

CHRIST HAS NO BODY NOW BUT YOURS

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How many of you have heard of Teresa of Avila? She is one of the most famous saints of the Christian tradition. She was born in Spain in 1515, which was a seriously Christian time in Europe. The worldview of medieval Europe *was* Christianity. It wasn't just one religion among others. It was the accepted truth, accepted by everyone. And it set many people on fire for God.

Teresa was a passionate Christian right from the get-go. When she was seven, she ran away from home looking for an opportunity to be a martyr. Her uncle found her before she got too far away and dragged her back home. She entered a convent as a young woman, became its leader, and spent her entire life making her religious order more serious, more disciplined, more dedicated to God, more useful to the world. She decided that she and her nuns would never wear shoes, for example. Why? Because shoes protect us from the earth and so they are symbols of how we can lose sight of the demands of humanity. Teresa didn't want her sisters to lose sight of the needs of humanity. She wrote many books on prayer and the spiritual life and this was at a time when women just did not write books. This woman was on fire.

I mention her to you today because this week you will receive this year's stewardship brochure in the mail, and its theme is something that St Teresa wrote. Here it is:

*Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours.
Yours are the eyes through which he looks
Compassion on the world.
Yours are the feet with which
He walks to do good.
Yours are the hands with which
He blesses all the world.
Christ has no body now but yours.
No hands, no feet on earth but yours.*

I have been thinking about these beautiful words for several weeks. Again and again they have made me imagine not our bodies and what they represent spiritually, but Jesus' body. Of course we don't know exactly what Jesus looked like, although he was of course not blond and blue-eyed as many mid-century American images pictured him. Interestingly, the only piece of real evidence we have about Jesus' physical appearance is the Shroud of Turin, which scholars and forensic scientists increasingly regard as an authentic image of Jesus. The imprint of Jesus' body on this piece of cloth shows that he was a very tall man, unlike most men in his time and place. Other than that, what we know is that he was a Palestinian Jew, dark of skin—a person whom people would now call a “person of color.”

What would it have been like to encounter Jesus in the flesh? The New Testament records many people's encounters with him, and they all indicate that being in his presence was a powerful, often life-changing

experience. Jesus was so filled with the light and love of God that one word, one touch, could transform someone. Even the hem of his garment could heal. The stewardship pledge brochure has several images of Rembrandt's "Head of Christ." Spend some time with these images. Look at Jesus' face, at how Rembrandt captured his gentleness and love, the way he can see you through and through, the way he seemed to be saying a reluctant goodbye to us long before his life was ever in danger.

Everything he had he gave to us. "This is my body, given for you." His earthly body is gone now. It went down to the grave just as our bodies will. The earth closed over it and it became earth, water, wind, stars. His last breath went out into the world and in some sense is still there, part of everything that breathes. And so as you take your next breath, you are breathing in and out the breath of Jesus, who is now absent in the flesh but who is present in his ascended body with God our Father and who comes to us now, at this very moment, from another dimension in his risen body, as he promised to do every time we gather in his name.

Jesus was the embodied spirit of God. I think that sometimes we forget that we are embodied spirits too, made by God to be the caretakers of creation and commissioned by Jesus before he died to carry on his work of love and service and healing. "This is my body, given for you" is in a sense "This is my body, given **to** you." So as St Teresa says, we are now Jesus' body. This is not a metaphor. It's a spiritual reality with tremendously life-giving potential.

And so the one core universal vocation is to love and to be loved. That's why you were born: to love and to be loved.

Every human being has an enormous inborn capacity to love and to give. We all catch glimpses of this at key moments in our lives.

Especially when you fall in love. When you fall in love, no matter what age you are – a teenager, an adult, an elder – you are undone, exploded, unraveled. It's like the first day of creation – everything is new, shining, perfect. You begin to understand that love is what is most alive about the universe. It's almost too much to contain within our small hearts. The great English poet William Blake had a very clear sense of the purpose of human life. He said, "We are here to learn to endure the beams of love."

I think there's another key moment that each of us experiences that's less visible. It's the moment when you decide what your life is for. *The moment when you decide whether you are in love with life...or not.* If you're in love with life, then you become a gift to the world. Everything you are and everything you have flows out toward others. This is the way Jesus lived, right until and through his last breath.

We all know that there are plenty of other things to be in love with. Success. Beauty. Youth. A lovely face. A toned body. A big house. A flawless resume. A bottle. An old anger. You can be in love with your regrets. You can be in love with a certain understanding of yourself that may no longer match reality. And you can be in love with money – which, oddly enough, we call "bread." I suppose you can even be in love with yourself.

You can always tell if a person is in love with life by looking at their face. Because our faces tell it all. Which is why some wise person once said, "By the time you are fifty, you have the face you deserve."

Josh told us at staff meeting this week that his Dad always called stewardship sermons the "The Sermon on the Amount." And I heard an old joke this week about some guy who when asked what he was going to give to his parish replied, "Well, this is how I decide. I take a big bunch of my money and I throw it

up in the air. Everything that stays up, I give to God. Everything that falls down to the ground, I keep.” The Force of Gravity principle of pledging!

Generous giving is hard. But it is worth it. Because you were made for it. Giving is the only thing that is ever going to make you happy; we’re just hardwired that way. Most of us have to learn how to give, because sometimes letting go of what we have feels like losing life itself. There are plenty of Bible stories about this; about people who were just too scared of not having enough that they couldn’t be generous. Today’s reading from Exodus tells one of these stories. The Chosen People are in the wilderness and God has provided for all their needs. But suddenly they panic over water and they demand that Moses get them some. Moses goes to God and says, “These people are killing me! I’ve got to give them water now! Tell me how to do it.” And God says, “Ah, so my people do not trust me to provide for them. Looks like you don’t, either. Very unfortunate. Here’s how to get the water: Take your rod and strike the rock; water will come out. But you will live to regret this.” So Moses bought into the people’s scarcity mentality and he forced God’s hand because he didn’t trust God to take care of them. This is the reason God didn’t let Moses go with his people into the Promised Land.

I remember being on the elevator in my building when we lived in Manhattan. I was riding down to the lobby with 2 little boys who were maybe 8 or 9 years old. One of the boys lived in our building and the other had been visiting him. Also on the elevator was the Mom of the boy who had hosted the playdate. The boy who lived in the building had in his hand a little plastic toy, one of those toys that little kids grow fond of and carry around with them everywhere. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the boy who was going home long at the little toy longingly. And the boy noticed his friend looking at it, and he said to him gravely, “Would you like to

have this toy?” And the other boy responded shyly, “I...I... really really would like it.” And his friend held it out to him and said, “Here; you can have it.” And he handed it to him. At which point, the mother intervened and said to her son, “NO!!! Don’t give it to him! You’ll regret it later! Take that toy back right now! It’s your favorite toy!” “No, no, I want to give it to him,” the little guy said. His mother forbade it. The boy handed back the toy. Each boy hung his head and stared sadly at the floor of the elevator. There you have it: Generosity stifled by the voice of fear and a scarcity mentality. *So it is easy to let the world beat right out of you the greatest gift God gave you, your loving generosity.* Because we think that clinging to something is somehow going to keep us safe in a world that will never be safe.

Of course, letting go is what actually gives us life. That’s what Jesus showed when he gave his body for us on the cross. We need to give our bodies away too – not, probably, the way Jesus did, on a cross. But we can give away the fruits of our bodies: our time, our talent, our treasure. Because if we are now Christ’s body in the world, then we have a lot of work to do. St. Mark’s has fallen in love with life during the past few years. We have grown in so many ways and we are moving forward. There is passion and fire here.

Let me tell you a story. Some of you knew Loretta Chappell. She was a parishioner here at St Mark’s for many years. She died this past spring at the age of 49 after fighting cancer with all her might for 2 years.

A few days before Loretta died, I brought Holy Communion to her at her house. She was very weak and in pain, but she was cheerful as she always was. An old friend was with her, and so was Sean, her 16-year-old son, who was raised and Confirmed in this parish.

We were in the family room. I had brought our tiny silver home Communion set and so

we used the ottoman of the armchair that Loretta was sitting in as a kind of altar. We all knelt on the floor around it; it was like we were little children, kneeling on the carpet together with Loretta sitting a little above us in the armchair, like a princess in a turban. She was barefoot, her feet swollen with disease.

I read these words out loud: “Jesus said, ‘I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever...whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.’” I gave the bread to Loretta. She held it in front of her for a moment. She looked at it, and she wept. The tears just streamed down her face. It was as if she saw both her life and her death right in front of her, in her hands, in that little piece of bread. She ate the bread, and then Sean got up and went to his mom and held her. He didn’t say a word, he just held her. He was Jesus for his mom. He helped her to see what was coming and he helped her not be afraid. Death was near, but the room was filled with life. This is the power of Christian community.

Sean was a real human being in that moment. He used every inch of his capacity to give. And when he did, his touch transformed and healed. He was Jesus for his mom. This is what St Mark’s is for: to be Jesus for our community.

Keep this story in mind as you decide what your pledge will be this year. *Money is one of the ways that love is set free to do its work.* And so stretch your generous heart to help your parish stretch to fill its enormous capacity to minister to the world in God’s name, just as Sean did. Because the world is dying to receive the healing touch of God.

When you come to Communion today, you will hold that piece of bread, that pledge of our redemption, in your hands, just as Loretta did. While you kneel at the rail, look at the

faces of the people around you. Look at their hands and eyes and feet. They are as close as you are going to get to Jesus in this life. Which is why you will see his face shining right through them all.

Christ has no body now but yours. Yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world.
Amen.