

Rev. Claire Feingold Thoryn
“Every Inch”
January 17, 2016
Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday Weekend
Worship Theme: Bodies

Opening Hymn: Wake, Now, My Senses #298 verses 1-3

CALL TO WORSHIP

One: A child once dreamed the Voice was calling his name...
‘Samuel;’

Fishermen once heard the Voice when a young man bid them
follow;

And still the Voice beckons today... can you hear?

Many: *Here I am. Send me.*

One: Moses protested vehemently as the Voice spoke at the
burning bush;

Mary stood amazed as the Voice proclaimed impending birth;
And still the Voice beckons today... can you hear?

Many: *Here I am. Send me.*

One: Rosa Parks followed the Voice to the front of the bus;
Martin Luther King, Jr. heard the Voice as the bullet shattered;
And still the Voice beckons today... can you hear?

Many: *Here I am. Send me.*

One: The Voice beckons from humble places...
in the tears of hungry children,
in the cries of the frail and frightened elderly,
in the pleas of those whose dreams have been too long deferred;

And still the Voice beckons today... can you hear?
Many: Here I am. Send me.

Personal Point: John Lempesis

Prayer time: Carl Byers

Centering: We Shall Overcome #169, verses 1 and 4 printed in order of service

Reading: "Susanna" by Anne Porter

Anne Porter was born in Sherborn in 1911 and raised five children. When her children were grown and her husband died, she returned to something she had done in her youth, and in the snatches of time she could find in later years: poetry. She published her first book of poetry at the age of 83. This poem was published when she was 95 years old.

Nobody in the hospital
Could tell the age
Of the old woman who
Was called Susanna

I knew she spoke some English
And that she was an immigrant
Out of a little country
Trampled by armies

Because she had no visitors
I would stop by to see her

But she was always sleeping

All I could do
Was to get out her comb
And carefully untangle
The tangles in her hair

One day I was beside her
When she woke up
Opening small dark eyes
Of a surprising clearness

She looked at me and said
You want to know the truth?
I answered Yes

She said it's something that
My mother told me

There's not a single inch
Of our whole body
That the Lord does not love

She then went back to sleep.

Sermon: Every Inch

Our worship theme this month is Bodies, and as my spiritual director pointed out to me this week, today is my anniversary of becoming embodied, the day my soul was incarnated in the world. It's my birthday!

According to the common way that marketers and organizations classify age ranges, I am no longer a “young adult.” I guess I am just an “adult.”

You want to know the truth?
There's not a single inch
Of our whole body
That the Lord does not love

What does it feel like to be a body?
After all, you don't “have” a body,
though we say that, as though there is some distance
between us and our body, as though we can hold our body
at arm's length from us and examine it dispassionately.
No, I am a body, and you are a body.
What does it feel like to be a body?

Last week we did a Body Prayer which is the spiritual exercise for this month—and you can find the link to a 90-second video that shows you how to do the Body Prayer in my current column at follen.org.

But I have to tell you that was not the first spiritual exercise I chose for this month.

This summer I sat down and planned all the spiritual exercises to match the monthly worship themes, for the covenant groups and the rest of the congregation to do.

I always choose spiritual exercises that I would do—because I think they would give me solace or challenge me in some way. Then I passed them along to the Covenant Group operations team for feedback.

I was not surprised when they came back to me and said, Claire, um, we need to talk about January.

The original exercise for our Bodies month was inspired by the wonderful writer and Episcopalian priest Barbara Brown Taylor. She wrote a book about spiritual practices we do in our everyday life, and one chapter was titled “The Practice of Wearing Skin.” Being a body is a spiritual practice.

This is the passage that inspired me; she wrote:

“I think it is important to pray naked in front of a full-length mirror sometimes, especially when you are full of loathing for your body. . . . You have gotten glimpses of your body as you have bathed or changed clothes, but so far maintaining your equilibrium has depended upon staying covered up as much as you can. . . .

“This can only go on so long, especially for someone who officially believes that God loves flesh and blood, no matter what kind of shape it is in.

Whether you are sick or well, lovely or irregular, there comes a time when it is vitally important for your spiritual health to drop your clothes, look in the mirror, and say,

‘Here I am.

This is the body-like-no-other that my life has shaped.

I live here.

This is my soul’s address.’

After you have taken a good look around, you may decide that there is a lot to be thankful for, all things considered. Bodies take real beatings. That they heal from most things is an underrated miracle. That they give birth is beyond reckoning....

“Here we sit, with our souls tucked away in this marvelous luggage, mostly insensible to the ways in which every spiritual practice begins with the body.”

The body is our soul’s address.

There’s not a single inch

Of our whole body

That the Lord does not love.

You can thank the Covenant Group operations team for the fact that I did not inflict that exercise upon you formally. It was interesting to me that when they told me they felt uncomfortable with it, I felt both disappointed and relieved.

Because now I didn’t have to do it, either.

It is hard to love our bodies.

Our bodies can be so vulnerable and disappointing.

I remember how I felt when, after having my first daughter, I developed a type of inflammatory arthritis, kind of like rheumatoid arthritis but not quite. I felt angry at my body.

Betrayed.

And totally afraid, especially as joint by joint, I lost my ability to do basic tasks. I had never realized how much I take my body for granted.

How privileged I am to be abled—temporarily.

To walk down stairs.

To hold a steering wheel.

To button a coat.

To change a diaper.

To open a jar.

I found the right doctor, finally, and the right treatments, and the arthritis subsided. It comes and goes, spontaneously and erratically. And each time I have to work through that dissonance, the fear and anger against my body, my self, the “marvelous luggage” in which my soul is tucked away. And I always tell myself, “When I get better, I’ll remember to stay grateful.”

But you know, I always forget.

The privilege of being abled—even temporarily abled—is one that is so easy to forget we even have, until we lose it.

That is the privilege—the ease and comfort of *not having to think about it*.

When I am well, when I am abled, it is so easy to forget about how my knees are working as I walk.

As a cis-gendered person—a person whose gender matches my biological sex—I am privileged that my body feels like “mine.” My hardware matches my software, they are compatible. I don’t have to think about it. What a privilege.

I live in a safe, relatively wealthy community, where I do not fear for my bodily safety as I walk down the street at night, I don’t fear for my children’s bodily safety when I leave them at school.

The lack of fear is an incredible privilege.

Being a white person, embodying whiteness, especially comes with many privileges. It is far too easy for me to forget or just refuse to see how my whiteness eases the way for me.

Our bodies are always vulnerable. But you know, some bodies are more vulnerable than others.

There may not be a single inch of our body that the Lord does not love,
but we can see every day in the papers or on television, that America does not really love black bodies,

female bodies, aging bodies, disabled bodies, poor bodies, immigrant bodies, trans bodies...there are a lot of some-bodies who are loved less by America.

Too many bodies are vulnerable to the choices of politicians and corporations, vulnerable to the chaos of violence on the streets and by police.

On this weekend as we honor Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we are called to remember most especially how America has an ugly history of destroying black bodies, a history that continues today. “That is our “heritage,” as writer Ta-Nehisi Coates says.

In Coates’ book *Between the World and Me*, written as a letter to his son, he reminds the reader again and again that racism, and the history of slavery and oppression, of black people in America, is not simply an oppression of the mind, an oppression of ideas; it is an oppression of the body, an oppression that kills.

He is such a incredible writer who pulls no punches, and it feels strange to have his words come out of my white mouth, but I have to share the power of his message with you. He writes to his son:

Last Sunday the host of a popular news show...turned to the subject of my body, although she did not mention it specifically. But by now I am accustomed to intelligent people asking about the condition of my body without realizing the nature of their request.

Specifically, the host wished to know why I felt that

white America's progress, or rather the progress of those Americans who believe that they are white, was built on looting and violence. ... The answer is American history.

[Coates' continues, telling his son:]

Here is what I would like for you to know:

In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body—it is heritage. Enslavement was not merely the antiseptic borrowing of labor—it is not so easy to get a human being to commit their body against its own elemental interest. And so enslavement must be casual wrath and random manglings, the gashing of heads and brains blown out over the river as the body seeks to escape. It must be rape so regular as to be industrial. There is no uplifting way to say this. I have no praise anthems, nor old Negro spirituals. The spirit and soul are the body and brain, which are destructible—that is precisely why they are so precious.

And the soul did not escape. The spirit did not steal away on gospel wings. The soul was the body that fed the tobacco, and the spirit was the blood that watered the cotton, and these created the first fruits of the American garden.

The body is our soul's address.

When we break a person's body we are breaking their soul.

Every spiritual practice begins with the body.

Evil begins there too.

I hope you read Ta-Nehisi Coates' book, and share it with others, and talk about his message. It is a masterpiece, it is a way to wake up our bodies to the experience of other bodies. It is one way to say: Black Lives Matter. It is one way to join the march.

50 years ago, Martin Luther King led the march on Selma. It was the third attempt at the march; the first two times the marchers' bodies had been beaten back. How many times can your soul survive a beating? The third time they tried, they had a court order allowing them to proceed, and by the time they reached Montgomery, there were 25,000 marchers.

One of the people marching at the front of the line, arm in arm with Dr. King, was Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, King's friend and colleague.

Heschel said: "For many of us, the march from Selma to Montgomery was about protest and prayer. Legs are not lips and walking is not kneeling. And yet our legs uttered songs. Even without words, our march was worship. I felt my legs were praying."

Every spiritual practice begins with the body.
Our body is our soul's address.
"The spirit and soul are the body and brain,
which are destructible—
that is precisely why they are so precious."

I want you to know the truth,

There's not a single inch
Of our whole body
That the Lord does not love.

God is calling us to love each other,
Body and Soul,
Souls within our bodies-like-no-other.
God is calling us to keep marching.

And still the Voice beckons today... can you hear?
"Here I am. Send me."
And still the Voice beckons today... can you hear?
"Here I am. Send me."

Amen.

Closing Hymn: Wake, Now, My Senses #298 verses 4 and 5