

Our bodies, our faith: Practicing incarnation

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [January 27, 2009](#) issue

Deep suffering makes theologians of us all. The questions people ask about God in Sunday school rarely compare with the questions we ask while we are in the hospital. This goes for those stuck in the waiting room as well as those in the hospital beds. To love someone who is suffering is to learn the visceral definition of *pathetic*: 1) affecting or exciting emotion, especially the tender emotions, as pity or sorrow; 2) so inadequate as to be laughable or contemptible. To spend one night in real pain is to discover depths of reality that are roped off while everything is going fine. *Why me? Why now? Why this?*

These are natural questions to ask when you are in pain, but they are just as relevant when you are in pleasure. Who deserves the way a warm bath feels on a cold night after a hard day's work? Who has earned the smell of a loved one, embracing you on your first night back home? To hold a sleeping child in your arms can teach you more about the meaning of life than any ten books on the subject. To lie in the yard at night looking up at the stars can grant you entrance into divine mysteries that elude you inside the house.

The daily practice of incarnation—of being in the body with full confidence that God speaks the language of flesh—is to discover a pedagogy that is as old as the Gospels. Why else did Jesus spend his last night on earth teaching his disciples to wash feet and share supper? With all the conceptual truths in the universe at his disposal, he did not give them something to think about together when he was gone. Instead, he gave them concrete things to do—specific ways of being together in their bodies—that would go on teaching them what they needed to know when he was no longer around to teach them himself.

After he was gone, they would still have God's Word, but that Word was going to need some new flesh. The disciples were going to need something warm and near that they could bump into on a regular basis, something so real that they would not

be able to intellectualize it and so essentially untidy that there was no way they could ever gain control over it. So Jesus gave them things they could get their hands on, things that would require them to get close enough to touch one another. In the case of the meal, he gave them things they could smell and taste and swallow. In the case of the feet, he gave them things to wash that were attached to real human beings, so that they could not bend over them without being drawn into one another's lives.

Wow. How did you get that scar? Does it hurt when I touch it? No, really, they're not ugly. You should see mine. Yours just have a few more miles on them. Do you ever feel like you can't go any further? Like you just want to stop right here and let this be it? I know, I can't stop either. It's weird, isn't it? You follow him and you follow him, thinking that any minute now the sky is going to crack open, and you're going to see the face of God. Then he hands you his basin and his towel, and it turns out that it's all about feet, you know? Yours, mine, his. Feet, for God's sake.

I am making this up, of course. Read the Bible commentaries and they will tell you that the foot washing in John's Gospel is an eschatological sign of Jesus' descent into flesh before his exaltation to God's right hand, or a symbolic representation of first-century baptismal theology. But after years of watching bodies being dug out of craters in Manhattan and caves in Afghanistan, after the body counts coming from Southeast Asia, Gaza and Iraq, most of us could use a reminder that God comes to us not beyond the flesh but in the flesh, at the hands of a teacher who will not be spiritualized but who goes on trusting the embodied sacraments of bread, wine, water and feet. "Do this," he said—not *believe* this but *do* this—"in remembrance of me."

Duke ethicist Stanley Hauerwas finds most Christians far too spiritual in the practice of their faith. Christianity "is not a set of beliefs or doctrines one believes in order to be a Christian," he says, "but rather Christianity is to have one's body shaped, one's habits determined, in such a way that the worship of God is unavoidable." In our embodied life together, the words of our doctrines take on flesh. If one of our orthodox beliefs has no corporeal value, if we cannot come up with a single consequence it has for our embodied life together, then there is good reason to ask why we should bother with it at all. The issue Hauerwas raises is not whether there is any such thing as purely spiritual holiness, but "whether there is anything besides the body that can be sanctified."

In far more pungent language, Daniel Berrigan once said, “It all comes down to this: Whose flesh are you touching and why? Whose flesh are you recoiling from and why? Whose flesh are you burning and why?”

Such questions strike below the radar screen of the intellect, where far too many questions of faith are both argued and answered. When I hear people talk about what is wrong with organized religion, or why their mainline churches are failing, I hear about bad music, inept clergy, mean congregations and preoccupation with institutional maintenance. I almost never hear about the intellectualization of faith, which strikes me as a far greater danger than anything else on the list. In an age of information overload, when a vast variety of media delivers news faster than most of us can digest—when many of us have at least two e-mail addresses, two telephone numbers and one fax number—the last thing any of us needs is more information about God. We need the practice of incarnation, by which God saves the lives of those whose intellectual assent has turned as dry as dust, who have run frighteningly low on the bread of life, who are dying to know more God in their bodies. Not more *about* God. More *God*.

Sometimes when people ask me about my prayer life, I describe hanging laundry on the line. After a day of too much information about almost everything, there is such blessed relief in the weight of wet clothes, causing the wicker basket to creak as I carry it out to the clothesline. Every time I bend down to shake loose a piece of laundry, I smell the grass. I smell the sun. Above all, I smell clean laundry. This is something concrete that I have accomplished, a rarity in my brainy life of largely abstract accomplishments.

Most of the laundry belongs to my husband, Ed, who can go through more clothes in a week than most toddlers. Hanging his laundry on the line becomes a labor of love. I hang each T-shirt like a prayer flag, shaking it first to get the wrinkles out and then pinning it to the line with two wooden clothespins. Even the clothespins give me pleasure. I add a prayer for the trees from which these clothespins came, along with the Penley Corporation of West Paris, Maine, which is still willing to make them from wood instead of colored plastic.

Since I am a compulsive person, I go to some trouble to impose order on the lines of laundry: handkerchiefs first, then jockey shorts, then T-shirts, then jeans. If I sang these clothes, the musical notes they made would lead me in a staccato, downward scale. The socks go all in a row at the end like exclamation points. All day long, as I

watch the breeze toss these clothes in the wind, I imagine my prayers spinning away over the tops of the trees. This is good work, this prayer. This is good prayer, this work.

So is digging in the garden, cleaning the chicken pens, washing the potatoes, doing the dishes. I know there are people who would give anything to do these things, people whose bodies have become too numb, too busy, too old or painful to do them. These are the practices that sustain life—not only my life and the lives entwined with mine, but the lives of all living beings. When I haul water, I am in instant communion with all other haulers of water around the world. We may have little else in common, but we all know the deep pleasure of being water-bearers. To deliver water for drinking, for cooking, for washing, for bathing: this is what muscles are for. To watch a thirsty creature dip its head to the bucket and drink: I am happy to sweat for this.

Above all, I am happy for practices that bring me back to my body, where the operative categories are not bad and good but dead and alive. As hard as I have tried to be good all my life—as hard as I try to be good even now—my heart leans more and more toward that which gives life, whether it is conventionally good or not. There are times when dancing on tables grants more life than kneeling in prayer. More to the point, there are times when dancing on tables is the most authentic prayer in reach, even if it pocks the table and clears the room.

Maybe I have watched *Zorba the Greek* too many times, but I find myself rebelling against any religious definition of goodness that leaves the body behind. When I came upon the words of the following hymn in a seminary chapel two summers ago, I could not believe my eyes.

Good is the flesh that the Word has become,
good is the birthing, the milk in the breast,
good is the feeding, caressing and rest,
good is the body for knowing the world,
Good is the flesh that the Word has become.

Good is the body for knowing the world,
sensing the sunlight, the tug of the ground,
feeling, perceiving, within and around,
good is the body, from cradle to grave,

Good is the flesh that the Word has become.

Good is the body, from cradle to grave,
growing and ageing, arousing, impaired,
happy in clothing, or lovingly bared,
good is the pleasure of God in our flesh.
Good is the flesh that the Word has become.

Good is the pleasure of God in our flesh,
longing in all, as in Jesus, to dwell,
glad of embracing, and tasting, and smell,
good is the body, for good and for God,
Good is the flesh that the Word has become.

The hymn writer is Brian Wren, one of the church's most gifted musicians. In the case of this hymn, he is also one of the bravest. I never thought I would be able to sing "milk in the breast" in church, much less "good is the feeding, caressing and rest." I do not recall ever being told in church that my flesh is good, or that God takes pleasure in it. Yet this is the central claim of the incarnation—that God trusted flesh and blood to bring divine love to earth.

In the same chapel where I found this hymn, I led a workshop called "Embodied Holiness," which drew a full house of 34 women and six men, both clergy and lay. Like me, they were interested in exploring how they knew what they knew about God, and also like me, they confessed a cognitive bias, at least in polite company. Most of us knew what we knew about God from the historical creeds of the church, from studying the Oxford Annotated Bible with other people, from reading books by favorite authors, and from listening to certain people speak. At least that was how we *thought* we knew what we knew about God.

Then one morning we explored the Beatitudes, only instead of talking about them we decided to embody them. In groups of five or six, people went off to different corners of the large room with one verse that they were charged with bringing to life. The assignment was to arrange the members of the group into a tableau that embodied the Beatitude without using any words, and then to show that Beatitude to the rest of us.

As you can imagine, the resistance to doing this was enormous, verging on panic in a couple of cases. We were adults, after all. Kids act things out; adults discuss them.

Plus, most of us had memorized the Beatitudes. We could say them in our sleep, and we had all heard more sermons on them than any of us wanted to count. I watched a couple of seasoned pastors eye the door to see if they could get out before anyone stopped them. One priest volunteered to be the corpse in her Beatitude (“Blessed are those who mourn”) so that she would not have to do anything but lie there. In the end everyone stayed put, thanks largely to a number of emerging group leaders who I am pretty sure were all eldest children.

After about 15 minutes, the groups began to perform. We did not go in order, so the first Beatitude was about those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Five women came out, arranged themselves in a circle facing out and turned into a bunch of baby birds all squalling for food. They used their hands to make big beaks, so that they were mostly mouths. One looked like she was going to die if she did not get something to eat real soon. She was barely peeping. Then the momma bird showed up and flew around the circle with food in her own beak, filling each of her babies in turn. They rose and flapped as she approached. They grew right before our eyes. Then one by one the beaks turned to wings and the babies *flew*.

It was so strong that no one spoke. The five women moved out of the center of the room as another group took their place. We watched another stunning Beatitude, and then another. Finally the “Blessed Are Those Who Mourn” group came out—all women again—and arranged themselves around the woman who had volunteered to lie dead on the ground. A second woman sat down and cradled the first woman’s head in her lap. Two others knelt beside her and two others stood over them until they made a sort of cathedral over the dead woman’s body. Everyone was touching someone so that they were all linked together, but unlike the first group no one moved. The women just held that pose, so full of love and grief, until a sob rose right out of the midst of them.

Those of us watching did not know what to do. Was that the end? That sad, sad sound could have been planned, but it did not sound planned. What was going on? Was this still pretend or was this real? Those of us watching the tableau froze just like those who were in it. Then, when the whole room was as still as a grave, the body of the woman on the floor began to heave. As her soft sobbing grew louder, the other women bent over her. Then one of them began to weep, and another gave a small, strangled yelp until the whole tableau was heaving ever so gently over the body of the dead woman who had come back to life.

I cannot tell you how long it lasted—a minute, an hour—but at some point the women straightened up and wiped their eyes while the rest of us offered our feeble applause.

What did it mean? Beats me. All I know is that God was there, in the flesh, and that no one who saw it will ever forget it. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” The assignment was to bring the words to life. Now those words will never lie quietly on the page for me again, because five women gave their lives to them. They took them all the way to the edge of what they knew to do. Then the divine Spirit took them further and everything was made new: the women, the watchers and the words.

Do we dismiss the body’s wisdom because it does not use words? The practice of wearing skin is so obvious that almost no one engages it as spiritual practice, yet here is a place to begin: with tears, aches, moans, gooseflesh, heat. The body knows—not just the individual body, but the cathedral we make when we bend our bodies together over one as good as dead. Doing that, we act out the one thing we know for sure: it is God’s will that these bones live.

This article is excerpted from Barbara Brown Taylor's book An Altar in the World, just published by HarperCollins. Brian Wren's hymn is used by permission of Hope Publishing Company. © 1989 Hope Publishing Company.

[Read more of An Altar in the World.](#)