

*Not Bad! Learning to Love the Bodies We've Been Given*  
Part 1: "Good." from Joe Heikman - Sept 10, 2017

We hear all kinds of messages about our bodies:

We hear thousands of advertising messages, that if we just buy this product, our bodies will be healthy, or attractive, or "young again."

We hear lots of advice on what we should eat and drink, or more often, what we should *not* eat or drink.

We hear some messages painting our bodies as an enemy, something to struggle against, something to overcome, lest we "give in to the flesh," and be tempted to sin.

Many of us have heard ourselves say negative things about our bodies, that we're slow, or weak, or old, or ugly.

Some of us have heard medical professionals speak dreaded words about our bodies or those of our loved ones: surgery. chronic pain. cancer. terminal.

With all of these messages about our bodies swirling around us, it's easy to miss the most important message. The most important one is this:

You, including your body, are created by God, of God. John Philip Newell says it this way:

**T**he first thing that is said about humanity in the Hebrew Scriptures is that we are made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26). Everything else written about us in our scriptural inheritance needs to be read in light of this foundational truth: that within us is the likeness of the One from whom we have come. Or, as Julian of Norwich puts it, we are made "of God."<sup>1</sup> We are made of the Light that was in the beginning. We are made of the Wisdom that fashioned the universe in its glory of interrelatedness. We are made of the Love that longs for oneness. This is not to deny our capacity for falseness and for the ugly betrayals that tear us apart. It is simply to say that deeper still is our of-Godness.

~ John Philip Newell, *The Rebirthing of God*

The full quote from Julian of Norwich is "*we are not just made by God we are made of God. We are born from the very womb of the Divine.*"

There's a lot in Christian history that has treated the physical side of God's creation with suspicion, even disgust. Not without reason. Our bodies are limited, fragile, painful, mortal. And let's be honest, a little bit gross.

But we are created by God, of God. The stuff we are made of comes from God. And that means that there is beauty in our weakness, coherence in our crudeness, and wonder in our mortality. Our bodies are not bad, for they come from God.

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### Whole.

You have heard it said that you are divided, that your body is separate from your mind, your heart, your spirit.

This view has been taught for a long, long time. The ancient Greeks, among others, noted that the sum of a person is greater than our physical parts, that we are *more than* bodies. And some of those philosophers concluded that where the physical is limited and flawed, the immaterial had the potential for perfection. And so they lifted up the soul as *greater than* the body, *greater than* and *separate from*, because that which is perfect must not mix with that which is imperfect.

Others draw lines of separation in order to focus on one part in particular. When I was in university, I pretty much lived on Doritos and Mountain Dew. What I ate didn't matter, I was there to learn, to think all the thoughts. My mind was the focus; my body existed to drag my brain to class.

When we pray, many of us have been taught to close our eyes and still our bodies, to shut out the physical to connect with the spiritual. When our budgets are tight, we cut back spiritual care as unnecessary for physical care. When a body ceases to show brain activity, we call it dead. When we sin, our spirit can be forgiven but our body has to live with the consequences, or so say some theologians.

You have heard it said that you are divided, detached. But I say to you, you are created by God, of God. Coming out of completeness and unity, you are whole and holy.

*As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him... For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority.*  
~ Colossians 2

The Incarnation of Jesus is the great mystery of Christianity. God embodied, the fullness of the divine meets the fullness of humanity and somehow the two are both tied together in one person. Jesus was, somehow, wholly tied together: body, mind, heart, spirit, united with God.

One of the many implications of the Incarnation is that it is possible for a human to be whole. The New Testament writers said that not only is it possible, in Jesus, this is the new reality. Jesus, not Adam, is the archetype, the True Human. And in his wholeness and fullness, we are also invited to be whole and full.

Yes, we are *more than* our bodies. But our bodies are connected to our minds, are connected to our hearts, are connected to our spirits. The lingo around wholeness, mindfulness, wellness, holistic practice, these are not just Buddhist ideas or New Age jargon. Wholeness is deeply Christian as well.

You have heard it said that your body is just a physical thing, but I say to you that you are whole, one being: body, soul and spirit united and indivisible.

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## Beautiful.

You have heard it said that you are ugly and undesirable. Maybe you've never heard this out loud, maybe you have. Sometimes it comes from our peers, from the kid at school that is insecure about their own looks and so puts down the looks of others. Sometimes it comes from competition, from the drive to stand out, to impress, to win the heart of a lover, to belong in a group, to earn the love of a parent. Sometimes it comes from society, from advertising, from the unquestioned assertions that sex sells, that image is everything, that appearance trumps substance.

Wherever it comes from, for many of us these sayings have been driven deep into our beings and self-understanding. We feel that we are not enough, and so we must do whatever we can to *look* our best so that no one can see the ugliness we are desperate to hide.

You have heard it said that you are ugly. But I say to you, you created by God, of God. Born of divine desire, you are lovely and beloved.

*For it was you who formed my inward parts;  
you knit me together in my mother's womb.  
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.  
Wonderful are your works;  
that I know very well.*

~ Psalm 139

That word fearfully is about reverence and respect. Your body, from conception, is an object of reverence and respect, wonderful, awesome, a work of art. Which, of course, makes sense, given the source. The God of Love created you out of a desire to be with you. You are beautiful by definition, attractive at the core of your being, because that is the source from which you come.

You have heard it said that you are undesirable, but I say to you that you are beautiful, the offspring of Divine Beauty.

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## Holy.

You have heard it said that your body is something be ashamed of, to keep hidden, that you need to keep close guard over your body lest it betray you with its temptations and lust and desires.

Sometimes these things are said out of fear, Out of fear of the strength of our bodies and their passions. Out of a desire to control the bodies of others, because bodies can be powerful and untamed and raw.

Sometimes these things are said out of deficiency, of experiences where you tried really hard to do things the right way, to stay out of trouble, to be fit. And you failed. You gave in to temptation. You ate the forbidden fruit, or was it a single potato chip, followed by the whole bag.

You're not the only one, you know. The Apostle Paul, Christian superstar, confessed: *"I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do."*

You have heard it said that you are shameful. But I say to you, you are created by God, of God. Growing out of holiness, you are pure and sacred.

*Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?*

The significance of this gets lost in translation with our modern Indiana Jones, Tomb Raider way of seeing the world. We're prone to deconstruction, to taking a thing apart to get to the truly valuable thing at the center. Go ahead and bring down the temple, as long as we get to the Holy Grail.

The ancient understanding of the temple is the other way around. The sacred object at the center sanctifies the whole structure, made the whole thing sacred. Your body isn't just a temporary residence for the treasure of your soul. The Spirit of God in you makes your whole body sacred.

Not just when it behaves itself. Not just when you control your impulses and resist temptations. No, you cannot tarnish what God has made good. The goodness works from the inside out.

You have heard it said that you are shameful. But I say to you that your body is sacred, grounded in the Spirit of God within you.

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**Strong.**

You have heard it said that you are weak, frail, failing.

Many of us have been told that our bodies are naturally incapable of some things. You're not fast enough to make the team, or strong enough, or coordinated enough, or smart enough. You can't sing well enough to be part of the choir. You can't draw, so don't even try. You can't, you can't, you can't, over and over until those limits define us.

Some of us have been told that we are disabled, that our bodies are abnormal, substandard, broken. We're not like others, whoever they are, and nevermind that they have their own limitations.

All of us know that our bodies are breaking down, that we get sick, we get tired, we need rest and medicine and healing.

You have heard it said that you are weak. But I say to you, you are created by God, of God. Coming from the source of strength, you are stronger than you know.

*...but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.*

*~ 2 Corinthians 12:9*

Where did we get the idea that strength was the same thing as invulnerability? Delicate does not mean defective. Dependence does not mean failure. Our ideals of self-reliance and self-determination leave us isolated and unfulfilled.

As embodied beings, we need more than our selves. Our weakness opens us up to the joy of community. We need each other. We rely on God. For sustenance. For healing. For connection and satisfaction and enjoyment. Our weakness draws us together, unites us, creates space for love and passion.

You have heard it said that you are weak. But I say to you that you are as you are meant to be, connected to the full potential of the universe.

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### **Essence.**

We are about to celebrate the ritual of communion, where we receive into our bodies these physical reminders of Jesus' physical body. As Anabaptist Christians, we emphasize that this is *just* ritual, that this is *just* bread and juice. And it is.

Two days ago this stuff was sitting on the grocery store shelf among all the other items I could have chosen. It will taste like bread and juice tastes, and our bodies will break it down into energy and waste, exactly like the other food we'll have for lunch. And then we'll get hungry again, physically and emotionally and spiritually, this is not all that we need.

And yet, there is depth and meaning in this ritual, this moment, this particular bread and juice. Some theologies speak of transubstantiation, the idea that the substance of communion bread and wine literally becomes the body and blood of Christ, while the physical appearance remains the same. I have some questions about that. But there's something compelling about this idea that a thing can be both physical and divine, natural and sacred.

You are born of God, the offspring of holiness and goodness. Your substance, your essence is both physical and sacred, and this is good. These bodies of ours, are sacred, and whole, and good. So it has been said. So we are invited to live.