

Homily – Embodied Spirituality

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I like to sing, and I know that a lot of you like to sing as well. We all have varying skills, and we all have different taste in music, but making music with our voices is a glorious thing.

Today’s Psalm is about singing. *“Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things... Sing to the Lord with the harp, with harp and the voice of song.”*

Singing involves not only the voice. It involves the lungs, and the diaphragm, and the shoulders, and the mouth, and even the feet. When we sing, it really includes much of our body, and when we *“sing to the Lord”*, it is aiming much of our body at the worship and glory of God.

Today’s Psalm is also about shouting. *“Shout with joy to the Lord, all you lands; lift up your voice, rejoice, and sing... With trumpets and the sound of the horn shout with joy before the King, the Lord.”* Shouting involves many of the same muscles and parts of the body. Like singing, shouting involves the voice, the lungs, the diaphragm, the shoulders, the mouth, and even the feet. When we *“shout to the Lord”*, we are aiming much of our body at the worship and glory of God.

Today’s Psalm also includes clapping. *“Let the rivers clap their hands, and let the hills ring out with joy before the Lord, when he comes to judge the earth.”* Clapping uses different muscles and parts of the body. So, when we *“clap our hands before the Lord”*, we are aiming even more of our bodies at the worship and Glory of God.

Today’s Psalm is a prayer and a call to get our whole bodies into the worship and glorifying of God.

Now, there are other ways to get our bodies into the action. As Episcopalians our Sunday morning worship incorporates sitting and

standing and kneeling. We put our bodies to use in singing, in the verbal saying of the confession, in the sharing of the peace, in coming up to the rail, and in tasting the bread and wine. Our bodies get into the action of worship.

As an aside, I sometimes get asked why we encourage people to stand as you are able and at other times, or other seasons, we ask people to kneel as you are able. Often we ask people to kneel for the prayers during the season of Lent, and we ask people to stand for the prayers during the season of Easter. And, at other times we say both, and at other times we give no guidance.

We vary the instructions to remind you that there are many beautiful ways to come before God in prayer. Kneeling, sitting and standing are all appropriate. I have been in parishes where there is great gnashing of teeth if everyone isn't doing the exact same body posture during prayer. Here at St. Barnabas it is appropriate for you to follow your own personal piety and kneel, sit, or stand in any of our seasons. In my own spiritual journey, I like to vary my body position. So, even if we say to stand for a prayer during a season, feel free to kneel.

For the goal is for you to use your body in the worship of God in a way that helps you go deeper in your spiritual journey. We are to use our bodies to move into healthier relationship with God, with others, and with self. Our bodies may be different than our mind and our spirit, but they are all intricately inter-related to one another. They are all part of this journey through life. We must use our bodies in ways that help us in our spiritual journey.

Over the last few weeks it has been my joy to be part of an interview team that brought in a new Diocesan employee. In August, Kelsey will start as the Curator for Emerging Youth and Young Adult Communities. One of the things that struck me during the interviews, was when Kelsey talked about embodied worship and how important this is to our younger generations.

Several times a week, hundreds of younger people squeeze in between pews and into aisles to practice yoga in the beautiful space that is Grace Cathedral in San Francisco.

We see this same type of response with Candle Light Compline in Seattle on Sunday evenings. The physical ascetics of a compline worship service incorporate light and music and chant in a way that is mesmerizing and it is often for many a very meaningful and very tactile spiritual experience.

Meditation is also being warmly embraced by our younger generations. There are many forms of body prayer. Chant, walking meditation, center prayer, dance, yoga, tai chi, pilgrimages, prayer beads, gestures, and breathing exercises are all beautiful ways to include our bodies. Each of these forms of body prayer is a practice that can help to bring our physical natures into our spiritual journeys.

Sometimes we think that physical or embodied spirituality is something that those other spiritual traditions do. For some embodied spirituality seems un-Christian. However, after centuries of body rejection, and the lack of any positive body theology, the West is now trapped in substance addiction, over eating, anorexia, bulimia, plastic surgery, and an obsession with appearance and preserving these bodies. Our poor bodies, which Jesus actually affirmed, have become the receptacles of so much negativity and obsession.

We must never forget that our God become human. Two thousand years ago, Jesus came as a baby boy and as the perfect union of God and human. His body was just like ours. Over and over in the Bible and in the life of Jesus, God reaffirms our bodies and the physical nature of the universe. What a place this would be if we got back to loving our bodies and incorporating them in a loving way into our spiritual journeys.

In this kind of world we would re-learn kinesthetic, bodily knowing. We would recognize our physical responses—be they fear, arousal, pleasure, or pain. It's not always as obvious as sweat under the arms. It may take a

few minutes of intentional focus to become aware of tension in our shoulders, churning in our gut, a pounding heart, or goose bumps.

I shared this a few weeks ago, but it bears repeating. Irish poet and priest, John O'Donohue, says, "Your mind can deceive you and put all kinds of barriers between you and your nature; but your body does not lie. Your body tells you, if you attend to it, how your life is and if you are living from your soul or from the labyrinths of your negativity... The human body is the most complex, refined, and harmonious totality."

This past week, I had a great example in my own life of kinesthetic, bodily knowing.

I was having a difficult and painful conversation with a friend. Our body language and the way we were both sitting in our chairs was a physical representation of the distress that we were both feeling and the conversation was not progressing in a helpful way.

We decided to get out of our chairs, get out of the building we were in and walk the parking lot here at the church. We walked side by side around and around the parking lot as our conversation continued in a more meaningful way. And for me, while the tension did not dissipate entirely, it was rechanneled through physical activity so that friendship and love could re-emerge. We bumped into each other a few times as we walked which probably means we need to walk with each other more frequently, and we hugged several times.

Within twenty-first century society we are constantly moving away from one another. It seems like we are always seeing how far away we can get from another person, not how we can get to each other. Within the bounds of propriety, I am all for going back to the old-fashioned thing of touching people. Notice, I said within the bounds of propriety. My hand always goes out for a handshake because when you touch somebody, we affirm that we are both alive, seen and welcomed. We need that affirmation. And, appropriate hugs can be an important validation. If someone hugs you, you know you must be there or they'd go through you.

Appropriate touch can be a great way to embody our spirituality as we move into healthier, loving relationship with others.

And let's not forget serving. Serving others is another wonderful way to embody spirituality, for it puts our bodies to work for others. Serving allows us to be the hands and feet and voice of Jesus. The embodied spiritual practice of serving is one that has been re-embraced by our younger generations.

Of course, embodied spiritual is not just for the younger generations. No matter our age or even our physical health, embodied spirituality is something that we all need, covet and even desire. For you see, in this lifetime, our bodies are the only reality we know.

Now, sometimes our bodies are frail, and sometimes they fail us. Our bodies can be the source of much pain. They can remind us that we are not in control. Many of you here today have or have had loved ones whose bodies are a source of frustration and hurt.

I do not like it, and I wish it weren't so, but embodied spirituality sometimes needs to remember our own pain and the pain of others. Embodied spirituality means we clap, shout, meditate, prayer with our bodies, and serve. It also means we draw closer to, rather than distance ourselves from the pain of human existence.

So today, since I started with song and clapping, I want to end with a prayer for those in pain.

The Lord be with you.
And also with you.
Let us pray.

Lord Jesus Christ, by your patience in suffering you hallowed earthly pain and gave us the example of obedience to your Father's will: Be near us in our time of weakness and pain; sustain us by your grace, that our strength and courage may not fail; heal us according to your will; and help us

always to believe that what happens to us here is of little account if you hold us in eternal life.

God hear our prayers.

Amen