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The Second Sunday after Epiphany, January 14, 2024  
1 Corinthians 6:12-20

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We are only halfway through January. The year is still new, and that means there are people who haven't given up on their New Year's resolutions yet. The health and wellness industry is counting on this. It's still the season of diets and fitness challenges and a general obsession with physical self-improvement. It seems like January, more than any other month in the calendar, is characterized by a widespread cultural awareness of our bodies, and advertisers stand ready to sell us new ways to look and feel better.

Everywhere I look, it seems, I am surrounded by targeted ads for supplements and dietary aids, gym memberships, 30-day better body challenges, and sneakers that will apparently magically turn me into an athlete the minute I lace them up. I am not saying there is anything wrong with this. I belong to two gyms myself. Sometimes I even go to one of them. And after all, we are stuck in these bodies of ours, so we ought to treat them as well as possible. A little kale juice and yoga might do us some good even.

Ironically, this is the time of year when you might hear a phrase that comes right from one of today's readings. "Your body is a temple." This phrase has become so widespread among health influencers that I wouldn't be surprised if many of them have no idea that it comes from the Bible. It fits their message that there is something sacred about your body and you should love it and take care of it and honor it the way you would a holy building.

Again, I have no objections to this. God created the human body, and even if many people today don't acknowledge that, I am happy when people choose to take care of their physical selves. I fully believe that this is what God wants us to do with the bodies that He gave us.

But Saint Paul's admonition that the body is a temple has nothing to do with juice cleanses. You already knew that. Your body is a temple *of the Holy Spirit*. The spiritual life is inseparable from the physical life. This has real implications for our Christian life, and that is what Saint Paul is getting at in his letter to the Corinthians.

And that letter, brothers and sisters, is my text for today. First Corinthians chapter six. And the question I want to explore is this; why does God care what we do with our bodies?

Ancient Corinth was a lively city and the crossroads of many cultures and religions. The Corinthian church reflected this diversity, with the result that of all the congregations addressed by Paul in the letters that we have, the poor Corinthians seem the most confused and the most in need of a stern talking to. It was a church wracked by division and the cacophony of opposing viewpoints, and Paul must address them sternly in order to help them sort out the unbiblical notions that have crept into their understanding of the Gospel.

Helpfully for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, some of the Corinthian misconceptions are so close to popular misconceptions in the contemporary church that Paul's letter could just as well have been written to us!

Take a look at the first few lines of the epistle lesson. "All things are permitted for me," and "food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food" are both in quotation marks. That is because Paul is responding to slogans that have apparently been circulating in the church at Corinth.

Jewish dietary laws and pagan sacrifices caused a lot of confusion in the early church, and it even took the apostles some time to sort out the issue of what a Christian could in good conscience eat. Just look at Peter's vision in Acts chapter 10, where God tells him that no food is unclean, and at Paul's advice in 1 Corinthians chapter 8, where he says that there is nothing inherently sinful about eating food sacrificed to pagan idols, but with the caveat that Christians should take care not to scandalize weaker brothers and sisters. The message of both apostles is clear, however; ultimately, what you eat or don't eat is not a matter of spiritual concern. It's just food. But your intentions, why you choose to follow the diet you do and the example you set for other believers, *does* matter to God.

And this message has reached us modern Christians pretty well intact. Believers might argue about what diet is healthiest or most environmentally ethical, but we don't worry about the spiritual implications of what we put in our mouths.

The problem, it seems, in the Corinthian church, is that some of the believers decided that because food is neutral ground for Christians, with no moral implications one way or another, then anything involving physical needs and

desires must be similarly spiritually unimportant. Paul's response to this misconception is so passionate we can feel his sense of urgency even now.

You can almost hear some of these Corinthians. It's as if they are saying, *If God doesn't care how I satisfy my hunger, why should He care how I satisfy my other urges? We all have physical needs. God knows my heart. He knows that I am a good person and I believe in Jesus, so why should it bother Him if I visit a temple prostitute once in a while? It's just physical; it doesn't mean anything. God has more important things to worry about.*

Pagan sexual mores were very permissive. Prostitution strikes most of us today as dreadful, even though we also live in a sexually permissive age, because we associate prostitution with the exploitation of vulnerable populations. There was plenty of exploitation in the first century, too, of course, but visiting prostitutes did not have the stigma it does today. It was what you did when you had an urge that you needed to satisfy. Your average pagan thought nothing of it, and this cavalier attitude seems to have wormed its way into parts of the young church.

Paul pulls no punches in describing how spiritually disastrous this attitude is. God created man and woman to be one flesh in marriage. Elsewhere Paul describes the one-flesh union of marriage as the mirror image of Christ's relationship to His Church! This is high praise indeed. And it is an important lesson for the other faction that had taken hold in parts of the early church.

Another corrupting idea introduced by the early pagans is dualism. Jewish thinking was firmly anchored in the doctrine of creation. Pious Jews did not think that there was a conflict between matter and spirit; they did not think of the created world as something evil that had to be overcome so that the spirit could be free. But the Greeks, some of them anyway, conceived a notion that the physical world entraps the spiritual world, or that the body is a prison for the mind to overcome.

There is much more to story of the origins of mind body dualism, which also influenced a widespread early heresy known as Gnosticism. What is important for our purposes here is to understand what poor Paul was dealing with. There was so much confusion in the Corinthian church about the Gospel's implications for living in the here and now, and Paul has to address it all at once.

On the one hand there were new believers who, influenced by this disgust with the physical world, which they saw as an impediment to the spiritual life, promoted extreme asceticism. Paul has to remind *them* that God created

marriage and that they should enjoy life with their spouse and not be afraid of their own flesh and its desires. Anybody who claims that Christianity has a so-called puritanical, rigid attitude towards sex has not only not read Song of Songs very carefully, they haven't read their Saint Paul well, either.

On the other hand, it seems there were a lot of antinomian types among the Corinthians – people who thought that the freedom they had in Christ meant there were no rules whatsoever, so long as their heart was in the right place. Paul warns such people sternly. “Shun sexual immorality! Every sin that a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against the body itself.” And he means this in a double sense; that person sins against his or her own body and against the very Body of Christ. There is no such thing as “it's just physical; it doesn't mean anything.” Our own flesh is now a temple for the indwelling Holy Spirit. We are not our own; we were bought with a price. Far from imagining that God doesn't care what we do with our physical selves, we instead ought to be glorifying Him with our bodies and presenting our members to Him as “instruments of righteousness.” (Rom 12:1)

It is fascinating to me, and also distressing, how little things have changed since the days of Corinthian confusion! Or maybe they have regressed. I am not just talking about sex.

The secular world may hold the body in high esteem, but Christians teach something more radical. Our bodies are created by God, they are gifts from God, and they belong to God. We are made to glorify God and serve Him with our bodies!

It is also true that our bodies are limited. They are mortal and imperfect. Some people bear a great cross in their bodies; they suffer from chronic illnesses or disabilities. Bodies feel pain. They break down. They impose limitations on our aspirations in many ways. So it is a glorious truth that we also have minds that soar above the limitations of the flesh. We are not just matter, not just clumps of cells animated by biochemical processes. We are spiritual beings!

At the same time, we are not, to use a phrase coined by the Christian philosopher James K. A. Smith, “brains on a stick.” Bodies are not like garments that we wear for a time and then cast off, like snakes shedding their skin. This means that the bodies we have, created by God, are integral, not incidental, to our identity.

This includes our gender; the distinction between male and female is fundamental to our being as people created in the image of God. Gender dysphoria is a terrible form of suffering, and Christians should have nothing but compassion for individuals who for whatever reason feel as though they are trapped in the wrong body. But as Christians we also understand that, because of the Fall, desires are often disordered, and feelings are an unreliable guide to truth.

Saint Paul would like to save us from unnecessary grief. It absolutely matters that we have the bodies we do, and it matters what we do with them. God cares what we do with our bodies because He created them, and He wants what is best for us. He wants us to be kind, yes. He wants us to be spiritual - to pray, to love others, to believe the truths He has revealed in Scripture. But He also wants us to be holy, and holiness involves the body, not just the mind. He wants us to serve Him with our minds and our bodies, which are, after all, inseparable.

God cares so much about our bodies that He took on human flesh Himself. If you think about it, the Incarnation is the greatest endorsement, the highest tribute, we human beings have ever received. God cared so much about us that He came to dwell among us in a body just like ours. In order to save our bodies, Christ gave up His. The Church Fathers had a phrase – that which is not assumed is not healed – meaning that Jesus became a Man, a real Man, not a spiritual apparition, in order to redeem our humanity. And He did not leave this Body behind Him when He rose again – He was resurrected and ascended into heaven with that Body in whose nature we too participate. And we too look forward to the resurrection of the flesh and the restoration of the whole created order, because matter matters to God.

The Rite of Confirmation that we use in the Lutheran Church, the liturgy that we celebrated last June when our young members Keitaro and Noah were confirmed, reinforces our Christian commitment to honoring God with our bodies. The confirmands receive the sign of the cross on their foreheads, their ears, their eyes, their lips, their hearts, their shoulders, their hands, and their feet. Their whole body is consecrated to the Lord, and they are sent off to serve Him with all their members, as Saint Paul commanded.

Some modern-day Gnostics would have us believe that all that counts is what we think and feel. If we think something, it must be true. If it feels good, we should do it. Christian faith stands opposed to that kind of disillusion. What we do with our bodies is of paramount importance to our lives of Christian discipleship. We present our bodies for worship, for service, and for consecration to holiness. And we look forward with joy to the day of

resurrection when our bodies will be renewed to a state of wholeness, health, and beauty beyond our wildest dreams. In this new heaven and earth, we will dwell in our glorified bodies with our Incarnate Lord, even Jesus, to Whom belongs the glory, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Amen.