INTRODUCTION
How are your new year’s resolutions going so far this year? We are two weeks in and I imagine motivation is still pretty high. I know mine is.
Here are the top ten New Year’s resolutions according to one web site. See if any of these are yours.
10. Spend more time with family
09. Fall in love
08. Helping other in their dreams
07. Quit smoking
06. Learn something exciting
05. Stay fit and healthy
04. Enjoy life to the fullest
03. Spend less, save more
02. Get organized
01. Lose weight
Are you surprised about number one? I’m not. It is interesting to note that the average American ate about 1 ton (1996 lbs) of food in 2011. 630lbs of dairy, 185lbs of meat, 273lbs of fruit, 415lbs of vegetables (which includes potatoes), 141lbs of sweeteners, 85lbs of butter. Thank you Paula Deen!

It is interesting and not surprising that 3 of the top 10 are related to the body: smoking cessation, staying fit and healthy, and weight loss.
Body image continues to be a primary concern for many Americans. The diet industry is a $40 billion dollar industry. That says a lot.
Our concern with body image starts early in America:
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  • 42% of elementary school students between the 1st and 3rd grades want to be thinner.
  • 80% of children who are ten years old are afraid of being fat.
And we all know that this is an issue that hits women harder than men, although men aren’t exempt from worrying about their bodies.
  • The average American woman is 5'4” tall and weighs 140 pounds.
- The average American model is 5'11" tall and weighs 117 pounds.
- Most fashion models are thinner than 98% of American women.

Those models shape our image of what a beautiful body “should” look like. This sets up unrealistic, and sometimes painful, expectations for how one should look, which can lead to medical issues like eating disorders.

- Approximately 7 million girls and women struggle with eating disorders.
- Approximately 1 million boys and men struggle with eating disorders.

**THE APOSTLE PAUL’S ADVICE ABOUT THE BODY**

I bring this up because the Apostle Paul is writing to a church in Corinth that has an attitude about the body that is misaligned with the Gospel. Many in Corinth believed that the body didn’t matter because it would ultimately be destroyed leaving only the soul. Justified by this belief, several members of the congregation took to visiting prostitutes and engaging in sexually immoral practices. They had developed false views of both freedom (“everything is permissible”) and of the body (“God will destroy it”). Paul writes to correct both errors.

1. **“Everything is permissible”**
   “Everything is permissible for me” is almost certainly a Corinthian theological slogan. It is likely they have twisted a Pauline position on freedom, though, to suit their own purposes. Paul’s position was that “in Christ” all things are permissible. It is a subtle, yet significant difference. Paul argued that Christians have freedom “in Christ” about many matters that are not essential, like whether or not:
   - one is circumcised
   - one eats certain types of food

These are non-essentials, and Paul argued for Christian freedom in these things because they didn’t rest on significant theological grounds. Paul did urge consideration for others though. He said if you think your actions may cause a weaker brother or sister in Christ to stumble then forfeit your freedom. Do what is best for others. But the Corinthians had their theology about the body all wrong, which led them to unethical sexual practices.

2. **“God will destroy the body”**

Next, Paul sought to address their belief that “God will destroy the body.” The Corinthians developed an erroneous belief in the dualism of the body and the spirit. This belief often led in one of two directions. If the body doesn’t matter, then some took to ascetic practices, whereas others took to indulgent practices. Ascetic practices involved extreme fasting, sleep deprivation for purposes of prayer, and some forms of celibacy. Indulgent practices were just the opposite and that is the pathway that many Corinthians went down. Paul sought to correct this, though, on a theological basis. The body does matter because of the incarnation and the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ.

a. **Incarnation**

It was and is a scandalous claim that God came to earth as a human being. Most other religions believed (and believe today) that God is so totally other (higher and beyond) humankind that it is unthinkable – even blasphemous – to suggest that God would be human. But that is our claim. The fact of the incarnation is a radical statement that God values the human body. It extends to our belief that the spiritual is not better than the material, just as the material is not better than
the spiritual. We blur the line between the two because of the incarnation. An early Church practice developed to underscore this point that we continue even to today. We will do it in just a few minutes. We will march this congregation’s offering of materials – bread, wine, and money – up to that holy and spiritual place, the altar. It is a bold and defiant move that symbolically says, “We will put material things on the most holy, spiritual place because the spiritual and the material do not always contradict one another.” It is our way of shaking our fists in the face of dualist who want to split up and keep separate the material and the spiritual, the body and the spirit.

In Genesis we hear stories of creation and over and over again we hear, “it is good.” Because of our belief in the goodness of creation, we are sacramental Christians. We believe, as the catechism in our Prayer Book states, that God gives us “outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace.” The two great sacraments given by Christ to his church are Holy Baptism and Holy Eucharist. In each of these sacraments – in fact in all sacraments – there are two important elements: form and matter. The form is what we say and the matter is some material that we use. For example, in baptism the form is the phrase “I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” The matter is the water. In the Eucharist the form is the words of institution, “This is my body…this is my blood.” The matter is the bread and the wine. The two go hand-in-hand signifying the unity of matter and spirit.

b. Resurrection

The second theological basis for Paul’s argument that the body does matter is Christ’s resurrection. The body is not destined for destruction, but for resurrection, the proof of which is Christ’s resurrection. Jesus’s spirit didn’t just appear to the disciples after his death. And Jesus’ spirit didn’t just ascend into heaven after spending 40 days on earth with his disciples. Both involved his physical body.

Remember doubting Thomas and his request? He wanted to see the wounds of Christ after the resurrection. The wounded Christ showed him – even had him touch – the wounds in his hands and in his side. These were not mere spiritual acts; they were physical.

Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, although practical, isn’t meant to be nitpicky, legalistic, or meddling. He understands that this early group of Christians must understand a Christian theology of the body, because that theology shapes so much of our Christian ethics.

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THE DISABLED GOD

I am also thinking a lot about the body right now because of a book that I am currently reading called The Disabled God by Nancy Eisland. The other day while I was eating lunch I had that book on the table and one of my Clinical Pastoral Education students walked by, saw the book, looked at it and me curiously and said, “The disabled God? I hope that is not referring to the God we serve.” The image of a disabled God can be hard to swallow for many of us. It is the biblical picture of Jesus, however. The resurrected Christ had a body, and it wasn’t perfect. It was broken, disfigured. Wouldn’t it be a stunning theological statement for us to rename this place to the Church of the Disfiguration? The story of Thomas reminds us of the startling fact that Jesus was disfigured.

The late Eisland, who had a congenital bone defect in her hips and lived with a lot of pain, wrote her seminal book in the mid-1990’s. She was in seminary struggling to make sense of her life experience as a person with a disability and her Christian theology. She experienced a culture – both in society and the church – that treated her with pity and paternalism. Christian theology seemed to only give her two options: miraculous healing or heroic suffering. Neither of those
options squared with her experience of seeking a normal life. She came to see and know a disabled God, who she imagined in a sip-puff wheelchair, much like the one Stephen Hawkin uses. She saw “not an omnipotent, self-sufficient God, but neither a pitiable, suffering servant.” She “beheld God as a survivor, unpitying and forthright.” God remains a God the disabled can identify with, she argued — he is not cured and made whole; his injury is part of him, neither a divine punishment nor an opportunity for healing.

One of Eisland’s many gifts to the Church was the idea that we must change our body images to normalize bodies that don’t square with what we think of as a “normal” body. In fact, she invited us to consider ourselves as “temporarily abled-bodied” as opposed to normal. Many of us, whether through birth, accidents or aging, are or will end up disabled at one time or another. Our bodies will change, and not always for the better.

Church and society, unfortunately, have excluded person with disabilities. The Church in particular has done so with images of God that conflates sin and disability, with ministries of charitable segregation, and with architecture that excludes.

1. The bible conflates sin with disability in several places.
   a. In Leviticus 21:17-23 we learn that you couldn’t become a priest if you were a person with a disability.
      i. “For any man who has a defect shall not approach: a man blind or lame, who has a marred face or any limb too long, a man who has a broken foot or broken hand, or is a hunchback or a dwarf, or a man who has a defect in his eye, or eczema or scab, or is a eunuch.”
      ii. Many mainline churches excluded persons with disabilities from the ordination process until about 30 year ago.
      iii. Bishop Parsley, retired bishop of Alabama, was born with a physical disability that caused him to walk with a limp. He is a powerful symbol of inclusion of persons with disabilities into the life and leadership of the Church. It would have been an atrocity had he been barred from ordained ministry because of his physical disability.

b. The Gospel of John gives us a story that conflates sin with disability.
   i. John 5:14 – Recall the disabled man at the pool of Bethesda. He had been disabled for 38 years. He couldn’t get himself into the pool when the angel stirred it, which would have healed him.
   ii. “Afterward Jesus found him in the temple, and said to him, ‘See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you.’

2. Ministries of charitable segregation
   a. The Church and society did a lot to care for persons with disabilities in times past by creating hospitals and homes. The unintended consequence was that putting persons with disabilities in homes segregated them from family and society at large and ultimately marginalized them. Unfortunately, this led to the development of attitudes that perpetuated stigmatization and fostered dependence.
   b. This also enabled us to put physical disability out of side and out of mind. It was too challenging to our images of healthy and whole bodies.
   c. Names of Institutions that stigmatized
      i. Hospital for Special Surgery began as “The Hospital for the Relief of the Ruptured and
“Crippled” in the 1860s.

3. Architecture that excludes
   a. Many of our churches are built with the aim of pointing us to the transcendence of God. We have high ceilings that draw our eyes up and beyond us.
   b. We have a high altar that is elevated by a serious of steps.
   c. We have gates that symbolize the holy and separate nature of the elements and action that take place at the high altar.
   d. These architectural features intentionally teach us something about God, e.g. that God is beyond us. They also unintentionally teach us something about God, (e.g. that not all of us can access God) especially if you are unable to fully participate in the liturgy because of physical disabilities and architectural barriers.

All of these factors, and more, have subtly shaped our theological body images. And for many of these things we must as church leaders – lay and ordained – reconsider how to be more inclusive of people with physical disabilities. That is the point of Eisland’s book.

CONCLUSION

The call of God to us today is to ask ourselves if our attitudes about the body are misaligned with the Gospel, like the Corinthians. We can never forget that the central act of Christian worship is the Eucharist, where we recall the broken, and disfigured, body of Christ. We must always remember that we, the Church, are the body of Christ, broken and poured out for the sake of the world. Paradoxically, it is through the broken body of Christ that we his people are made whole and bring wholeness to the world. May God help us to reimagine our theological body images in such ways that are inclusive of broken and disfigured bodies that challenge our sense of that which is normal. And may God give us grace to include broken and less than perfect bodies into our vision of what it means to be whole and beautiful people.

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v Ibid
vi Ibid
vii Ibid
viii Ibid
ix Ibid
x Ibid
xi Ibid