



Westminster Presbyterian Church
 Knoxville, TN
 April 7, 2024
 The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
 Sermon: “Bodies that Matter”

1 John 1:1-4 (NRSV)

1:1 We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life--

1:2 this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us--

1:3 we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.

1:4 We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

“Bodies that Matter”

You may hear echoes of something familiar in what I just read: *We declare to you what was from the beginning.*

That sounds a lot like, *In the beginning was the word and word was with God and the Word was God* (John 1:1).

The beginning of 1st John is meant to remind us of the first verses to the Gospel of John. Both books likely came from the same community.

But there’s an important difference between the Gospel of John and 1 John. Both start out talking about ‘the beginning,’ but each of them means something different by that.

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes. It’s not about the beginning of creation, which is what the Gospel of John means by ‘the beginning.’ 1 John is talking about the beginning of the Body of Christ.

In fact, 1st John is all about the body of Christ. Christ's physical body: *What we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands.*

To this author, the tangibleness of Jesus matters.
It was after all, an incarnation. The Word made flesh.

We can get, uncomfortable, when we talk about bodies, can't we?

For example, what is your relationship with your body?
Do you cherish it?
Do you love it?
Does it bother you? Does it hurt?
Have you ever been told to be ashamed of your body?
Are you constantly thinking about it?
Or do you forget, sometimes, that you even have a body?

In her recent book *This Here Flesh*, Cole Arthur Riley, says, "When shame enters us, it tends to make its home in our bodies."¹ You may remember that name. She is the author behind *Black Liturgies*, a worship resource that we have used several times here at Westminster. Riley begins her book, *This Here Flesh*, with the story of when her hair started to turn grey when she was just 11 years old:

I would spend ages in front of the mirror parting my hair just right so that as little white as possible was visible. One night, we were all going out and my family was waiting downstairs for me to finish parting. Eventually, my dad sent everyone to wait in the car and came to the bottom of the stairs and called for me.²

This led to a confrontation. Her father on one side of the closed door. An 11-year-old Cole Arthur Riley on the other. You can just hear them. "Come on, we've got to go." "I can't go. I'm not ready." Things escalated. At one point, she burst into tears and threw her comb against the wall. Eventually, the door opened.

When my crying softened, she says, feeling more embarrassed than before, [I said], 'I can't do this anymore...I have to dye my hair.'

¹ Cole Arthur Riley, *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories that Make Us* (New York: Convergent, 2022), 61.

² Excerpts here and below taken from *Ibid.*, 12-13.

My father's response...He tucked my head into his chest, sowed a kiss into my hair, and just said, 'Okay, honey. We can dye your hair.'

A tender moment. He could have easily just brushed her off. 'No, your hair is what it is.' Or just downplayed her embarrassment: 'Oh, it's not that bad.' Instead, this father was gentle with his young daughter's feelings, with all the shame that we can carry, in our bodies.

The author of 1 John deeply wants to affirm that in Christ the body matters.

The entire book of 1 John is responding to a division in its community, with many leaving because they do not believe that Jesus was a real human being, coming in a real human body.

Many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, reports 2 John, v. 7.

But it matters, says 1 John, that God's son, the word of life, was incarnated in a human body and dwelt among us: Eating with sinners. Washing disciples' feet. Even being led to a cross. God is not just an effervescent Spirit, floating among us, just like we are not bloodless souls floating in the ether. God showed that faith was concrete, and that every human body matters, by coming to us in the body of Jesus of Nazareth.

Does your body matter to your faith?

Presbyterians have a reputation of getting too much in our head, when we talk about faith. Think about the theological doctrines found in the *Book of Confessions*: creation, providence, salvation, ecclesiology – they veer towards abstractions. Rarely do they touch upon flesh and blood, unless they happen to be talking, as Paul does, about the sins of the flesh.

I could go on and complain more about Presbyterianism and bodies, but, as an aside, I want to offer a brief caveat about Westminster:

In my last church, we didn't have children's church. And our services were long – just ask my spouse Lindsey. Easily an hour and a half. Sometimes two. Lindsey said that around the 30-minute mark, Joseph would start to beg her with his eyes – he was about 6 at the time. Many of you know *the look* I'm talking about. Sometimes, it wasn't just a look. It was a whisper: 'Can we leave?' He would play

with toys in his seat. He would crawl all over the pew. He would do these huge sighs. Just [sigh]...Because my last church didn't make room for his body. Because the body of a 6-year-old can't stay still for an hour and a half. So, when we learned about children's church in Westminster, you had us. Sign me up!

Does your body matter to your faith?

It's not just a Presbyterian problem. Tell me, "Are you saved?"

We don't ask that question in the Presbyterian Tradition. But you hear it all the time in more evangelical versions of the faith, and hardly ever, does it have anything to do with the safety or support of your bodily or physical needs. It means that you believe the right thing. That you've said a certain prayer. It can be a faith that leaves the body behind. And again, if the body is ever mentioned, it's usually in the negative. The body is something you've got to reign in, and control, so as not to succumb to its desires.

Has your faith ever asked you to leave your body behind?

Has it ever made you ashamed of your body?

Of course, anyone can be told that they should be ashamed about their bodies. Though, some of us, we have to say, are told they should hide or be ashamed more than others.

Some of you may have already caught that the title of the sermon, "Bodies that Matter," comes from a famous book by UC Berkley philosopher and Queer Theorist Judith Butler. Butler's book *Bodies that Matter* came out in the early 90s, in the midst of several public acts of violence against gay and trans people.³ In the book, Butler argues that our bodies are policed by gender and sexual norms, and that those who fall out of what is understood as normal are put at extreme risk. The book is thirty years old. But today, trans individuals are still targets, not only of violence, but also legislation limiting their rights and access to healthcare, coupled with condemnations by religious leaders and denominations, simply for being who they are. Which leads us to Butler's question, whose body gets to matter?

Women, people of color, people of low socio-economic status, people in LGBT communities bear this bodily burden more heavily. So much so, that their bodies sometimes don't even get counted:

³ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

Seven workers from the World Central Kitchen killed this week in Gaza by Israeli bombs, supplied by the United States. What a contrast this week between those who deliver food and those who deliver bombs. In the *Daily Podcast* from the *New York Times* last Thursday, one reporter noted that if these had been seven Palestinian aid workers instead of seven European Aid workers killed, we wouldn't even be talking about it.⁴ Because Palestinian aid workers have been killed repeatedly over the last 6 months, and rarely is it reported in the national press.

Again, the question, whose bodies matter?

And the book of 1 John answers: Those. Those bodies matter, too.

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life.

The body of Christ, means God cares not just for the soul, but for the body. And that goes especially for those bodies most in need:

Ch. 3: How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help. Little children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth.

Faith, for 1st John, is not abstract.

It calls us to a love that means ensuring everyone has what they need to live and to thrive. It means that the body should never be a place of shame; it should instead be central to our love and care for one another. Because Christ came in the flesh, the best thing we can do, is support one another, when life in our bodies is hard.

A confession: when I looked at the calendar this week, I freaked out a little: a Baptism, and the Lord's Supper, and a Commissioning service all in one! We're never going to get out of here on time! I almost called up Session to cancel communion.

⁴ Here's how the reporter in the podcast put it: "Frankly, I don't think we would be having this conversation if a group of Palestinian aid workers had been killed." The Daily, "Israel's Deadly Airstrike on the World Central Kitchen." *The New York Times*. April 4, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/04/podcasts/the-daily/israels-deadly-airstrike-on-the-world-central-kitchen.html>.

*Gradye talked me out of it.
If we run long today, talk to him.*

But the more I sat with this passage, the more it all came together: the table, the font, and Justice Knox.

Because this is love. This is care, for the soul and the body:
Here. At this Table.

This isn't an abstraction. Here at this Table our bodies are literally feed, cared for, nourished, at a Table where no one is turned away, where all are welcome. What we do at this Table should be a model for what we do outside of these walls.

Love is here at the Table. It's also here, at the font.

Here, as we just saw, water poured over our heads. Water symbolizing love. Water symbolizing grace. It's not just poured over your soul. It's poured over your body. It's our way of saying that all of you, from your head down to your toes, and everything in between is loved and claimed by the grace of God.

Table. Font. Love is also here.

This week, we intertwine the practice of communion with the commissioning of our Justice Knox participants. Many of you and more from Westminster and other churches in our community will go out this week and speak to our elected leaders for better equity in our schools, affordable housing in our city, and greater concern for mental health in our institutions.

Table, font, and faithful work. This is a faith that is embodied. It is bodies of faith-filled people, nourished, supported, and prepared inside these walls for faithful work on the outside.

1 John draws our attention to:

What we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands.

Remember:

Christ's body then.

And Christ's body now.

Bodies that love, and deserve love.

Bodies that care, and deserve care.

Remember an embodied love:

Here. (table) And here. (font) And here. (people)

Thanks be to God.