
A Spiritual Body?

**A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
7 Epiphany - Year C**

“As for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. (1 Corinthians 15:37-44)”

A spiritual body?

The answer is Yes. When I talk to people whose loved one has died, when their mother or father has died, when their child has died, or their friend, they often ask similar questions: Will I see that deceased person again, in heaven? How will I recognize my daughter or son? Will my loved one recognize me? The questions can be sad and scary.

My answer is always Yes. I admit that I do not have the details. I have no idea how we will look like what we will look like. I have no idea how we might recognize one another in what we imagine is the afterlife.

But my answer is Yes, because of this odd phrase that we have heard Saint Paul mention this morning, in his First Epistle to the Corinthians. “If there is a physical body,” he says, “there is also a spiritual body” (1 Corinthians 15:44).

A spiritual body? That phrase may be my favorite image of heaven. Paul suggests that, in the resurrection, we will have bodies, and they will be something he calls “spiritual bodies.”

Wow. Let’s pause a moment a moment and consider that phrase. We usually think of bodies as some sort of material, objective, realities. Bodies, by definition, are physical, aren’t they? And we usually think of spiritual realities as immaterial, without physical substance, don’t we? But here in First Corinthians 15:44, Paul puts the two images together. In the resurrection, he says, we will have “spiritual bodies.”

Is that a contradiction, like an oxymoron?

Back in the old days, in church, we used to say, “I believe in the Holy Ghost,” instead of “I believe in the Holy Spirit.” That is because, in the Bible, the word for both “ghost” and “spirit” is really the same word. The word is “pneuma.” Yes, it means “spirit,” and in some centuries it was translated, “ghost.” But the same word, “pneuma,” also means “wind.” It means “breath.” It’s part of our English pneumonia and pneumatic. Air. Wind. It can be all those things. It is that word, “pneuma,” that Paul is using here in First Corinthians: spiritual bodies.

These days, we give the words “ghost” and “spirit” two contrasting meanings. The word “ghost” seems eerie and scary. That’s why we learn as children that dressing up as a ghost on Halloween scares people! On the other hand, the word “spirit” seems wonderful and life-giving.

The gospels say that when the disciples saw the risen Christ, they saw a spirit – a spirit which had some sense of reality, but which did not have a sense of a usual body. And I believe it was that, that lack of a body, which was the scary thing, like a ghost. It is only when Jesus asks for something to eat, confirming the sense of body, that things begin to calm down. Jesus, after his resurrection, does have a body! Apparently, asking for something to eat changed everything.

Actually, the act of eating together can be scary, too. It can be awkward and complicated. The people with whom we eat see us in vulnerable and messy ways. Sometimes they are the people who know us best. They know how messy and ungraceful our bodies can be. They know that our tastes are peculiar and fussy. Hey! I know my body is less than perfect; but it's the only one I've got!

Yes, physical bodies require care and maintenance. They stay the same when we want them to change, and they change when we want them to stay the same.

Our growing spiritual bodies spirits, too, need nourishing and care. Our spirits, too, develop energy, when we do things like exercise prayer and practice meditation. When we tell deep stories to each other, when we let ourselves be shaped by love. Even the encouraging and caring words we speak to each other at meals shape our lives. Those stories at the supper table? Those words form us! We grow.

That's why, in some monasteries, one of the monks is assigned the task of reading from holy biographies as the rest of the community eats in silence. The bodies of the monks absorb literal food, and the souls of the monks absorb holy stories. Thus, spirits take on a kind of body, too. Even in this life, we are supposed to be growing both physical and spiritual bodies.

A spirit without flesh is scary. It's not right. After the resurrection, Jesus was actually sort of scary, until he asked for something to eat. Jesus was scary until he had a meal in his community. In short, a spirit without a body is scary. It is rambunctious and fleeting. It rambles and wanders. It can't grow. Sometimes in its loneliness, it even does damage.

Hey! As a matter of fact, that's what being "spiritual" and "not religious" is. We have all heard the phrase, "I am spiritual, but I am not religious;" and we have probably said it, at some point or another. What that sentence really suggests, however, is the false fantasy of having some pure spirit without having a body.

Jesus was against that lonely spirit, that lonely ghost, wandering around without body. I believe Jesus was opposed to the notion of spirit without body. Remember: the word for "religion" comes from "Re-ligio," which means to tie back together. The word, "ligament" comes from the same root. Remember that story on Easter morning about Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones? He saw ligaments and bones and tendons being brought together. He saw religion happening, bodies being tied together. He saw spirit taking on flesh. He saw ghosts taking on bodies.

The purpose of "spirit," the purpose of "spirituality" is to tie bones and muscles and ligaments together. To grow! "RE-ligio!" Religion! The purpose of spirituality is to be a living body. The purpose of spirituality is to be religious. The idea is to have both a spirit and a body. Like Jesus was. Jesus was both spiritual, AND religious.

The phrase "I am spiritual, but not religious," then, is often the phrase of someone not yet formed, not put together yet, maybe not yet perfected. (Maybe like someone dressed up like a ghost on Halloween.)

Jesus, however, will not be known as a free spirit, a lonely ghost. It is not a simple physical body that God resurrects in Jesus. And it is not a simple spirit that God resurrects in Jesus. It is something that Saint Paul calls, in 1 Corinthians 15, a "spiritual body." It is new. It is not dead religion alone. And it is not empty spirituality alone. It is both. It is spiritual and religious. Jesus is spiritual and religious. He is spirit, and he eats bread and fish.

Jesus was resurrected so that the Body of Christ could form and grow and give life to the world.

Hey! That's us! The Body of Christ! The Church! We are growing into "spiritual bodies," spiritual bodies that will be perfected in the resurrection. Yes, we are messy and broken, and awkward and fussy. We require care and maintenance. Hey! I know it's less than perfect; but it's the only body we've got! Our physical bodies require care and nourishment, and our developing spiritual bodies require care and maintenance.

Yes, we will know each other in the resurrection when we have been caring for our spiritual body's development all along. Even in this life, we glimpse each other's spiritual bodies. We get a preview of spiritual bodies when we see love in each

other, when we see care in each other, when we see the Christ in each other. When we see and love the Body of Christ.
When we see face to face.

AMEN.

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