

August 23, 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time: John 6:56-69

by [Dennis Sanders](#) in the [August 19, 2015](#) issue

Each summer, *ESPN* magazine puts out its annual body issue. While the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue aims to titillate, the *ESPN* body issue is far more interested in the human form for its own sake. The magazine gathers athletes from various sports and asks them to pose in the nude. The result is pure art. You can see how the athletes train for their various sports and how their bodies conform to these sports.

What's fascinating is how many different body types are pictured: big and small, lean and toned, in various hues. Para-athletes are included as well; the human form is celebrated even when it's missing an arm or a leg. The body issue reminds us that people come in all shapes and sizes and that underneath an athlete's padding, behind all the hat tricks and three-pointers, there is a human being with a human body.

The body issue also makes me think about my own body. We so often feel embarrassed about our own bodies because they don't fit some ideal. But looking at the photos, I can see people who look a bit like me. Maybe I'm not as fit as they are, but there is some similarity. Maybe, just maybe, I can see myself and others—and praise God for being fearfully and wonderfully made.

In John's Gospel, Jesus talks about eating his flesh and drinking his blood, something that must have shocked the people who first heard it. Jesus offers a violent image of a body being damaged, a frightening image. Of course, Jesus is talking about what would later be called communion, the act of remembering Jesus' action on the cross. His use of the language of a body in communion reminds us what this is all about. Jesus is a human being with a human body, a body that will be bruised and broken for us and for all creation.

"The body of Christ, broken for you. The blood of Christ, shed for you." I've said these words many times when distributing the bread and wine. Whether we think of communion as the actual body and blood or a representation or even a memorial, communion makes it clear that Jesus offers up his body for the forgiveness of sins. It

is a body that is tortured and abused, bruised and bloody. It is the God of the universe in a vulnerable human body.

But our faith isn't simply about watching Christ use his body for the redemption of creation. As followers of Jesus, we are also called to give our own bodies over to Christ's work of reconciliation. People know about Jesus only through their own bodies, demonstrating who Jesus is through their own lives. Sometimes following Jesus leads to a violent death, as it did for King, Romero, and Bonhoeffer. For many of us it doesn't mean dying so much as living for Jesus with our bodies. Think of Dorothy Day, who not only worked for the poor but became poor herself. Sometimes being a follower of Jesus means giving up our own bodies just as Jesus did.

In our Gospel text, some of Jesus' disciples find his teaching hard. Eating his body? Drinking his blood? I didn't sign up for this. Couldn't I just pray for you?

The usual understanding is that these people walk away because they don't want to follow Jesus when the road gets hard. But I wonder if instead it's because they feel they are unworthy. What if they look at themselves and decide they aren't up to the task? It's as if you take a look at your middle-aged body, a body that has consumed a few too many donuts and given up on going to the gym. "You want to use my body, God?" you say. "Look at me! I'm hideous!"

But God calls us, perfect body or not, to be God's hands, feet, and bodies. Our bodies might not get us into a magazine, but in Christ's eyes they are fit for mission and ministry.

Over the last few years, Minnesota Public Radio aired a long-term series of interviews with Bruce Kramer, a teacher who learned in 2010 that he had ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease. For over four years MPR followed him as his body slowly but surely failed him. And he offered himself as an example of how we live and die. Kramer, who was involved in his Methodist church in a Minneapolis suburb, offered his body, a body that was breaking down, to teach the wider public about how we can be servants even when we are at death's door.

God wants us to use our bodies to God's glory and the greater good. Perfect or scarred, fit or flabby, smooth or wrinkled—God will use our bodies. We just have to allow ourselves to be God's feet and hands, to be bread and wine in order to fulfill God's mission.