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Embodying God through Our Bodies

KATHY J. PULLEY

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Barbie turned fifty in March 2009. What a cultural icon she has been! In those fifty years she has pursued over 100 careers including president, astronaut, professional baseball player, doctor, concert pianist and the current totally styling “tattoo Barbie.” She’s an empowering force: a doll that can do anything.

As I have looked at her in all her various expressions I am well aware that the one fundamental thing about Barbie that has not changed in fifty years is her body—no doubts there. No matter what her race, her hairstyle, her clothing, her career, Barbie’s body has remained unchanged. Although there is not a male doll equivalent to Barbie, there are body-builders such as Arnold Schwarzenegger or quarterbacks such as Tony Romo who represent a traditional cultural image of a male body. Perhaps we are not the ideal body, but we are all bodies. We embody God in our femaleness and our maleness. To embody God through our bodies has implications for our ministries.

What is it that we embody when we embody our God? Studies focused on aspects of embodiment seem to be increasing in the academy, in such fields as religion, anthropology, psychology, politics and philosophy. A lot of us have images of God that may go back to our childhood—images of a powerful, almighty being, sitting on a throne, commanding all the powers of the universe. We may even fear the wrath and coldness of such a God, as Job did when he said, “He has torn me in his wrath, and hated me; he has gnashed his teeth at me . . .” (Job 16.9).

Let’s shift our focus of God to what is revealed through God’s “incarnated” son. To the extent that it is possible to know something about God, our best chance of doing so is through God incarnating “godness” through Jesus Christ. That incarnation shows us a loving God in a lived body, a body that is vulnerable, emotional and even disabled.

Vulnerable! Does God embody vulnerability? The sixth chapter of the Gospel of John has an interesting statement mixed in between Jesus’ feeding of the five thousand and his walk on the sea. This is the last Galilean miracle recorded in both John and Mark, and no doubt it aroused a lot of attention, which could have led to an uprising, and could have given authorities a reason to arrest Jesus legally.¹ The text says, “When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself” (John 6.15). He wants to be by himself—alone—away from both the crowds and his intimate group of apostles. This is only one of several accounts in the New Testament of Jesus wishing to be alone. He’s vulnerable. He’s going to be arrested and ultimately die soon. He needs

1. Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John: I-XII* (Vol 29 in Anchor Bible; Garden City: Doubleday, 1981), 330.

some time alone to think and pray—off the stage, not performing. Perhaps he cries as he opens himself up to total vulnerability. This is not a picture of an all-powerful God incarnate who could zap Roman soldiers—it is God embodying vulnerability as we know it and experience it in our own lives. It is “godness” in the flesh.

The God on the cross is also a disabled god—a god who suffered, and a god who ministers to those who suffer. It is a story we all know well. His physical body experienced the same limitations ours experience. He needed the same things we need: food, water and shelter. He was unable to protect himself from the death that awaited him. This is a vulnerable god—a god whose body was broken.

What do I embody when I embody God? At the least, I embody all that it means to be vulnerable—physically, emotionally and mentally. Like us, the incarnate God was permeable, experiencing all that human beings face in their lived bodies.

If the image of an in-the-flesh God—one who is vulnerable to all the possibilities a body experiences—is scrutinized carefully, it might enhance how we honor not only our own bodies but the bodies of others, and undoubtedly such honoring will affect how we minister to one another. Historically, we come from a Western heritage that presented us with a Graeco-Roman worldview carried forward through Cartesian philosophy about the duality of body and soul. Plato described the soul as being imprisoned in the body like an oyster in a shell.²

Despite the dominant influence of body-versus-soul philosophies, there also have been intimations of theologies of the body. Such theologies have stressed the unity between body and soul. For example, the early Plymouth Colony of seventeenth-century New England reflected the theology of the body that had been passed on by the English Separatist minister, John Robinson. Robinson believed that one’s body and soul could not be separated, saying that God had “ennobled the *whole* man soul and body with His image and joined them together in one person: the soul to inform, and quicken the body, and the body to be quickened, and used by it, as an active, and lively instrument for her operations, and work.”³

In our current transitioning between the modern and the postmodern era, there is a re-emergence of thinking that the person cannot be divided between body and essence, or whatever name we wish to give to that essence: soul, mind, will, or person. Recent studies emphasize that we don’t operate as dualistic beings in everyday life—that there is really no such thing as a mind or soul separated from a body. Ian Burkitt, social and psychological theorist, is one of several in the social sciences who argue that human beings are “bodies of thought.”⁴ It is impossible to think about being a person or soul in this world without a body, and he further illustrates the point by quoting a line from Walt Whitman’s poem, “I Sing the Body Electric”: “And if the body were not the soul, what is the soul?”⁵

Despite the fact that the apostle Paul writes of wrestling with the flesh in several passages, it is also the apostle Paul who told the Corinthian church that the “body is a temple of the Holy Spirit which you have from God, and that you are not your own” (1 Cor 6.19). The body that Paul speaks of seems to be an inseparable part of the package of who each of us is. We are not body or soul, will or mind. We are both.

God embraces the goodness of the body, as is clear from the Creation story itself, in which the book of Genesis proclaims that God observed what had been created, and “it was very good” (Gen 1.31).

2. <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/phaedrus.html> (accessed July 15, 2010).

3. John Robinson, *On Religious Communion, Private and Public* (1614), in *The Works of John Robinson, Pastor of the Pilgrim Fathers*, ed. Robert Ashton (3 vols.; Boston: Doctrinal Tract and Book Society, 1851), 3:243, quoted in Martha L. Finch, *Dissenting Bodies: Corporealities in Early New England* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 10.

4. Ian Burkitt, *Bodies of Thought: Embodiment, Identity and Modernity* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1999). For an excellent ethnographic account of embodiment as it pertains to gender, see Rebecca J. Lester’s *Jesus in Our Wombs: Embodying Modernity in a Mexican Convent* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005).

5. Walt Whitman, “The Body Electric,” in *Leaves of Grass* (1900), quoted in Burkitt, *Bodies of Thought*, 1.

The Creation story does not talk about a separate creation of body from that of the soul, will, or mind. They are part of the same whole that is the human person.

As Stephanie Paulsell puts it in her book, *Honoring the Body*, there is a way in which we both “have” a body and we “are” a body.⁶ There is a way in which the body encases who we are—it establishes the boundaries of where I exist in space and time. I have the ability to change certain aspects of it—like Barbie, we can quickly change our hair color, use Botox to change our faces, use one method or another to change almost every aspect of our physical bodies. We can do all of this to this body we “have,” just as we can get navigation systems, leather seating, and other accessories on the cars we “have.” We can also feel frustration with our bodies—maybe we’re too short or too pear-shaped or too fair-skinned. So, we can and often do view our bodies as extraneous to ourselves.

However, there is another way in which we “are” our bodies. Our “essence” as human beings cannot be separated from our bodies. We have all experienced the feeling of going to work after a “sick” day and telling our coworkers that we had a stomach virus, or maybe we had a bad cold. In those moments, if you’re like me, it is easy to tell the story—a part of our body was affected by a virus, but now we are back. All is well.

There is a way in which those temporary illnesses illustrate our separateness from our bodies—that this body we inhabit malfunctioned temporarily but it is back to normal. A few months ago, I was talking to a colleague of mine who is forty, and he had just come back to work after having a heart attack. I asked him how his first class had gone and he said, “Okay, but it was a little hard to tell them about the heart attack.” I had to go to a class myself, so I simply said, “Yes, I know what you mean.” As I walked toward my own class, feelings from eleven years ago rushed back. I remembered well the day I told the group of administrators with whom I worked at Missouri State University that I had been diagnosed with breast cancer. Classes and administrators don’t meet to hear about each others’ personal troubles (but that is not to say they are not sympathetic). In both cases there is a need for those who must make such announcements (about the personal infringing into the public) to make them quickly and move on to the expected agenda for the day.

Heart attacks and cancer—those are illnesses we die from—they are different from the cold or the stomach virus. It was hard for me to acknowledge to that table of men that I was terminal—it wasn’t just something about my body that had gone haywire, but both my body and I might cease to exist over this “cancer” illness. There was no separating the two of us—whatever happened to my body was happening to me. I and my body were one. It is and was essentially me in a way that cannot be divided. The emotion I felt about that connection brought reality home—the reality of the oneness between my flesh and my essence.

So, when we talk about the embodiment of God in and through our bodies, there is complexity, paradox and wonder. Paulsell summarizes the wonder of it well:

Sometimes we know that we are our bodies, that our capacity for life and death makes us who we are. At other times, we feel that we simply inhabit a vessel that is inadequate to contain all that we are. But at all times, it is the body that allows us to reach out for one another, to steady each other on our feet when we are weak, to embrace one another in joy and in despair. Thank God we don’t have to know what something is in order to hold it.⁷

6. Stephanie Paulsell, *Honoring the Body* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 16–21. Paulsell’s book is a part of the “Practices of Faith Series,” and is an inspiring account of various ways one can practice honor toward the body.

7. *Ibid.*, 20–21.

What are the practical implications for ministry of embodying God through our bodies? Regardless of whether we work with children and families, youth and college students, those in between, or with the elderly, ministry must be body to body: ministry is a contact sport.

When we begin to think of our own body, as well as the bodies of others, as precious to God, then we may be led to see that there is a profound sacredness about being the temple of the Holy Spirit. This is a clue as to where we start in our ministry with people: we begin, we end, and we do everything in the middle with both the body and the essence as the focus—no separating the two. It is the responsibility of us as individuals and as a community to protect, to nourish and to be strong and supportive of bodies that need additional strength.

Fragile bodies need our attention—like the body of a newborn. Women who birth children are involved in the cosmos in a somewhat unique way because birthing is an act of creating. Birthing and nursing illustrate so well the relationality and interdependence of bodies. One does not have to birth a child to love one and relate to one. We can hold her, change her, feed her and bathe her. We are curious to examine every detail. Does he have a crooked little pinky like mom? Is he flat-footed like dad? We connect body to body—the only option we have in those earliest days. I know of elderly women who go to daycare centers every day to rock the babies—an example of body-to-body ministry as life goes full circle.

As we grow up, it is clear that our bodies “exist both in relation to other bodies and in the integrity of their own boundaries.”⁸ We may find ourselves ministering to children, teens, or adults who have been physically and violently abused and/or raped (often by family members). Bodily boundaries have been violated and in so doing, it isn’t the body by itself, it is the whole person who has been violated.

Many of us have read and reread Martin Buber’s book *I and Thou*, in which he discusses the relationship between humankind and God as an “I-Thou” relationship—one in which two personal beings commune together. Buber goes on to articulate that because God reaches out to humanity as I-Thou, rather than I-It, we should reach out to each other in the same way—“For as soon as we touch a You, we are touched by a breath of eternal life.”⁹ Abused persons are literally and symbolically treated as objects. In their efforts to protect the violated, ministers must respect the bodily boundaries of one’s personhood, recognizing that the body and essence are one.

In our work with teens and college students, it has always been true that how one clothes her body says much about how she views herself. Clothing, athletic shoes, accessories (jewelry, scarves, sunglasses) reflect our ongoing efforts to make a statement about who we are, and this is especially true of many adolescents. In today’s culture, tattooing and body piercing have been revived and serve as one more means of clothing the body for a whole new generation of young men and women. Body art is viewed as a way for some teens (and some adults) to identify and differentiate themselves.¹⁰

Pop culture writer Tom Beaudoin suggests that tattooing and body piercing have religious meaning—perhaps sacramental—at least in part because they manifest themselves as rituals taking place in shopping malls and basements in friends’ homes.¹¹ He further claims that this is “partly because religious institutions today are unable to provide for deep marking, profoundly experiential encounters.”¹² We are a part of a culture in which many, especially among the younger, need to be marked or “religiously branded” by having

8. Ibid., 22.

9. Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), 113.

10. For an historical and cultural overview of body art see the chapter titled “Derma-graphics” in Mark C. Taylor’s *Hiding* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 77–145. For a discussion about how adolescent body piercing may symbolize a revolution of sexual values in the United States, see Joan Jacobs Brumberg’s *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 130–137.

11. Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 78.

12. Ibid.

transformative, lived spiritual experiences.¹³ These are just a few examples of how important the “body” is in our ministries to youth.

Finally, I want to move to the body that is physically disabled because of accidents, illnesses, or aging—those bodies that we see with IVs, walkers and wheelchairs.

If honest, we might acknowledge that it is not always easy to be with someone whose body is suffering, or to look past a body that is altered from the norm because of an illness or accident. We witness terminal symptoms that cause us to turn away because they are reminders of our fears for our own bodies. It is hard to look at someone who has been badly burned. It is hard to look at the emaciated body of someone dying from cancer. But the practice of honoring the body, the disabled body in this case, demands that we keep the sacredness of that whole person in view, that we adjust, and that we take gentle care of the bodies of those to whom we minister.

In my mother’s last couple of years of life she had limited mobility; thus, she spent most of her time sitting in her recliner at home. From her dear and faithful friend Rick (initially she knew him as a church usher who helped her get seated), I learned the power of holding my mother’s hand. He came to visit her almost every day, hugged her, sat down beside her, talked to her and often held her hand. Her skin was thin. It bruised easily, and cuts healed slowly because of diabetes. She loved for Rick to show interest in her hand. Often I observed that the conversation seemed to deepen when the hands were touching. Regardless of our situation in life, our skin is hungry for touch—it is a door to our hearts and minds, and it is an honor to know the hands of not only our loved ones but also of those to whom we minister.

When we imagine embodying a God who is vulnerable, we then appreciate the vulnerability of our own bodies and the bodies of others—we want to reach out, to respect and honor their bodies. To begin with the body is to use our eyes, ears, our gestures and our touch in order to be present with those around us—to embrace, affirm and support the bodies in whatever ways are needed.

We worship a God who has chosen to be embodied in the strangers we meet and in the hungry and sick we encounter—to recognize that they, like us, and like God, are vulnerable. We honor God by honoring the bodies of those we love and serve. Therein, God is embodied. The well-known passage in the Gospel of Matthew puts it succinctly:

“ . . . as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matt 25.40), no matter the state, age or condition of the body!

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13. *Ibid.*, 80.