

Grace and Peace be to you from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord.

Last week we heard how God created us in His image: body and soul. Through our bodies, He gives us our identities, layer upon layer. We receive this unique mix of all that makes us who we are from Him as a gift. It is through our bodies that we are known as individuals. But in our sin, we lost the very thing that gives meaning and purpose to our bodies, the image of God. We became less than human. In our fallen state, we grow dissatisfied with the foundational layer of our human identity, our body. Rarely are people content with the body God has given them. Ask everybody in this room, and I bet there is at least one thing each would change about our bodies if we could.

This concern over our bodies all too often generates an unhealthy disdain for them. At best, it alienates us from our bodies so that we are no longer at home in them. At worst, we dissociate ourselves mentally and emotionally from our bodies because we do not wish to be identified by them. But what we are really doing is treating our bodies as scapegoats, heaping all we don't like about ourselves upon our bodies and detaching ourselves from them, sending them off as if they are not part of who we are.

And there is a lot we heap on our bodies. First, there is the guilt of our own sin. Our conscience becomes uneasy as we fear that if God or others see the sin in our hearts, our evil thoughts and disordered desires, they will reject us. To ease the discomfort of that guilt, we shift the blame to our bodies. They become vessels, we tell ourselves, to either punish or indulge our sins, believing that what we do to our bodies does not affect who we are.

Second, there is the shame of the sin others commit against us. We usually experience this as trauma. Because of what others have said or done, we feel unworthy of approval, acceptance, and love. We can even convince ourselves that we are to blame for their sin. If only we were more or less attractive, stronger, smarter, or simply something other than who we are, then we would never have been sinned against. In either case, that self-dissatisfaction for failure to be what we would like to be is projected on our physical appearance and misplaced on our imperfect bodies as the cause of our inadequacy.

So instead of enjoying our physical life given by God within His order and beneficial limits, we imagine that we can free ourselves from the limitations of the body with things such as cosmetic surgery, sexual reassignment, drugs, alcohol, pornography, technology, food, sexual immorality, sensuality, fits of anger, drunkenness, and things like these. But such things not only damage our bodies but also our spirits, leading us further into guilt, shame, and alienation. Or we lean in the other direction and overcompensate, seeking to affirm all our imperfections and inadequacies as good and right. But that doesn't work either. It makes us even more obsessed with ourselves and our appearance. All this hides the real reason we are alienated from our bodies as we treat the symptom rather than the disease.

No matter how good these makeovers or escapes may make us feel in the moment, they can't change who we are. They don't make us beautiful or good; they don't make our problems go away. They merely disguise our self-dissatisfaction. Our real problem is sin. We recklessly sacrifice our bodies in lawless pursuit of what we desire. In our quest for a fuller, richer, happier, freer life, we hand over the members of our bodies with each limb and organ to worse and worse impurity. That sacrifice leads to ever-increasing shameful defilement of our bodies. The final, eventual result of bodily self-pollution is death. Ironically, by seeking a life of freedom apart from God, we become enslaved and destroyed by death.

Thus, the widespread, deep-seated human sense of alienation from the body is not irrational nor even mistaken. It has real spiritual causes and cannot just be treated cosmetically or superficially. Our alienation from our bodies drives us right into the heart of our sinfulness and thus requires a real spiritual solution. Even though our spiritual ugliness is wrongly projected from the soul to the body, both need to be completely recreated and renewed from the inside out. We require a total change, the radical transformation of the whole person that begins with the conscience and involves our whole being. We all need to be remade by being born again in a heavenly way.

Jesus taught Nicodemus, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again...of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”* In losing the image of God, we became carnal creatures, focused on ourselves. In trying to escape our bodies, we severed our ties to the Spirit of God, who sustains our life. We became spiritually dead, with our bodies slowly following. This is the first death of which Revelation speaks.

But God, our Creator, regards humanity so highly that He chose to take on a human body to rescue mankind from bodily corruption and spiritual ruin. Like the members of a human family, Jesus shares the blood and flesh of Adam’s descendants. That includes us; he is our human brother. Yet He does not just identify Himself with us physically by His incarnation; He shares our human flesh and blood so that He can share His flesh and blood with us. He becomes one of Adam’s children like us so that we can become children of God through Him.

The four Gospels initiate us into the mystery of the incarnation and our involvement in it. In them, we see how Jesus shared our whole human life in the body from birth to death to bring us with our bodies back to God the Father. Jesus engaged with people physically to redeem them, body and soul, for life with the Father. He related to people bodily to give them bodily help. His human hand offered divine help to people in need. His body is the place where God shows His glory to all people to give them access to His grace. This is most clearly revealed in the cross.

Our healing comes at the cost of Christ’s death. God sent His Son in the likeness of sinful human flesh as an offering for sin to condemn sin in the flesh, fulfill God’s law for us bodily, and empower us to walk with our bodies according to His Spirit rather than according to our sinful human flesh. He took on our sin bodily that He may share His righteousness bodily with us. He took on our death physically to share His life with us. He took on our mortal flesh to give us his Holy Spirit through his immortal body. He gives us a clear conscience by forgiving us and offering Himself to us as our righteousness.

We can therefore dress up with Him. He gives us the new self that we need to be at home in our bodies, with each other, and with God once again. He gives us spiritual bodies, in tune and animated by our resurrected spirits made alive by Christ. This is the first resurrection. This was the chief purpose of His incarnation. Through Jesus as human and divine, we can now participate in the eternal life of the triune God with our whole being: body and soul.

But our vision of God through the incarnation is incomplete and of little use to us unless we see that Jesus remains embodied even after His ascension. He takes His humanity, His resurrected body, into fellowship and life with God the Father to bridge heaven and earth. He retains His human body, now transcending time and space, to interact with us in our bodies. Just as we were created to represent God on earth, He represents us in the presence of His Father. And He brings God and all His gifts of grace and mercy down to us through His body.

He accomplishes this through His means of grace. Jesus uses God’s Word as a physical means to give us His Holy Spirit, the Spirit that creates faith and revives us, the Spirit that purifies us and makes us holy, the Spirit that transforms us and makes us more and more like Jesus. This word is the external word, heard in the reading of Scripture, spoken in the absolution, proclaimed in the sermon, sung in the liturgy and hymns, and enacted in Baptism and in the Lord’s Supper. In these sacraments, Jesus joins us in body and soul to Himself for our liberation from sin, protection from the devil, salvation from death, and participation in the divine life of the Triune God. Then, Jesus offers us back to the Father through His Spirit as holy and blameless and free from sin.

Jesus has ransomed our bodies at the cost of his own death. He freed them from sin and death, so our bodies now no longer belong to us; they belong to Jesus and are meant to be used in His service. He claims them for Himself in our baptism; He shares His own body and His own life with them in Holy

Communion. He consecrates each body by His Holy Spirit as God's temple, God's residence, the place where God's glory dwells.

Since Jesus makes us holy through His word and Spirit, we are holy and well-pleasing sacrifices to God. We, therefore, offer our living bodies as an act of devotion and worship both in the divine service and in the whole of our lives. We offer our minds, with our thinking and feeling, our imagining and desiring, our planning and deciding, to God for Him to change and renew by His word and Holy Spirit. As we are transformed by God himself, our minds are attuned to the mind of Christ so that we begin to think and feel and act as he does. We entrust ourselves to Him and put ourselves at His disposal.

We receive spiritual bodies through His work in us, and then our spiritual bodies respond to Him. Faith in Christ always issues in bodily acts, like any emotion's physical display. Living faith, actual confidence in Christ, is always active in love and good works. Through faith, Christ activates and energizes the believer's body. Our works, the things that we do with our bodies, are always carried out by God and in God; He produces them in us through His Holy Spirit.

Our bodies are our main, lifelong gift to Him in response to the gift of His Son to us. This self-offering leads to a life of righteousness, rich in good works and ongoing sanctification. That purifying, sanctifying transformation does not happen automatically without consent or cooperation. It requires our willing, receptive obedience, the obedient entrusting of ourselves, body and soul, to God for Him to sanctify us for eternal life with him. He does it for us; we go along with him in what he is going. We must separate ourselves from everything that is unclean to God, everything that pollutes them and so desecrates their holiness. The reason for this is that they are "the temple of the living God," His earthly sanctuary.

In short: we do well to see ourselves as Jesus sees us, with pure and holy spiritual bodies that are being reconfigured for eternal life with God in heaven. By faith, we are privileged to live heavenly lives on earth and earthly lives in heaven at each moment and each stage of our bodily journey with Jesus. His goal is to sanctify us completely, with our whole spirit and soul and body, for eternal life with him. That is an ongoing, lifelong operation for him. Since he is faithful in keeping His promises, we can be sure that He will accomplish it. As God's incarnate Son, Jesus is both our justification and sanctification.