you'll hear that the same crowd, right after hearing him preach the word from Isaiah, chases Jesus out of town, with the intent of hurling him off a cliff!

Perhaps you recently witnessed how quickly a crowd that calls themselves faithful can turn on someone, just for speaking a prophetic word that comes from their own biblical tradition. Did you hear the sermon from Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde gave at the National Cathedral on January 21? She ended it with this appeal, which she directed to the newly inaugurated President.

"In the name of our God, I ask you to have mercy upon the people in our country who are scared now. There are gay, lesbian and transgender children in Democratic, Republican and independent families, some who fear for their lives. And the people, the people who pick our crops and clean our office buildings, who labor in poultry farms and meatpacking plants, who wash the dishes after we eat in restaurants, and work the night shifts in hospitals, they — they may not be citizens or have the proper documentation, but the vast majority of immigrants are not criminals. They pay taxes and are good neighbors. They are faithful members of our churches and mosques, synagogues, gurdwara and temples."

From the immediate aftermath through the following days, the President has called her sermon "uninspiring," "nasty in tone, and not compelling or smart." A congressman has called for her to be deported. The bishop has even received death threats.

But even if the sermon did not move the man Bishop Budde addressed, it was the sermon heard around the world. And I have been amazed at how much her words stirred even my most secular friends. I don't guess many of you would be surprised by her words, since the Presbyterian Church (USA) has a similar tradition of advocacy and prophetic edge. If you know someone who needed to

hear a word like that, invite them to church with you and show them a community that knows how to welcome all different kinds of bodies.

Jesus said that now is the time “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor,” a notion reminiscent of the Jubilee Year; the Jubilee Year, which was commanded in the Torah, is a Jewish tradition that every 50 years, debts are forgiven, captives set free, and the land is laid to rest. Our Catholic siblings have continued that tradition and have marked this year– 2025– as a year of Jubilee.

One way that Jesus’ recitation of the Isaiah passage differs from the book of Isaiah itself, is that Jesus adds “the recovery of sight to the blind” which Isaiah doesn’t include, and Isaiah has a line– “bind up the brokenhearted”-- which Jesus, at least according to Luke, does not include.

The fact that Jesus included recovery of sight to the blind– well, this is not something ordinary Christians can do. We *don’t* work miracles. But we can do as Isaiah said– bind up the brokenhearted. I see that happening in the church all the time, from Deacons who visit the lonely, to friends in church who sit in a back pew long after service is over, offering care and conversation to one another, to those of you who encourage one another when your sighs over the current political climate feel too heavy.

Why would Jesus add this line about recovery of sight to the blind, something too hard for us ordinary folks to accomplish? I don’t think that Jesus or Luke meant this connection, but since the Lectionary layers this text with Paul’s writing about the body, I cannot help but think of Paul’s line, “And if the ear would say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body.”

As I reflect on this time of our history, I want to name how important it is that Christians see. We need to see who has been forgotten or purposefully left out in the body. We need to see who is prioritizing their body, their belonging, over and above others who deserve a place at the table. We need to see our neighbor, or even the stranger, or even the enemy, and show mercy, as much as we would want to receive mercy.

We need to see ourselves, and know that Christ is alive and at work in our own bodies, and then look to the other and recognize that presence is true for them as much as it is for us.

We are the body of Christ. Can't you see how beautiful this body is?