



**Mennonite
Church**
Canada

Formation

Sermon

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Scripture Text: Psalm 139, Genesis 1:26-31

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Body and Soul

Body Image Issues Along Life's Journey

Introduction:

During our pastor's sabbatical, speakers have been given the choice of preaching from the Lectionary text, or list of topics compiled by the Worship committee. Body Image was one of those topics. In my work as Director of Christian Nurture for Mennonite Church Canada I had been one of the reviewers for a brand new intergenerational resource for Mennonite worship and study on the topic of Sexuality, called *Body and Soul*, where the introductory session is on being made in God's image as males and females, I picked the topic of Body Image. Our congregations could benefit greatly from purchasing and working with this material.

It can be previewed at the Mennonite Church Canada resource centre, and purchased from Mennonite Publishing Network with a phone call to their Waterloo office (519-888-7512), or ordered through their website www.mpn.net/bodyandsoul.

Finally, because I'm quite immersed in seniors issues these days, some of those thoughts found their way into my work with the topic as well.

Sermon:

I've heard that in the world of athletics coaches often tell their players when they want them to step up the intensity of the game: "It's time to get physical." But in the world of Caucasian and Korean Mennonite worship this is a rather unusual phrase. Oh, at Charleswood Mennonite Church we sit and stand, and we use our vocal chords well in worship, but, except for the children coming forward for children's time, and to bring their offerings, our worship is not a particularly bodily experience. Are our bodies and souls integrated as we worship? Should they be? Is worship a context for dealing with topics like "Body Image?"

I'm sure we have different responses to this question, because we are wired differently, and because we've been trained to think and respond differently. Many of us are fairly cerebral and physically restrained in our worship.

But let me share a story with you about connecting our bodies and souls in worship. One of the seminar courses I took for my theology degree experimented with many different ways of engaging Scripture. A classmate of mine, with a different ethnic and denominational background, chose to work with the Love chapter from 1 Corinthians 13 for her assignment. I wondered what she'd do with this familiar poetic description of Christian love. It was a text I respected deeply. When I heard sermons on it I had often felt like 1 Cor. 13 set a standard I could and would never reach.

My classmate began by dimming the lights and inviting us to stand, close our eyes and move our

bodies in response to the song. Then she played a beautifully sung rendition of this Love Chapter. Glad for the darkness, I followed her instructions, timidly at first, and then more freely. Suddenly, I noticed my response to this chapter changing. From an unattainable should, its words about love were changing into an appealing invitation from God. I came to understand and feel that this kind of love was God's dream for us, and one that could become possible if we remained open to God's love flowing through us.

I don't think words alone could have achieved that shift in my soul. The music and the bodily movement opened avenues of connection with the text that were transforming. They united body and soul in redeeming ways. On a similar vein, I have read that younger men, and teenage boys in particular, often feel closest to God when they really exert themselves physically. They often have an aerobic spirituality that makes it really hard to sit through and get anything from a long sermon. Sorry guys.

Body and Soul are meant to be integrated. We are embodied creatures, and the pleasures of food, touch, work, play, sight, sound, and sexual love are gifts of a loving God, sprung from the ecstatic generosity of creation. Our bodies, male and female, young and old, are God's ideas, and the least we can do is to join our voices with God in agreeing that they are "very good."

When we do so we go against streams of thought in our church's history that have encouraged us to feel shame, and to disregard our physicality. Some of that shame is with us still, but we are moving into a new era with a greater emphasis on embodiment, on integrating our bodies and souls, our thoughts, experiences, and actions.

At the same time, our society surrounds us with unhealthy, even idolatrous, images of both sexuality and physical attractiveness, from Barbie dolls, to survivor TV shows that lead to marriage, to commercials for body care products, and even to front page coverage of the Justin Bieber concert last weekend.

But let's move on. When we start reflecting more deeply on this topic of Body and Soul we acknowledge all kinds of differences in our bodies, and that those differences impact us spiritually. The most basic of these differences are our gender, which includes our sexuality, and our age.

I was one of those children of the sixties who tried to raise her children without gender bias. My boys had access to dolls as well as trucks, and so did my daughter. But I soon found out that nature produced differences in their personalities

that an unbiased approach to nurture did not erase. My years of teaching elementary also taught me that a typical boy is quite different from a typical girl, and that while there are many children on the continuum between being "boyish" and being "girlish," a class with a majority of boys had a very different character than a class that consisted of mainly girls. And yet this whole continuum of differing personalities is somehow all part of being made in the image of God.

Genesis 1 refers to both male and female are portrayed as equally, yet uniquely, bearing the image of God. What does that mean? This text was written in the Ancient Near East. The Ancient Near Eastern notion of bearing the image of God was usually reserved for the person of the king, the pharaoh, the emperor. By declaring all of humanity as bearing this image, the writer of Genesis 1 recognized that a notion of royalty, of divine blessing, accompanies each person, each body, and we are to treat each image-bearer as if they are royalty. Wow. That's ancient wisdom that we can apply to our daily lives.

In Genesis 1 text we hear about humankind's honoured place in the grandeur of God's very good creation. In contrast, Psalm 139 emphasises how personal and intimate this blessing is. The psalmist declares that God personally "knit" him together in the secrecy of the womb all the way down to his inward parts. With such loving attention, it is no wonder that he is "fearfully and wonderfully made." It is no wonder that such reflections lead the psalmist to proclaim, "Wonderful are your works" in verse 14. The psalmist, like each one of us, is a wonderful work of God, and that includes our bodies, our souls, and yes, our sexuality.

Sexuality reflects the creativity and intimacy of God. By sexuality, I am referring broadly to all the ways we experience the world as gendered, sexual persons, and not to any specific sexual activity. In Genesis 1, the creation of humans as male and female, in the divine image, appears as the culmination of creation. Does the divine image appear in both sexes because procreation is one symbol of God's own creative and generative activity? Perhaps. Claiming this idea could help us move toward a healthier view of sexuality, and might help us to celebrate the connection between our bodies and our souls.

Sexuality is a big issue, almost as big as the issue facing our society and our church of how we will respond to the Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgendered community (LGBT), a community which includes a growing number of young and not so young Mennonites. These issues are closely linked, and we can equip ourselves to

engage the LGBT issues by learning to talk and live comfortably with our sexuality and by acknowledging sexuality as part of what made God's creation very good. Many of our Mennonite leaders have realized that we need that as a base for addressing the more complex questions surrounding the LGBT issue. This is why Mennonite Central Committee Manitoba and Canadian Mennonite University sponsored a conference on sexuality last winter. It is the reason our denominational publisher has invested major time and finances into developing the Body and Soul Resource Kit on sexuality for the Mennonite church.

Naming, discussing, and pondering our sexuality in church isn't easy, not even with good resources. It involves congregations in high risk, but also high reward work. And with the risk come feelings of discomfort. Those of us who were young a long time ago probably still remember the discomfort, dread and fascination we felt in grade five as we were separated by gender and then marched into the school gym for the films explaining puberty and reproduction.

As I looked through the book at our Resource Centre that is part of this resource, Created by God: Tweens, Faith, and Human Sexuality, by: James H. Ritchie, Jr. ((C) 2009, Abingdon, Press, Nashville, TN), it seemed to me that today's grade five's must still react in much the same way, even though our society has become much more explicit and sexualized.

In the introductory chapter I found questions from adolescents such as:

- Why are my parents giving me books about sexuality?
- Why do I need information about my body, growing up, relationships, reproduction, responsibilities, and how faith in God make a difference?
- Why will my body go through these changes?
- What does God and the church have to do with it?

The answer I found to those questions hints at the high rewards of tackling this somewhat uncomfortable topic. The book goes on to say:

As children change into adults, there are changes that are physical, emotional, spiritual and relational. Parents and the church are there to help adolescents navigate those changes, to help them remember that, in the midst of all those changes:

"You were created by God! And God is still at work in you, moving you along the path designed for you from creation, through childhood and towards adulthood."

God made us male or female, to live and to love, to form relationships and families, and gave us the privilege of creating new human life. God gave us the gift of our maleness and femaleness, and like all of God's creation, said "It is good."

Good resources on sexuality can help us understand and use this creative, and procreative, gift wisely. They can protect us all from information and dangerous attitudes to which society exposes us. They can protect us from the temptations to despise and abuse our "non-centerfold" bodies by cutting, by denying them the food they need, by engaging in binge eating, or by denying them the exercise they need to stay healthy. With a healthy attitude toward our physicality, and our sexuality, we'll all be able to make better decisions and to be healthy examples to others.

People are always changing, but there are seasons in life where physical and hormonal changes speed up. Adolescence is the one we've talk about the most, but there are parallels to others seasons of life, seasons where we are confronted by physical, and sometimes hormonal, changes. Let me tell you about it! No, don't worry, I won't. What I will say is when our bodies change rapidly, it becomes challenging to keep a healthy image about these bodies we aren't quite used to. And if the society we live in spends a lot of money projecting ideal body shapes and youthfulness through the fashion and media industries, it can be really hard to feel good about bodies that don't reflect the socially idealized images. When we feel challenged that we're not thin enough, athletic enough, young enough, etc. we can respond to this challenge by remembering that creative diversity is part of God's plan.

There's a growing industry of magazines for seniors that are full of tips for looking and feeling younger than you are. Seniors can be as tempted as any adolescent by the unrealistic images and role models of staying forever young and strong, and by the marketing industry's ideas of what is beautiful. And that leads to confusion and depression and unhealthy body images among seniors as well.

On the healthier side, seniors can also claim the affirming words of scripture from Genesis 1 and Psalm 139. When our own John Enns shared his Reflections on Aging in our Newsletter, the Grapevine, a few years ago, he began like this: The human body is a marvel of creation, wonderfully complex and efficient, responding to external stimuli, healing itself, cleansing itself, regulating its multiple functions, and constantly adjusting to changing situations. In Psalm 139 David recognizes and pays tribute to this when he writes, "I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and

wonderfully made: Marvelous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well." But this exceptional and superb piece of creation, subjected to relentless decay and perpetual regeneration, suffers loss of faculties and physical capabilities as, in advancing years, the rate of cellular destruction gradually exceeds the rate of repair.

In my research on issues related to seniors in the church, which is a newer part of my work, I came across a wonderful book by Lyndsay Green called, *You could live a really long time: are you ready?* ((C) 2010, Thomas Allen Publishers, Toronto)

Aging, by Lyndsay Green. This book is the result of interviews conducted with seniors, over 75, from a variety of walks of life and ethnic backgrounds, who have aged well. She writes:

I now understand that to age successfully, instead of fighting to stay young, we should embrace aging. Instead of focusing exclusively on augmenting our RRSPs, we should be cultivating what will become the most valuable part of our retirement plan: our emotional circle of friends and families, and partners. To stay attractive to others, we need to spend more time focusing on our inner selves, and less time having facelifts and hair implants. To keep our physical agility, we have to stop pushing our bodies and pretending to be young. If we want to retain our independence as we age, we must learn to accept help. (Green, 19)

What our own successfully aging elder, John Enns, could have told her is that Psalm 139 echoes God's great care for our bodies, from beginning of life to end. Even though in our time we are able to chart and label and use scientific language to describe the beginnings of life all the way to the end, we are still left with the wonder and amazement of the miracle of our bodies. Healthy sexuality and healthy aging include a healthy understanding of our bodies as blessed, of being made in the image of God.

So, as I encouraged the children to reflect on their beginnings with me, I now invite the rest of you to close your eyes and reflect on your development with me:

Imagine that after you were born, God continued working at your development, your physical, mental, emotional and spiritual development; and everything else that contributes to who you are and how God wants to bless the world through you. God made you and God loves you, and wants to bless the world through you the way you are, no matter your gender, your age, or your energy level. Imagine that, wherever we are on our physical and spiritual journeys of life, God has a place and a purpose for us all. And, God still agrees that we are fearfully and wonderfully made, even as we age. Amen.