

2022-05-08 SERMON TUMC

Present your bodies

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Luke 5:17-26

Romans 12:1-18

[Questions for conversation pre-service: How are we doing at TUMC on including bodies of different abilities?

What assumptions do we make by people's appearances?

What could the Bible mean when it says we are to present our bodies as living sacrifice?]

Romans 12 has one of the best articulated visions of what it takes to be a Christian community. It also says here to, under the mercy of God, "present our bodies as living sacrifice." I wonder what that might mean.

You have a part to play in this sermon, later I will be asking you for some of your thoughts, so be ready if there is something stirring that you want to share.

But first please pause with me for a moment and consider the following questions (I will not ask you to share out loud)

What is it like to be in your body?

What is your favourite aspect of your body? What do you like best?

How does your body show up in church?

Years ago, during the "big" renovation of the late 90's it was decided that we would move from wooden pews to stacking chairs, so that this space could be used for multiple purposes. I must have volunteered for this task, and somehow found myself going all around the city with Emily Burgetz to chair warehouses looking at and sitting on all kinds of chairs. Besides considering what they looked like — by and large stacking chairs were ugly back then — we also had to think about all the different body-types that those chairs would need to hold.

We asked ourselves, were they good for people with short legs, long legs? Were they sturdy enough that someone could support themselves getting up? Could they be moved out of the way quickly to accommodate a wheel chair? Was there enough space between them to account for different “widths” of people, children sitting with parents, hymnbooks, etc. There were a lot of different bodies to consider.

And we ended up with these, which have lasted quite well, actually (which we ordered from somewhere in Ohio, if I recall).

We have other things that operate in the background to accommodate different aspects of bodies. I’ll name a few:

When the **stage blocks** were made, at one point TUMC carpenters were given the task of creating a ramp so that (in theory) someone in a wheelchair could come up to lead from the mic. I do not have any memory of that ever happening. (And more recently others have been trouble-shooting to create a safe railing for coming up and down that ramp).

We have the **pulpit**, which was made in the decades when it only needed to fit male bodies — which are generally taller — is still a bit challenging for those of us who can stand but are on the lower end of the vertical spectrum. And for whom “just standing on a stool” does not feel safe.

The most recent renovation a few years back, was in part because we needed to have a bigger **lobby space** (for more bodies) and a washroom on the main floor for people in wheelchairs, people who have urgent bathroom needs, people with babies, people who need greater privacy can take care of their needs. We call it accessible, and as a bonus is also our only gender neutral washroom (though it is unclear to me whether we were conscious of that in our plans.)

There are **large print hymnals** available, we have hearing-aid friendly and headphone sound system for those of us with hearing difficulties. You kind of have to know to look for them but they’re there. Automatic captions on zoom calls. We do not currently have sign language interpretation or accommodations for folks who are visually impaired.

Finally, many song leaders invite us to “**stand as we are able**” when we sing, in recognition that not everyone’s body can switch that quickly or at all from sitting to standing, or that a body might just be too fatigued to move on a particular day.

So though we don't often talk about body diversity, but we have things in operating in the background that take into account different bodies. And, depending on what kind of body you inhabit you make different assumptions about things.

As we continue to look at our welcoming statements, we want to take a measure of our commitment to **be** welcoming not just say that we are.

Today I invite us to consider the actual physical bodies we hope to be part of our church community. And how, why, whether we actually welcome different bodies in this church community at TUMC.

And if we do, or if we don't, what are the implications for us as a church? (These are likely many conversations and not just a sermon)

[Irony in the disembodied online experience, but even that makes it possible to accommodate folks who have mobility challenges, large group gathering anxieties or other barriers to being here in person]

[Invitation to participate]

Whether we recognize it or not are under the influence of our culture when it comes to bodily identities. Here are a few that I thought of:

Ageism

- We often think of ageism as discrimination against older bodies; bodies with gray hair, bodies with sagging parts, bodies with brains that aren't quite as quick.
- We also need to be careful not to practice ageism by ignoring the wisdom of children
- Or being rude to teenaged boys (example of how they are treated on the TTC)
- At TUMC we work hard at being Intergenerational. And that is why, because we want to counter this bias about different ages of bodies that make up a community.

Size-ism

- As someone who lives in a plus-sized body, I can tell you that it is hard not to give in to the pressure of wanting to be "normal." Because there is this idea of a normal body that everyone should aspire to. All you have to do is go to one beach to realize that there is no such thing as "normal." Somebody pointed out to me recently that their doctor mentioned that even inside we are all different: hearts are different sizes, intestines, stomachs. There is not a standard that we all need to measure ourselves against.

That is hard because our society attaches moral values to someone being fat or thin (are they lazy or working hard, or being “good” according to what they eat or don’t eat).

We know that those are not the values we aspired to and that there is much to be said about taking care of one’s body and exercising restraint. What I’m speaking to is the moral judgement based merely on a body shape.

Read online from a woman in the body-positive movement that she’d love to go to a church where she saw herself reflected from the front. I thought — I’m here for ya!

Though no-body wants to be someone else’s token or object lesson.

I don’t know how to name this next one: Gender-ism (Transphobia). This is a tendency where we want to categorize people into either male or female bodies and might become uncomfortable when that becomes difficult to do on that binary.

This is one of the reasons that many folks make a point of identifying what are the pronouns they would like to use. It’s not about being politically correct, it’s about allowing you not to make assumptions about who they are just by looking at their body. Trying to use those pronouns when someone offers them to you is a way to honour those bodies.

Can you name any other bodily aspects that our culture creates a bias for us (We will speak to ableism in a bit, and racism next week)?

I thought we could use the story of the paralyzed man as an entry point to some of this discussion:

“For many scholars addressing the gospels, people with disability described therein have not been considered agents in their own right but exist only to highlight the actions of Jesus as a miracle worker.”¹

*Luke 5: 17-26*¹⁷ *One day when Jesus was teaching, Pharisees and legal experts were sitting nearby. They had come from every village in Galilee and Judea, and from Jerusalem. Now the power of the Lord was with Jesus to heal.*¹⁸ *Some men were bringing a man who was paralyzed, lying on a cot. They wanted to carry him in and place him before Jesus,*¹⁹ *but they couldn’t reach him because of the crowd. So they*

¹ “The Poor, the Crippled, the Blind, and the Lame”: Physical and Sensory Disability in the Gospels of the New Testament - Louise Anne Gosbell (PhD Thesis)

took him up on the roof and lowered him—cot and all—through the roof tiles into the crowded room in front of Jesus. ²⁰ When Jesus saw their faith, he said, “Friend, your sins are forgiven.”

²¹ The legal experts and Pharisees began to mutter among themselves, “Who is this who insults God? Only God can forgive sins!”

²² Jesus recognized what they were discussing and responded, “Why do you fill your minds with these questions? ²³ Which is easier—to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’? ²⁴ But so that you will know that the Human One^(a) has authority on the earth to forgive sins” —Jesus now spoke to the man who was paralyzed, “I say to you, get up, take your cot, and go home.” ²⁵ Right away, the man stood before them, picked up his cot, and went home, praising God.

²⁶ All the people were beside themselves with wonder. Filled with awe, they glorified God, saying, “We’ve seen unimaginable things today.”

So now I want to name ableism, which are assumptions about what our bodies can or can’t do.

If you could ask the gospel writer more about this story what would you ask?

- what kind of support did he have
- How long had he been paralyzed or had the friends been taking care of him for a while
- Was he in pain?
- What did the quality of life look like, and did he just assume that being physically more able would improve his quality of life?

What do you notice about bodies in this story?

- Crowd - why did they not get out of the way. Why were those bodies a barrier to this person coming to Jesus.
- The friends had to be able to climb up on the roof, carry a paralyzed person.

What is going on between Jesus and the paralyzed man?

- Did he just assume that he needed his sins forgiven?
- Did he assume that he wanted to walk?
- Jesus doesn’t immediately recognize that the paralyzation needs fixing.

Scholars have pointed out that physical issues in Bible times were often considered to be related to sin. So Jesus is breaking that assumption, in front of everyone, making sure they know that there is not something wrong with them before God. That is huge.

There are cultures where anybody born who does not appear to be perfect was often considered to be someone of greater wisdom. They were the shamans and the wisdom-keepers. The same to be said about elders, often they are considered to be the keepers of wisdom, yet in our society we tend to look at those people as someone who needs fixing rather than elevating.

Put yourself in the place of the friends who were carrying the paralyzed man. What would happen if their friend hadn't been healed?

- The friends would be upset because they had brought this man to be healed. Jesus had a different plan and saw different things, potentially. They'd have to carry him back out.
- They'd have to deal with someone who needs them longterm.

Are there other thoughts about ableism and bodies in this story.

As I was thinking about the crowd in the story I thought about how this space is or is not set up specifically for people with wheelchair needs. Right now we require someone to arrive in a wheelchair and somebody to notice that they need a spot. We accommodate on the spot, and don't consistently leave a place for a wheelchair. I wonder what that says about our assumptions about the bodies that enter this place. The burden is on the people to request what they need. I think about that in terms of other needs. Where does the burden lie to identify those needs and to accommodate those needs.

Who are the friends that carry and will keep on carrying even if the healing doesn't happen?

There is a whole lot more that could be said about abilities and disabilities. I find this story somewhat troubling, it's very based on the biblical world's view of ability and disability. I do like that Jesus does not assume. And I do put us in the place of the friends and of the crowd and ask ourselves, what is your body willing to do on behalf of other bodies? What discomfort of carrying, of lifting or creating space are you willing to do on behalf of other bodies.

Going back to the chairs, it was, of course, impossible to pick something that was comfortable for everyone. A level of our own discomfort is perhaps part of what we sign up for in the "sacrifice" of being a church with each other. I'm not talking about the chairs. I think that if we want to be welcoming we need to recognize that we won't always be comfortable.

After the sermon last week, the online folks had a lively discussion about what inclusion in the church means. I don't have permission to quote anyone, but somebody remembered that the invitation to be a part of a church is "Come as you are" and not "what gifts can you bring?" (Though there are gifts)

When thinking about welcome I'm also challenged by a tweet I read only this morning: Sharing space without sharing power is tokenism. (@CarlosHappyNPO). So as we go through this series, don't fill out your diversity bingo card — yep we have one of those — but ask yourself — Am I **being** welcoming?

I'm not here to tell us we're not doing a good job, I'm here to have us wonder.

We trust that God is able to transform us in our belonging, and in our behaviour and in our values, and so I end with the appeal from our scripture:

"Don't be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you can figure out what God's will is — what is good and pleasing and mature." Rm 12:2