

Sermon: Year B, Lent 3
Texts: John 2:13–22, 1 Corinthians 118–25
Preached: March 8, 2015 at CTL

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my strength and my redeemer. AMEN

One of the things I love about preparing for worship is putting together the “I saw Jesus this week...” slide presentation that plays before worship begins. (Though, a quick plea: I need more of you to take photos, and I would love to have some help assembling these presentations!) Many of you have commented on how uplifting and meaningful you find these images, seeing the things that we as the people of God assembled here at CTL are doing out in the world, being the hands and the feet and the face of Christ to others. We’ve seen pictures of people making and serving meals for homeless and hungry folks, pictures of you painting and doing gardening at Hillcrest Elementary, pictures of the work being done in our Community Garden to raise vegetables to take to Food for Greater Elgin, pictures of us packaging groceries to help families celebrate Thanksgiving or Easter, pictures of people picking up trash in Lord’s Park, or writing advocacy letters concerning things like child nutrition. We’ve had pictures of prayer shawls you’ve knitted or crocheted, quilts you’ve pieced, dresses you’ve sewn, Caring Bears you’ve crafted. We’ve seen photos of you helping children learn about God in Sunday School or Vacation Bible School. We’ve seen you hosting the Craft Show to raise money for Habitat for Humanity. We’ve seen countless images of you doing good works for the benefit of the neighbor. The list just goes on and on.

I attempt in these presentations to highlight that you and I are “little Christs,” as Luther once put it, called to serve the world in love. So you may have been a bit surprised this morning to see those incredible photos of Sarah and Angie Tabak performing dance. I suspect that you may have been puzzled as to what a dance performance has to do with being Christ to our neighbor. “Sure, Pastor,” you say, “those are beautiful photos, and they make us proud of these two talented young women, but how is that being Christ in the world? I’m not getting the connection. Where do we see Jesus in that? Banana bread made by the hands of the Confirmation kids for the homeless and shut-ins, that I get, but what does dance have to do with Jesus or service to the neighbor?” Well, stay with me, and I hope that you’ll see how that could be.

You know, one of the issues the Church has always had to struggle with is a very strong tendency, influenced by Greek and Gnostic philosophy, to see the spirit/soul as all that counts, and to see the body as sinful, evil matter that we’re just waiting to be freed from. Even the Apostle Paul struggles with that notion in a few places, and the Church ended up taking it to extremes, urging people to subjugate and even torture their bodies, to see their bodies as something shameful, and seeing the highest good in some imagined pure spiritual existence where the body would be left behind. Basically, it came down to a teaching “spirit=good, body=bad.” But that teaching flies directly in the face of the affirmation we make week after week in the Creed: “I believe in the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.” In that order. The resurrected life is an embodied life. So bodies must matter. The faith of the church is not that we will be freed from our bodies and be disembodied spirits floating about on clouds. The faith of the church is that somehow, at the resurrection, we will be fully embodied. Bodies matter.

In today’s gospel lesson, Jesus approaches that question in addressing the worship of God at the Temple in Jerusalem. This story that we tend to call the “Cleansing of the Temple” appears in all four gospels, which is an indication of how important it was to the gospel writers and to the early Church. But Matthew, Mark, and Luke all place this story at the end of the book, as part of the Passion story, the story of Holy Week as Jesus comes to the Cross, and they present it as the triggering event for the crucifixion, putting all the emphasis on the purity of the worship of God. John, however, places the story all the way back at the beginning of his gospel, and shifts the emphasis from purifying the house of worship to this strange discourse on tearing the temple down and rebuilding it in three days, which nobody seems to understand, all taking it very literally to refer to the building itself. But the writer of John tells us in an explanatory aside that Jesus wasn’t talking about the temple, he was talking about his body. In John, Jesus calls into question the whole notion of the temple as the place where God dwells, and shifts the focus to God dwelling in Jesus, in this body that God will raise up.

From the very beginning of the Gospel of John, we hear those words, “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.” Those are the words we hear in our Christmas Eve worship. They are words that remind us that in Christ Jesus, God chooses to take on human flesh, to take on a body, to become fully human, and to live among us as one of us. As Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message*, “The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes.” The temple is no longer necessary, because God has chosen to dwell in a temple that is not constructed by human hands. See, bodies matter. Flesh and blood matters. Everything that has to do with our bodies, frail as they are, difficult as they may be, vulnerable as they are, matters enough to God that God takes on a body in Christ Jesus. It’s a body that moves through the world blessing and healing and feeding and touching and loving. And it’s a body that goes all the way to the Cross, lifted up in all its humanness, and it is in the weakness and vulnerability of a human body Christ shows us that not even death itself is strong enough to prevent God’s victorious redemption of all that is wrong with our world. Bodies matter.

So what does this have to do with teenaged girls dancing? How do we see Jesus in that? Here’s the thing: If bodies matter, then we are called to use our bodies, not just our spirits, in the care and redemption of our neighbor and of all of creation. And the use of our bodies in redeeming creation is not limited to doing acts of humble service. We embody Christ when we speak to one another, when we go to school, when we head to our jobs, when we gather with friends for coffee. This Christian life is not just about “getting our hearts right with God.” It’s also about the ways in which we move through the world, the things that we say and do that work for uplifting and improving the lives of others, and it’s an awareness that what we do with our bodies matters not only to us, but it matters to God and it matters to our neighbor.

So when Sarah and Angela dance and create beauty, soaring, they are embodying God’s vision for the world, and they help others see that vision. When you as a teacher enter that classroom, you are the embodiment of Christ to those learners. When you as an accountant deal honorably and forthrightly with the books of your employer or your client, you are embodying God’s own values of justness and order. When you as a parent earn money to feed and clothe your children, you are embodying God’s own parental care for us. When you as a teenager show honor and respect to your parents, you are embodying right relationship between people. When you as a retired person volunteer as a mentor to a child at Hillcrest, you are embodying the loving care of Christ himself. When you are standing in a line at the grocery store and you speak a word of encouragement or appreciation to the cashier who is having a bad day, you are embodying the loving concern of Christ. When you write a letter, or lift up your voice to advocate against injustice, you embody Christ’s own concern for the oppressed. Bodies matter.

I would love to extend the “I saw Jesus…” slides to include many of the less obvious, and yes, even the less “churchy” ways in which we use our bodies in this world. I would love to have photos up there of you in your vocations out in the world, and not just the obvious acts of service and giving. Trina, I would love to see a picture up there of you teaching those middle school kids. Mary, I would love to see a picture of you tending bar at the Village Squire. Henrietta, I would love to have a picture of you playing in the symphony. Jan, I would love to have a picture of you caring for your beautiful grandchildren. Karol, I would love to see a picture of you serving passengers on an airplane. John, I would love to see a picture of you and the care you take in providing for safe roads. Carol, I would love to see you volunteering at the library. What we do matters, regardless of where we are, regardless of what activity we are involved in.

You may say, “Pastor, those aren’t spiritual things. They’re not really worthy of being labeled as “I saw Jesus…” Ah, but you see, they are. It’s not just our spiritual lives and coming to church that is holy. God does not dwell in this temple or in any other. God dwells in us, in all of our humanity. Christ is embodied in our work, in our play, in our conversation. Bodies matter, enough that God in Christ Jesus decided to take one on for our sake. Thanks be to God. AMEN

