

Flesh – a sermon

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*For who hath despised the day of small things?
(Zech 4:10, KJV)*

I was twenty-seven years old when I entered serious discernment about becoming a Christian. I had been feeling the draw of Jesus since I was a child, but it took twenty years for the spiritual pressure to build up to the point where I had to act. And so I stumbled into a church one morning and sat in a pew — and became aware of a sharp, acrid smell. It was coming from the body of a man seated near me. By his dress, I took him to be a gardener — not a hobbyist; someone who made his living tending other people’s gardens in the hot Los Angeles sun. I was an academic, and the smell of rancid sweat was not part of my daily life. I was more likely to smell newly-mown grass, or the sweet scent of ancient paper from books five hundred years old. And as I sat in that pew, my heart was moved: in this place, all God’s people were welcomed and equal, because all God’s people belonged.

That moment has shaped everything for me: my understanding of Christian community; of my own vocation and of God’s call to the church; and, underneath it all, like bedrock, my understanding of what Jesus was doing in the Incarnation and of what God is working in us through our practice of the sacraments.

It has shaped my deep sense of loss during this time of online worship. I am grateful each Sunday when I get to see your faces, tiny on my screen; I am grateful for the relationships we have been able to cultivate in our midweek prayer and study groups and conversation. Each of you who have participated in those things has been a lifeline to me at a time of profound isolation.

But I also know what I am missing: the presence of the people who are not with us. The unhoused people who nod in our pews. The ones who disrupt our worship. The poor among us, who do not have access to internet. The seekers who wander into our doors week after week, sit quietly in the rear pews, and leave without giving their names — seeking anonymity because their souls are in a tender place, much as I did those long years ago. The ones who will not join us online because they are afraid their children will be disruptive, or who cannot because they are working at risky, essential jobs — the jobs in which they provide groceries or take-out or medical care. The jobs in which they tend our flesh.

If the Incarnation means anything, surely part of what it means is that Jesus tends our flesh. He wore our flesh, fed our flesh, healed our flesh, suffered and died in our flesh, and, as we were reminded at the Feast of the Ascension, was resurrected in our flesh and bore it up to heaven — body and all. That's why the sacraments are embodied rites: the flesh is what we share with Jesus. None of us can hope to share the divinity of Christ, but each of us can touch him in our humanity.

But not just our own flesh: everyone's flesh. In Christ, the love of God runs straight through the love of our neighbor. St. John reminds us, "Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen." (1 Jn 4:20) And that love is not abstract, but embodied. It's not enough to try to feel warm feelings about our neighbor, when the truth is that they are dying in our CHSLDs (residential and long-term care centres) and being shot or choked to death by police or starved in residential schools. Those problems destroy the flesh of our neighbors, which means that they destroy the flesh of Christ.

As our cathedral, and so many other houses of worship, tries to wrestle with what sacrament means at this time of online worship, I keep coming back to the fact that Christ called us to love our neighbors in the flesh. And so I am troubled by this discussion of "online consecration," precisely because it would imply that we are able to receive the Body of Christ (not as an emergency measure for the critically ill, but as a corporate practice) divorced from the flesh of our neighbor. Divorced from it, as Christ never is.

For those of you who live in families, this separation may be less acute than it is for people like me, who are single and living alone. You may still be able to tend the flesh of others — the sweet flesh of an infant, or the stinking reality of her diaper, or the more challenging reality of someone's adult diaper — that thing we all fear until it becomes a tool which gives us freedom. But for many of our members, "online

Communion” would be claiming a spiritual privilege without that lived reality of incarnation, which in Christ never refers only to our own flesh.

There is a temptation in that: it is so easy to participate in a “spiritual community” which is oriented toward our consolation. One which tells us we are loved; we are special; we have been and are being saved. (And we are, all those things.) It is so much more difficult to encounter the embodied reality of the stranger, so difficult that we fail, over and over again. And so what are saying if we suggest that you can have Christ in the most intimate way possible without that other communion, the one he died to give us? If we cannot manage to eradicate racism and violence and predatory business practices which prey upon the bodies of the poor when we are unable to receive the flesh of God without also receiving the flesh of our neighbor, how will we learn to see and act if we think we can have it all without that intimate challenge? What God will we be tempted to follow?

And what might we do with such a practice, if it were accepted? Our church is only too comfortable with closing parishes which serve the poor, without questioning the system which is allowing the forces of market economics to determine the shape of our dioceses. What might we do if we had an easy way to fob their members off? Will we end up as a handful of middle- and upper-middle-class parishes (predominantly White) which have real pastors who care for them and know their names, while we appease our consciences by claiming that the poor can, at least, have “virtual” communion?

In the book of Zechariah, God says to Zerubbabel, the governor of Judea, who was rebuilding the Temple, “Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit.” (Zech 4:6) To me, there is no finer image of that spirit than the altarpiece painted by Mathhias Grünewald for a community of monks who tended lepers and those who were sick of the plague. In an act of astonishing theological courage, Grünewald painted Jesus with the torn skin of a leper, reminding us that nothing and no one was separate from the death of Christ: no suffering, no degradation, no neighbor. No one’s flesh.

I will wait a very long time to receive Communion if doing so might tempt me or anyone else to forget that truth, which is the very one represented in the Sacrifice. The one Christ died to bring us.