

“Why Do We Stay in the Church? To Learn To Spiritualize Our Humanity.”

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

12 March 2023

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Texts: Galatians 6:1-10

Ephesians 4:1-3, 14-16

*“I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you
to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called,”*
~ Ephesians 4:1

Prayer

Holy God,

May the words of my mouth

And this sacred time of intentional listening to your Living Word

Inspire us to grow in every way into the Church

That never gets tired of following in the Way of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Last week, I read an article on innovative sustainable funding models for churches and I am glad, and you will be too, that I took the time to scroll down to the comment section. Among the many informative, intriguing, and inspirational comments was a light-hearted one about a successful annual dinner party with a live auction. This reader said that his congregation looks forward to the entertaining fundraising event and, every year, the item that gets the highest bids is an index card bearing only one simple sentence: *“The pastor will deliver a 5-minute sermon on a mutually agreed Sunday.”*

Since we all lost an hour of sleep last night and those of us attending in person are looking forward to the pancake breakfast the youth is preparing for us today, I thought I would give you the gift of a brief sermon this morning. But don't get too excited. It won't be a 5-minute homily! No, you won't get a very short sermon out of me so easily! But I promise to save that homiletical pearl for when we have a live auction and you all can bid on it. I'd love to see who among you might be the most eager bidders.

So, I invite you to dive with me into this morning's meditation by opening your hearts and minds to the provocative words of the nineteenth-century poet Walt Whitman who said, *“I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul... I have said that the soul is not more than the body, And I have said that the body is not more than the soul,”*¹ *“The body has just as great a work as the soul,”*² *“And if the body were not the soul, what is the soul?”*³

Unlike other poets before him, Whitman rose above the prevailing dualistic Western concept of the universe, which still tends to divide the soul from the body, and he saw a sacred union at the core of our humanity. Going against the grain of culture and religion of

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his time, the poet spoke of the equal coexistence of the human body and soul, refusing to conform to the predominant view of the soul as the enduring and superior part of the self and the organic body as the finite expression of an inferior nature. Whitman believed that without the soul, our bodies are just lifeless physical matter, and without the body, the soul is nothing more than disembodied consciousness without the ability to see, hear, taste, smell, touch, pass on knowledge, create meaning and experience emotions that are built into the architecture and physiology of the human nervous system. Walt Whitman's poetry imagines the soul descending into the body, consciousness merging with matter, and the eternal cohabiting with the mortal. And this integration of soul and body is essential for a mature religion that inspires human beings to pay attention to what Franciscan priest Richard Rohr calls our deepest identity, our unique blueprint, our True Self.⁴

For most of Christian history, the Church has insisted on a rigid and irreconcilable dichotomy between the physical body and the immortal soul. Influenced by Greek philosophy and misguided interpretations of the Christian Scriptures, Christianity has enshrined in our doctrines and creeds a schizophrenic anthropology that splits human nature into two antagonistic halves with clashing views, incompatible needs, opposing claims, and antithetical yearnings that are engaged in an ongoing existential struggle with each other. On one side, there is the body, which is viewed as a kind of weak earthly prison capable of sinful impulses that could put the human soul in danger of eternal damnation, and, on the other side is the soul longing for the glorious jailbreak from the distractions, temptations, shortcomings, and sins of this mortal coil. In this traditional Christian model of humanity, we are the battleground between two hopelessly uncompromising enemies in our own human essence. But, as author and public theologian Brian McLaren wrote in his book *"Do I Stay Christian?"*, human beings are much more than spiritual ghosts in prisons of meat. ***"We are biological creatures... in which spiritual experiences happen."***⁵

In a recent interview with Krista Tippett on *"On Being,"*⁶ Dacher Keltner, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley and the founding director of the Greater Good Science Center, affirmed both Whitman's poetic declarations and McLaren's theological assertions about the sacred, the spiritual, the transcendent being inseparably linked to our bodies. The human soul and body are not at odds with each other. They are both essential to our experience of God. In fact, our bodies make God real in the world. Our bodies give meaning to what we say we believe in church. Our bodies remind us that we are not independent soul-in-a-meat-package monads at the mercy of an eternal spirit that yearns for the freedom of the grave and a decaying body that is powered by ungodly desires, but human beings who are trying to be the bigger self, the True Self, God hopes we will grow into as we abandon our dualistic thinking about our own nature and about the world around us.

Speaking about the oneness of the body and soul, Keltner noted that we have neurophysiological systems in our bodies that make space for goodness, love, tears, laughter, joy, grief and a myriad of other emotions that put us in touch with God, each

other and with our deepest Self. Keltner has been investigating the experience of awe in human life and he said that not only wonder, mystery and awe are common human experiences across cultures, but the most common source of awe for people around the globe is other people doing amazing things. When they were asked, “**what’s awe inspiring?**,” people did not mention God or a gorgeous sunset or the Grand Canyon or one of Beethoven’s symphonies; they brought up the kindness, courage, solidarity, selfless giving, faith, love, the strength to overcome obstacles of other people. We all have a tendency to be inspired, to choke up and to get tears in our eyes when we see or read or hear or even think about other people practicing what Dacher Keltner calls “**moral beauty**.” And, of course, this moral beauty is mediated through human bodies that are energized by the life force of the soul.

It is fascinating that already in the first century of the Christian Era, Paul was impressing on the first Christians the importance of moral beauty for the communal life of the Christian community. In both New Testament passages that we read this morning, the apostle was instructing the Church “**to allow goodness its own speech**,”⁷ to borrow another expression Keltner used on “*On Being*,” in and through their embodied existence.

In the Letter to the Colossians in particular, Paul warned the early Christians of the “flesh” – “**If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit.**” The apostle wasn’t pitching the human body against the soul. In Greek, there are two words for “body:” “*sōma*,” which defines the body of a human being or animal and “*sarx*” that is often translated as “*flesh*” and, in the Christian Scriptures, points to a power that resists the life God dreams for people of faith. This power of the flesh is the small self, the ego that wants us to believe that life is all about us, about what we like, what we want, what we think we need, about our hurts, our opinions, our career, our status, our success, our need to be in control, our safety, our country, our religion and our beliefs. Father Richard Rohr says that the human ego prefers just about anything to changing or being liberated from a narrow worldview and a small, closed heart that have place only for the people that are close to us and live and look like us.⁸ So, Paul challenged the Colossians to spiritualize their humanity. In other words, to let their hearts break open to God’s Spirit so they might evolve spiritually and step beyond the boundaries of their small self toward a higher level of consciousness. Only then, Paul told the Colossians, they would be capable of a much wider and inclusive seeing, much more compassion, more forgiveness, more love, more solidarity, and more moral beauty.

Friends, we stay in the Church to spiritualize our humanity. To get in touch with the real spiritual DNA of our faith so the Spirit of God can help us give up our false self, our egocentric, tiny-hearted and constricted view of life and embrace our True Self and its bigger heart and broader seeing.

Brian McLaren says that the Christian faith is not an evacuation plan to heaven and the Church cannot be a safe and comfortable warehouse for forgiven souls that are eager

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to escape the body.⁹ This version of Christianity, McLaren wrote, is like McDonald's: the menu is limited and predictable, but its familiarity feels as comforting as a cheeseburger. What it lacks in nourishment it makes up for in convenience.¹⁰ The ego loves a convenient religion, but the Christian faith is not supposed to be "ego-soothing." Christianity, the real thing, is a compass for deep human transformation, a spiritual strategy for the widening of our minds and the enlarging of our hearts so we do not remain stuck in a dualistic universe that divides the sacred from the profane, matter from spirit, and the soul from the body. We don't come to church to learn how to manage our bodies until we die and our souls are whisked away to heaven. We come to invite the Holy Spirit of God to give us a push toward our True Self so we may mature in the practice of moral beauty and allow our actions to bring awe, love, kindness, courage, peace, hope, tears of joy and goodness into the world. That's how other people know that we are biological creatures that have the Holy Spirit in our bodies.

When was the last time that you had an experience of awe in our church?

I asked the question, so I will share my experience with you from the pulpit.

Last January, my aunt Lúcia died. She had pancreatic cancer, so her death was not unexpected. When I visited aunt Lúcia last year, I gave her a prayer shawl knitted by the faithful people who keep our Prayer Shawl Ministry going. Aunt Lúcia had never heard of a prayer shawl before, and she was moved to tears by the thought that someone in Acton had knitted the shawl and we as church had blessed it so she might feel enveloped in prayers and love. The prayer shawl was on her shoulders every single day until the moment of her last breath. In fact, the last voice message aunt Lúcia left on my cell phone, she asked me to thank the knitters for their work of love and faith. The shawl meant so much to my aunt that my cousins buried her with the prayer shawl around her shoulders. And every time I think about aunt Lúcia, I imagine her feeling completely encircled by God's love. This is the beauty your body and soul brought into my life and the life of my extended family.

And the poet declared, "***The body has just as great a work as the soul.***" And the Apostle wrote, "[Lead] ***a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.***" "[Let] ***us not grow weary in doing what is right... let us work for the good of all.***" And the scientist said, "***The sacred, the soul, is in your body. You can bring moral beauty into the world.***" And may the people of God say, "***May it be so. We are ready to let our bodies bring awe and moral beauty into the world. Amen.***"

¹ Walt Whitman in A Song to Myself, sections 21 and 48, [<https://iwp.uiowa.edu/whitmanweb/en/writings/song-of-myself/section-21>].

² Walt Whitman in Poem of the Road (1856), published in Selected Poems of Walt Whitman 1855-1892, p. 147.s

³ Walt Whitman in I Sing the Body Electric, section 1, The Walt Whitman Archive [<https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1881/poems/31>].

⁴ Richard Rohr in Falling Upward; A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life, location 168 [Kindle Edition].

⁵ Brian D. McLaren in Do I Stay Christian?, p. 180 [Kindle Edition].

⁶ Dalcher Keltner in The Thrilling New Science of Awe, On Being with Krista Tippett, 2 February 2023 [<https://onbeing.org/programs/dalcher-keltner-the-thrilling-new-science-of-awe/>].

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Richard Rohr in Falling Upward; A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life, location 349 [Kindle Edition].

⁹ Brian D. McLaren in Do I Stay Christian?, p. 64, adapted [Kindle Edition].

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 68. Adapted.