

Incarnation: God in These Bodies?

“And the word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” John 1:14

And the word became flesh and dwelt among us.

And the word became flesh

And the word...and now we emphasize in Christianity the word and forget the flesh, making the flesh of Jesus a sterile and holy thing, saintly and unlike us in so many ways. The incarnation of God into human flesh is the chief contribution of Christianity to the faith traditions of the world. It is bizarre then that we, of all people of faith, should be the ones who fear and avoid discussion of the flesh and sexuality. The recent brouhaha over *The DaVinci Code* was primarily because a novelist dared to suggest in his fiction that Jesus might have married a (gasp!) woman, and might not have been celibate, and might indeed have fathered children. Could Jesus have really been that human? Could he really have had body parts that are the most private that we don’t talk about in good company? That we certainly don’t discuss in church? Or, home or the office for that matter! It is no wonder that the images on TV and the media are blatant and objectified bodies. As a culture, we have a major disconnect with our bodies and our spirits.

The Problem: Incarnation without a body!

Well, it is time Christians begin to grapple with the central tenet of Christianity, God becomes flesh and lives among us. Indeed, Immanuel, the scriptures say means “God with us.”

So, what does it mean for Christians to believe God is among us? In bodily form? Was it only once, as some would have us believe? Was Jesus a purified saint whose bodily functions were barely noticeable? Did he refuse to acknowledge his fleshliness? In my one-woman show I have the “church lady” being incensed about another woman’s appreciation of men’s bodies. She is asked if Jesus had buns. To this she replies what I think many Christians seem to believe, “Well, *if* he had them, then they were pure and holy!”

But let us consider the words that described Jesus and his body. He got tired, he ate, he spoke, taught and chided. He walked and he wept. He experienced anger, longing, friendship and grief. He was irritated by hypocrisy and was open to questions. He cried out loudly and sought solitude and peace. He looked at people one-on-one and in crowds and sat among children. He caught fish and he fixed breakfast and he went to synagogue. He used metaphors of beautiful lilies and birds in flight, of bread and seeds and candles and spoke of dreams and visions. He sounds pretty human to me.

But for religious folks it might be well to remember that he was clear that the needs of the body take precedent over religious rituals as when he encouraged his disciples to harvest grain on the Sabbath when hungry. And he placed human need higher than man-made rules about so-called “appropriate behavior,” such as when he allowed women and lepers to touch him or he touched them.

The book of John, one of the last books written some sixty to seventy years after Jesus’ death, has little positive to say about the flesh, usually using it in contrast with the spirit. And we know that the writings of the Apostle Paul often reflected the dichotomy of carnal flesh versus the spirit. And, for better or worse, we are inheritors of a body-denigrating Reformation that was deeply conflicted, if not simply antagonistic, to the body and especially the sexual body. Hence, it is very easy for us, as a culture, to see this kind of attitude toward the body as appropriate. But Christians must beware that we are not seduced by the culture. Our Christianity must stand in stark contrast to a body-denigrating society with some good news. If we have an incarnational theology then I would maintain it must have some good news for our bodies! That Christianity must have some good things to say about our physicality and that includes our sexuality.

Living passionately in Our Bodies

One Christian writer says “..Sexuality is our relational capacity to move beyond ourselves toward others. Living passionately in our bodies, living from the center outward..., opens us to vital and at times playful interaction with others. “(1)

If I asked you to describe something beautiful about your body, something you admired you probably would have a hard time doing it. And yet the scriptures speak of our bodies as holy temples inhabited by God's spirit. You are beautiful, my friend. Can we convey that in every conversation with another?

If I asked you to describe a pleasure-seeking God, can the Church do it? And yet the Genesis story is clearly about a Creator God whose creation, Eden, means Garden of Earthly Delights. If I asked you to describe your spiritual experience of God in sensual terms, can you do it?

I am Eros

"In the beginning,

I am in the void. I am in the nothingness,

Moving, stirring, anticipating.

In the beginning,

I am pregnant with potential. I am birthing

Moving, stirring, anticipating.

In the beginning,

I am the hum of the universe. I am the singing and the song

Humming, vibrating, anticipating.

In the beginning,

I am the maestro, the composer and the singer.

I sing into being the sun and moon and the stars begin to dance.

In the beginning

I am the song of the universe. I am the musician of the heart.

I hum into being the bubbling brooks and fragrant flowers.

In the beginning, in the void

I move and the birds and insects dance in flight.

In the beginning, in the potential

I stir the life force into clay and humanity leaps.

In the beginning, in the hum

I anticipate all creation unfolding, exploding with birthing power,

Life begets life, music begets music, and

Dancing always leads to ecstasy.

I am ecstasy, the quickened breath in the silence before creation.

Ecstatic union is my art form. Pleasure is my name.

You I desire.

I long to pour myself through your body, to cover you, to dwell in your soul

Come to me. Love me. Sing with me. Let us create life as we hum together.

Come, be the song.

Come, be the dance with me. Be life with me.

Come laugh.

You can do nothing less. You are mine.

I in you and you in me.
Come.” (2)

An incarnational theology means if cannot move from our understanding of God in the flesh known as Jesus to our understanding of our own pleasure centers, then we are separated from our God.

The Apostle Paul writes that Jesus was like us in all ways except without sin. And, sin, in its broadest sense, is anything that separates us from the Love of God.

Your separation from God

Your separation from love is the hardest work; it's the hardest work you'll ever do.

Let me bring you trays of food and something for your thirst. Use my words to cushion your head. For your separation, your separation from God, from Love it's the hardest work; it's the hardest work you'll ever do.

By Beverly Dale, based on Hafiz poem “*Your separation from God*”)

Jesus was not separated from Love but lived a life that was so compassionate that the people around him began to live differently, opening themselves to give generously to others, opening themselves outward. Jesus’ way of being in the world transformed the world. Jesus’ living and breathing love and compassion around him freed others to do the same.

Hafiz’ word for God is Beloved and his understanding of God is wondrously exuberant. He writes, “The Beloved does not mind repeating, ‘Everything I have is yours.’” All of it; the sounds, the sights, the wonders, the tastes, the caresses and feel of all of life. All of our senses can reveal God’s Presence to us if we are open to it. Then our bodies become the means to convey that to others as well.

The Hebrew Scriptures talk about it in terms of the Creator making the entire planet earth and then giving it to humanity to be the stewards of it all. The Sufi poet Hafiz says,

“God,
disguised as a myriad things and
playing a game
of tag
has kissed you and said,
“You’re it.

I mean you are really it.”...” (3)

The Christian story is that our God became disguised as one of us and dwelt among us, teaching us what it is to be human, showing us how to live, how to love. Yes, we have been kissed. Hildegard of Bingen, the medieval mystic, “The Creation is allowed in intimate love to speak to the Creator as if to a lover.”

Incarnational theology means we understand God is our Lover, our Beloved, and we find the sacred in our bodily experiences.

“Moving out toward others...living passionately...in our bodies...”

The God in the song you heard earlier is one who cries, who weeps, who bleeds, and who waits. These are all human experiences we understand and yet we have such a hard time thinking of them as possibly sacred experiences. And, if we cannot then our God is too limited.

The Other

The Quakers have as one of their main tenets that their spiritual practice is to look into the eyes of the other and see God. That includes the neighbor. It includes the enemy. It includes the terrorist. It includes the politician and the stranger. Can we see God? Can we find the sacred when we look into the face of our significant other, our intimate other, our closest and dearest friend, or our lover? If Jesus could, and it seemed he did, then so can we, not easily perhaps, but as humans we can do so since he was human.

The Bible tells us that God is in our human experiences with us, all of them, not just the platonic ones, not just the safe ones, not just the Christian ones. Can we believe it?

The Bible tells us that Jesus and God are one, that we are brothers and sisters with Jesus, that God's breath blows through us and enlivens us, that it is Love that unites us all as one.

Anytime we try to limit love's flow we show our separation from God. When we set up rules about who can marry and who cannot, or the rules about what constitutes right or wrong with some on the inside and some on the outside we are separated.

Oneness

Where is the Love? And when we follow the sweet aroma of Love's fragrance we will see that all is one and it is all sacred. But we tend to want to separate out our body self from our spirit self, our sexuality from our spirituality, the males from the females, the gays from the straights, the hardworking worthy poor from the lazy, good-for-nothing poor, one racial group here and another beyond a border or better yet, a wall. We are as the fish is to the water. A fish lives and moves and breathes the water and knows no existence apart from it. So it is with God/Love. We are in God and God in us.

Again, the poet Hafiz writes,

**Only
that Illumined
One
who keeps
seducing the formless into form
had the charm to win my
heart.
Only a Perfect One
who is always
laughing at the word
Two
can make you know
of
Love.” (4)**

An incarnational theology says we believe that “It is all Love.” And “It is all One, spirit and earthly.”

May you know a God of Eros, your Life Force who moves you toward greater intimacy and creativity. May you know the Sacred through your senses. And may you live passionately, always moving outward to others in generous and playful ways.

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(1) Marvin Ellison in *Erotic Justice* (1996) page 79.

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(3) *The Gift poems by Hafiz* p.30

(4) “Laughing at the Word Two” in *The Gift, Poems by Hafiz*

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