

# AN ALTAR IN THE WORLD

## *The Practice of Wearing Skin: Incarnation*

Promptings offered by Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle  
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Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ  
Dayton, Ohio

### **Psalm 84**

*How lovely is your dwelling place, O God of hosts! My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of God; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God. Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O God of hosts, my Ruler and my God.*

*Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise. Happy are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion. As they go through the valley of Baca they make it a place of springs; the early rain also covers it with pools. They go from strength to strength; the God of gods will be seen in Zion.*

*O Sovereign God of hosts, hear my prayer; give ear, O God of Jacob! Behold our shield, O God; look on the face of your anointed. For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness.*

*For the Sovereign God is a sun and shield; God bestows favor and honor. No good thing does God withhold from those who walk uprightly. O God of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you.*

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***“My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of God;  
my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.”***

Psalm 84:2

The church I grew up in was always suspicious of flesh. We never talked positively about our bodies. We never spoke of our bodies as a miracle of God's good creation. Flesh was bad. Spirit was good. And sex, well, that subject was taboo. And if we ever did talk about it, it was done so in the most negative of terms...as something dirty, lustful, or “the nasty.” But mostly, flesh was a subject to be avoided...a beast to be tamed.

Not too long ago my youngest brother, Shawn, had a starring role in the Birmingham Festival Theatre's production of David Sedaris' play *SantaLand Diaries* in Alabama. In that play there was this big scene where my brother was naked on the stage, except for a skimpy pair of boxers. And in addition to him being mostly naked on stage there were large images of his mostly naked body in various and sundry poses being projected behind him. And one of those images showed Shawn in a somewhat “curious pose” with another man – who happened to be an “elf” -- and a large candy cane. (You'd have to see the play to understand.)

Well, out of all the plays that my brother has been in over the years, it was this particular play that our dear Southern Baptists parents decided they would travel south to see. So when Shawn found out that my parents would be attending a performance of *SantaLand Diaries*, he got a little, well, sort of...anxious. What would my parents think? Would they be terribly offended and upset? Should he tell them NOT to come? Should the cast and crew do a little rearranging of the play on the night my parents would be present? These were the questions and concerns at the moment, but Shawn decided to just go with it. He reasoned that he was an adult now and he didn't need our parent's permission or approval and he no longer needed to edit his life for them, nor did he need to protect our parents. And in the end, he figured they could handle it.

Well, I couldn't wait to hear how things went. So after my parents returned home, I called my mom and dad to see how their trip went and how they liked the play. An inquiring mind wanted to know! And all that my mother said was that she and dad liked it. It was funny. Shawn was great. But “she didn't like hearing Shawn use all of that foul language.” And that was it. That was all they ever said about it. That was the only critique ever offered. The subject of the “flesh” was

never mentioned. And as was so often the case, the subject of flesh was to be avoided in our family at all costs and certainly not discussed in polite company or with your children.

And of course, being a “self-described” people of the book, the church I grew up in used the Bible to justify and teach their anti-flesh perspective. And most, if not all, of their teachings can be attributed to the Apostle Paul and the later Christian writers. The writer of 1 John instructed:

“Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; for all that is in the world – the desire of the *flesh*, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches – comes not from the Father but from the world.”

(1 John 2:15-16)

All of which sounds strange to me in light of John’s gospel, which put in Jesus’ mouth these words: “For God so *loved* the world that he sent his only son...” (John 3:16) According to John, God not only loves the world but was pleased to embody flesh in Jesus.

And if you are familiar with the writings of the Apostle Paul, who wrote most of our Christian scriptures, you know that he can be really conflicted about subject of flesh. Sometimes his language and metaphors can soar with body imagery. He imagined those who follow Jesus to be members of the *Body* of Christ. But he also suggested that we “walk not according to the *flesh* but according to the spirit.” (Romans 8:4) and that “if you live according to the *flesh*, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” (Romans 8:13) In Galatians, Paul attributes all kinds of negative attributes to the flesh:

“Now the works of the *flesh* are obvious: Fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

(Galatians 5:19-21)

And all of this sounds strange too, in light of the Psalmist’s exuberant song: “my heart and my *flesh* sing for joy to the living God.” (Psalm 84:2)

All of this aversion to the flesh seems to have come sometime after Jesus’ life and ministry on earth had ended, when his early interpreters used a Greek worldview, not a Hebrew worldview, to spin their budding Christian theology and to separate body from soul. Jesus was a good Jew and Jewish theology and philosophy has long maintained a unity of body and soul. In Hebrew, the word translated “soul” is often the word *nephesh*. As in our text today, the psalmist sings, “My [*nephesh*] longs, indeed it faints for the courts of God; my heart and my *flesh* sing for joy to the living God.” But if we are not careful, we, with our Greek-skewed philosophical bent, will hear that as a separate part of our being...as our soul separate from our body...as what is the *good* separated from the *bad*. But in Hebrew, the word *nephesh* is better translated as “entire being.” In other words, “My *entire being* longs, indeed faints for the courts of God.”

If there was anything I learned in seminary, it was this Hebrew notion of the unity of body and soul. One of the most challenging and rewarding classes I ever took in my first year of seminary, when I attended the Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary, just outside of San Francisco, was a Hebrew exegesis class in the book of Isaiah. For every class session we had to come prepared, having dissected every letter and word and sentence of a passage of scripture from Isaiah. In other words, we had to be able to name whether a word was a noun or a verb; whether it was singular or plural, masculine or feminine, past tense or present tense; whether it was a preposition, a conjunction, etc. Then, once we had deciphered each Hebrew word as if we were a detective in the greatest mystery drama ever written, we had to offer our own translation of the text. And when we came to class, Dr. J. Kenneth Eakens, Professor of Archeology and Old Testament, would randomly call on one of the members of the class to parse a verse and then offer their interpretation of that verse. And one time, when I was called upon, my verse had the word *nephesh* in it. When I offered my translation of *nephesh* as “entire being” Dr. Eakens paused, took off his glasses, moved away from the lectern, and said, “Class, Mr. Castle has translated *nephesh* as entire being and not soul.” (My eyes were like deer in the headlights!) He went on to say: “He has done a good and beautiful thing...” When he said that, I breathed a sigh of relief. And from there, he went from teaching to preaching about how Hebrew understanding

holds together body and soul...how Hebrew understanding never separates body and soul like Greek understanding did...how Greek understanding was a ruse that Western culture in general and Christianity in particular has never overcome, but should...and how important it was for us as Christians to reclaim a Hebrew understanding of the unity of body and soul as followers of Jesus the Jew...and so on. And ever since that class I have wanted to wear glasses so that I could take them off for dramatic emphasis...when I needed to offer words of wisdom like that!

One of the genius' of Christianity, one of the reasons why anyone would want to follow in the way of person named Jesus, is that somehow, and in some way, God is discovered and known in that flesh...in that humanity...in that particular body. And by extension then, Christian theology can assert that the One God we worship and serve, known by many names, is a God we know and experience in our bodies as well. As Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us, "Every spiritual practice begins with the body." (Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, pg. 40)

I am constantly amazed by how many people continue to deny Jesus' humanity. Oh, if you pushed them, they will quote some doctrinal formulation that Jesus was fully human and fully divine, but the humanity of Jesus is never really thought about or considered. I find most Christians imagine Jesus walking the earth with a halo glowing around his head, walking two feet off the ground, thinking that if you bumped into him on the road it would be obvious from the glow that he was God. Rarely do they consider that Jesus was human...just like us...and in his human flesh he embodied, welcomed and revealed God.

This idea was another one of those shocking and mind altering discoveries I made in seminary. In my second year of seminary, when I was at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, I took a class on "The Church and Sexuality" taught by the Rev. Dr. Paul Simmons, Professor of Christian Ethics. Yes, at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary they offered such a class. This was, of course, before THE FALL...before the seminary fell into the hands of the fundamentalists in 1993 (but that's another story).

One of the sessions of that class dealt with the topic of "Jesus and Sexuality." When I first read the title for that class session I thought "what in the world does Jesus have to do with sex?" But the class was fascinating! What Dr. Simmons attempted to do was help us understand and get our heads wrapped around Jesus' humanity. If Jesus was fully human as Christian tradition has always insisted, then Jesus was a sexual being, knowing the impulses and urges of the body, even sexual ones! Did Jesus have wet dreams? Did Jesus have sexual desires? These kinds of questions were asked and pursued. None of these questions were meant to be irreverent or disrespectful, but I t was meant to push us to think about just how human Jesus really was, and once we could imagine that, to also imagine how God was and is revealed in and through flesh...Jesus' flesh and ours! And I have to tell you, for some dear Southern Baptists in that class, these kinds of questions were just way too much...TMI (too much information as they say!).

Dr. Simmons went on to describe how people have understood or imagined the sexuality of Jesus. Some understand Jesus to have been asexual, devoid of sexual impulses altogether. Some understand Jesus to have been single but celibate. Others understand Jesus to have been single but sexually active...think of the movie "The Last Temptation of Christ." Some have argued that Jesus was married. The argument being that the normal sexual expression of a Jewish male in first century Palestine would have been married. The odd thing would have been for him to be single. And if he was single, that would have been what people would have noticed and wrote about, but since there are really no comments about Jesus' sexuality in scripture or out, it is safe to imply that he was married...so the argument goes. And then there is the notion that Jesus was homosexual, after all the Gospel of John talks about John as the "disciple whom Jesus loved."

Now hear me clearly, no one knows anything about the sexuality of Jesus. Any thinking about Jesus' sexuality are all wonderments at best. But the point my professor made that day was that Jesus was fully a human being, with a body, with a sexuality and all that entails. And it was into such a body that God was pleased to be revealed and made known. And undergirding this whole discussion was the notion that we experience and discover God in and through our bodies, never apart from them, that God trusts flesh and blood to make divine love known and experienced on

earth. Or as Taylor suggests, what many of miss, in our physical dis-ease, is that our bodies remain God's best way of getting to us." (Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, pg. 42)

And this also includes suffering and pain. Thinking about the practice of wearing skin, of paying attention to our bodies *where* they are and *what* is going on with them, I went to visit Ken Keller this past Friday. And as many of you know Ken continues to struggle and heal from his stroke. He is doing great in rehab. He is getting physically stronger. He is still working hard at his speech and thought processes. But it is good to see his personality coming back to life and to hear the return of his sweet, gentlemanly, southern voice.

But after a nice visit over his hospital dinner, I asked if I could pray with him and Richard. I held Kenneth's and Richard's hands and I don't remember exactly what I said but I was praying that God would be revealed to both Ken and Richard in and through their bodies, even their struggling, frustrated, tired, and disabled bodies. And after my brief prayer, Ken's eyes were full of tears, which caused Richard to cry and me too. It wasn't an agonizing, awful, despairing sort of cry, but a hopeful, grateful cry, a cry in which Ken, in spite of his limited speech, was expressing his own sense of God's very real and powerful and gracious presence.

Taylor notes:

"Deep suffering makes theologians of us all. The questions people ask about God in Sunday School rarely compare with the questions we ask while we are in the hospital. This goes for those stuck in the waiting room as well as those in actual beds...To spend one night in real pain is to discover depths of reality that are roped off while everything is going fine. *Why me? Why now? Why this?*

These are natural questions to ask when you are in pain, but they are just as relevant when you are in pleasure. Who deserves the way a warm bath feels on a cold night after a hard day's work? Who has earned the smell of a loved one, embracing you on your first night back home? To hold a sleeping child in your arms can teach you more about the meaning of life than any ten books on the subject. To lie in the yard at night looking at the stars can grant you entrance into divine mysteries that elude you inside the house.

The daily practice of incarnation – of being in the body with full confidence that God speaks the language of flesh – is to discover a pedagogy that is as old as the gospels. Why else did Jesus spend his last night on earth teaching his disciples to wash feet and share supper? With all the conceptual truths in the universe at his disposal, he did not give them something to think about together when he was gone. Instead, he gave them concrete things to do – specific ways of being together in their bodies – that would go on teaching them what they needed to know when he was no longer around to teach them himself...

Most of us could use a reminder that God does not come to us beyond the flesh but in the flesh, at the hands of a teacher who will not be spiritualized but who goes on trusting the embodied sacraments of bread, wine, water and feet.

"Do this," he said – not *believe* this but *do* this – "in remembrance of me."  
(Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, pg 43-44)

In closing, I think Barbara Brown Taylor gets it just right:

The last thing any of us needs is more information about God. We need the practice of incarnation, by which God saves the lives of those whose intellectual assent has turned as dry as dust, who have run frighteningly low on the bread of life, who are dying to know more God in their bodies. Not more *about* God. *More* God.

(Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, pg. 45)

*My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of God; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God. Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O God...my God. Amen!*