Embodied faith

Incarnation and wholeness

Sarah Werner

We are all embodied beings, both sacred and fragile. Our bodies are integral to the functioning of our minds and the wellbeing of our spirit, and each of us is connected in a rich web to the rest of the created world and one another. In addition to this, we worship an embodied God. The incarnation of God in Jesus is at the center of Christian faith, but modern Protestant churches often treat the body as suspect and a place of sin. The people who lived in the time of Jesus inhabited a different cultural landscape where the body and soul were reflections of one another and intimately connected.[1]

There are many reasons why we have forgotten this early Christian emphasis on embodiment, but learning to reconnect our spiritual health with the miracle of our physical embodiment can help shed new light on what it means to be part of the body of Christ, connected to God, creation, and one another. It can also help us see the danger in categorizing bodies into "normal" and "abnormal" when we have all been created by God to be unique. Disabled bodies often fall outside of this normal ideal, and so are subject to attempts to "fix" them in ways that can cause more harm. People with disabilities often do not see themselves as broken and in need of fixing.

Western culture tends to see disability through the lens of loss—loss of sight, hearing, movement, or cognitive ability—but disabled bodies are simply a reflection of a diverse creation. A lack of a certain function only becomes disabling when the built or social environment is designed to exclude. Churches can be places of radical acceptance and belonging or exclusion and indifference, depending on whether the congregation is willing to change its structures and practices to accommodate these differences in ability.

1 For more on this subject, see Bethany McKinney Fox, *Disability and the Way of Jesus: Holistic Healing in the Gospels and the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019); Mark Wallace, *When God Was a Bird: Christianity, Animism and the Re-enchantment of the World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019).

The body as sinful

It is important to understand how we have failed to recognize the goodness of embodiment and the beauty of each unique human creation. There are many reasons for this, and those of us in the West have inherited a long legacy of disconnection from our bodies. At the heart of this is the myth of dualism, the idea that each of us is broken into pieces—alternately called mind and body, soul and body, or brain and body. These are all reflections of the myth of dualism in different garb.

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Augustine gets a great deal of attention for being perhaps the most memorable proponent of the idea that the body is doomed by original sin, but he was not the earliest or only voice telling us that our bodies are places of sin rather than holiness.[2] Augustine and other Western Christians argued that the body is sinful and keeps the soul from living up to its highest potential. In this theological position, the body and the soul are in conflict with one another, rather than a unified whole. This same idea was expressed earlier by Plato in his dialogue *Phaedrus*, when he described each person as being driven by two horses—one representing the body's sinful impulses, and the other representing the soul's noble and beautiful wisdom—who often try to move in opposite directions.

During the scientific revolution, this idea of dualism took on the veneer of scientific legitimacy, best exemplified by the ideas of philosopher René Descartes. Descartes is famous for his phrase, "I think, therefore I am." The implication here is that only thinking beings, by which he meant human adults without cognitive disabilities, were worthy of status in society. According to Descartes, the body is fickle, subject to illness and decay, and therefore humanity should put all its effort into our mental lives.

Perhaps the most profound effect of dualism on Western Christians today comes from the purity culture espoused by certain modern evangelical Christians, which has led generations of Christians to be distrustful of their bodies and forever vigilant against what they consider sinful urges that might coopt their soul for evil. Like Descartes and others, they

2 St. Augustine of Hippo, *On the Grace of Christ and on Original Sin*, trans. Robert Ernest Wallis (New York: Lighthouse, 2018).

argue that our souls are stronger and more important than our bodies. We should not listen to our bodies because they are only temporary containers for our eternal souls and only lead us astray from more important spiritual goals.

All this emphasis on the body being subject to the will of the mind or soul has led to body shaming, an alarming rise in eating disorders among young people, and a distrust of the body fostered by churches who encourage their followers to disregard the wisdom of their own bodies because they are inherently sinful. The problem with this faulty logic is that we aren't made up of disparate, warring pieces. We are meant to be an integrated whole. God is not only spirit but also body, reflected in Jesus and the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in creation.

Incarnation

This biblical integration of body and soul plays out most strongly in the incarnation of Christ. Jesus is the embodied aspect of God, God "made flesh" to live among us on earth (John 1:14). This means that we ought to take seriously our own embodiment. Our bodies are our places of connection to both creation and the Holy. They are the crux of our link to all life, the earthly and spiritual interwoven into an intact whole. We are not souls inhabiting bodies; we are all of it altogether at once. In the eyes of the biblical writers, who clearly thought bodies were important, resurrection isn't just a spiritual return but also a bodily one, for Christ and for us. The Gospels spend a great deal of time recounting the many healing miracles performed by Jesus, where people were healed in body and soul. Paul, in many of his letters, lays out a theology of cosmic restoration that includes the salvation of humans, body and soul, as well as all creation.[3] Additionally, both the Gospels and the letters of Paul allude to the importance of bodily resurrection at the end of time (Matthew 22:29–33; Acts 24:15, 21; 1 Corinthians 15:54–55).

God took on human form, became enfleshed, to better connect with us through Jesus. Even after Jesus was finished walking the earth, the Holy Spirit continued to be present with us in the created world at all times and places. The incarnation is a reminder that God is present throughout creation and throughout time and space. The world is a holy place, suffused with the presence of God, and this includes our bodies. Our

3 For more on Paul's vision of cosmic restoration, see David G. Horrell, Cherryl Hunt, and Christopher Southgate, *Greening Paul: Rereading the Apostle in a Time of Ecological Crisis* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010).

bodies are not a place of sin and brokenness. They are the place where we connect with God and with one another. Jesus walked on this earth in a body. He ate and slept and felt angry in the same ways that we do. The fact that God would take on human form means that our bodies are also holy and good and builds on ideas from the Hebrew Bible regarding the goodness of humans and of creation in general. Near the end of the first creation account, God surveys all creation and proclaims it "very good" (Genesis 1:31).

Finding our way back and some thoughts on healing

Given all of this, if we heed this miracle of incarnation at the heart of our faith, we ought to recognize the miracle of our own embodiment. Original sin is not a concept found in the Bible. What we find instead is a rich theology of embodiment, culminating in Paul's vision of a cosmic restoration that includes our bodies. We are created "very good" and in the "image of God," according to Genesis 1. When the Hebrew people were wandering in the wilderness after escaping slavery in Egypt, God sent manna to sustain their bodies. After they established a kingdom in Israel and social inequality was on the rise, the prophets reminded them that God calls God's people to care for the wellbeing of all bodies. God cares about the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner, those with the least resources, whose bodies were most at risk for depravation and violence.

When Jesus began his ministry, he continued this tradition of the prophets, repeatedly teaching his followers to care for the most vulnerable members of society. In addition to this, Jesus spent a great deal of time healing people. These healing miracles are an important aspect of the gospel narratives and of understanding embodiment in the Bible, but it is hard to know what to do with these stories as modern readers. Some of them sound so odd and even offensive from our twenty-first–century perspective. Those who are part of modern Western culture tend to view illness as resulting from faulty body processes. For example, schizophrenia is not the result of demon possession but is a brain disorder caused by a combination of genetic and environmental factors. Similarly, leprosy is a skin disorder caused by a bacterial infection, not the result of sin. Given this modern understanding, reading Gospel accounts of healing requires interpretation to make them understandable to modern ears.

This is where it is helpful to delve into the cultural context in which the Gospels take place. Our modern conception of the separation of mind and body would not have made any sense to those living at the time

of Jesus. They understood the body as an outward reflection of the soul, where healing incorporated not just the body but also the person's spirit and their connections with others in their family and community.

In the first-century Mediterranean world, people understood illness to be the result either of sin or of demons, which is why Jesus's followers and other onlookers were so concerned with a disabled person's sins. Those of us in the modern West tend to see illness as a biological phenomenon that happens to individual bodies, but for ancient Mediterranean people, illness was more cosmic in scale.[4] The time of Jesus's ministry was also one of political turmoil and social oppression at the hands of the Roman Empire. The miraculous healings that Jesus enacted would have been perceived by those witnessing them as evidence of the coming kingdom of God.[5]

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When Jesus enacted healing miracles, those who were healed could then return to their families and communities, and so healing extended far beyond their bodily reality to their spiritual and social wellbeing. Ethics scholar Bethany McKinney Fox points out that the New Testament refers to healing more than any other document from the period and that each of the synoptic Gospels "presents Jesus spending a significant portion of his ministry engaging people with illnesses and disabilities, and transforming their lives."[6] This is the context within which Jesus healed, as he also disrupted the cultural understandings of the cause of illness.

Miracle stories can be hard for disabled people to read because they seem to offer an impossible or even unwanted healing. Disabled people often have had negative experiences of people attempting to heal them in religious settings, focusing only on their perceived deficit rather than all the gifts and wisdom they bring to the community. We also inhabit a culture that is hyper-focused on curing whatever is not perceived as "normal" for a human body. This includes deafness, blindness, bodies that are larger than "normal," people who use mobility equipment to navigate the world, and neurodivergent people. All of these are simply differences, not

4 Fox, *Disability and the Way of Jesus*, 30.

5 Fox, *Disability and the Way of Jesus*, 34.

6 Fox, *Disability and the Way of Jesus*, 28.

necessarily disabilities, but our culture tends to see them only as problems to be fixed, regardless of whether the affected individuals see them as such.

Given all of this, the miraculous healing narratives in the Gospels often make those of us outside this spectrum of "normal" cringe. These differences make us who we are. They affect how we experience and engage with the world. The point I take from miracle stories is that Jesus healed people in order for them to return to a place of belonging in their community. People with skin conditions, those with walking impediments, blind and deaf people, and those with mental illness were all outcasts in Roman culture during Jesus's time, struggling to survive with little or no social support in a culture that wanted to discard them. Wholeness and holiness aren't a perfect body but a body able to live in community.

After Jesus was resurrected, his body became disabled in a sense because he still bore the injuries of crucifixion. He wasn't miraculously returned to perfection; the wounds in his hands and feet remained even on his resurrected body. His wounds were a witness to the violence of the Roman Empire and a reminder that when God became embodied through Jesus, God also experienced pain and suffering as we do.

Toward an embodied faith

We are inheritors of a faith centered on embodiment. Jesus is God embodied, the one who walked among us and felt our human pain and our joy. God created us along with all creation and called it "very good." The original paradise in Genesis was one of humans and nature in harmony, a garden of peace and plenty. And in Revelation the final vision of the restored earth is one of similar harmony: the river of life flowing through the center of a holy city, on whose banks grows the tree of life, producing every kind of fruit for sustenance and healing (Revelation 22:2). We are created good, embodied beings living in a sacred creation, connected to one another and beautiful in our diverse experiences of being human.

It seems fitting to end by detailing some of the ways we might live out this embodied faith, both individually and as part of our human communities and the wider world. First, it's important to remember that we are all embodied children of God, each one of us created whole and holy. Our physical, tangible experiences of the world are important, and every person feels and moves through the world differently. Each of us is valuable and whole just as we are, whether we currently inhabit bodies deemed "normal" by our culture or not. No one is defective. In the words

of the psalmist, "I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14).

Second, there are cultural aspects to living into an embodied faith. We should recognize that everyone is different. The way you understand something will be different from how another person understands, and so each of us has an incomplete picture of the whole. People come in all shapes, sizes, abilities, and cognitive ways of being. We all see the world in different ways, and so we ought to listen to diverse voices when attempting to understand our place in it. There is no single mold we should all fit into, and this is a beautiful thing. God created each of us unique, a reflection of the diversity of creation. It is only together that we can foster the kin-dom of God, a society where all are valued and valuable.

Third, given all of this, we need to work to make our churches welcoming communities for all kinds of bodies—abled, disabled, neurodivergent, deaf, blind, old, young, tired, exuberant. Communally, the way we live out our faith through worship, Christian formation, and service should reflect this beautiful diversity of creation. We can ask questions about our own churches: Who do we see in the pews on Sunday morning? Who is absent? How does the structure of our building welcome or exclude? Are our worship practices only inviting for certain types of people? Church buildings might need to change to make room for wheelchairs or strollers or large and small bodies. Some disabilities are invisible, and many people suffer in silence for fear of being excluded from the community rather than asking for accommodations.

It is only in paying attention to our own embodiment and welcoming the myriad ways that others are embodied that we can build communities and societies of true belonging. This is what it looks like to be the body of Christ together, to live into an embodied faith.

About the author

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