

**“Practicing Incarnation”**  
**Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Psalm 27; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35**  
**A sermon preached by Carla Pratt Keyes**  
**Ginter Park Presbyterian Church, Richmond, VA**  
**February 28, 2010**

I know that several of the long-time members of this congregation think of me as young, but I remember when you had to stay up late if you wanted to watch the women’s figure skating at the Olympics. You *might* get lucky the following day to see highlights replayed on the news . . . but it was often just a jump or two – the best or most disastrous of the night before. I mean, you couldn’t just go to a website and watch the whole thing after the fact . . . like *you* can do today if you missed the performances of the last week.

So many of the skaters brought to my mind the phrase “poetry in motion.” In addition to executing some pretty amazing axels and flips, they moved with beauty and feeling. With playful smiles, exuberant jumps, and arms stretched wide, they embodied mischief, excitement, joy, and longing. They were composed and powerful and strong. Their performances were striking. Just as striking, I thought, were the emotions that surged when the women were done skating. Gold medalist Kim Yu-Na was surprised to find tears rolling down her face at the end of her long program. Tears of relief? Tears of joy? Maybe both. But no one was surprised when Joannie Rochette’s face crumbled into tears at the end of her short program. Her mother had died suddenly just two days before. The surprise was that Joannie could skate at all. Both skaters exited the ice and fell into the arms of their coaches. Those performances seem always to end with a *hug* – hugs of comfort, congratulations, and love.

As much as anything, I suppose, the Olympics have gotten me thinking about humans as physical beings – the curious mixture of strength and weakness we are. The blend of body and soul. But not just the Olympics. Some experiences of the week – what I’ve been privileged to share with members of this church – have drawn me to contemplate the beauty and vulnerability of human flesh. Watching Roselie Cutting in the process of dying – her heart still strong, but her lungs struggling, her mouth unable to swallow food. To see in her the wince of pain, the relief of sleep, the flash of humor, the pleasure in recognizing a loved one’s face. To watch others of you fight cancer, combat depression, struggle with pain, celebrate fitness, grow weaker or stronger every day . . . to see you eat and clear tables and wash dishes . . . to watch you play games and skin knees and hide-and-peek . . . to hug your shoulders – shoulders that are frail with sickness, bent with grief, squared with resolve, small with youth . . . . And then, yesterday, to hear of the earthquake in Chile . . . to imagine again the crush of flesh – the brokenness and desperation of people there . . . .

Usually it is better to start a sermon with a single scripture and a clear theme, but we’re going to do things differently this week. I’m still struggling to say what has affected me so. I’ve been struck by the ways that people wear their skin . . . the things that our bodies do and depend on . . . the material of human life. People of faith are not

always sure what to make of our flesh or the stuff of earth. In the passage from Philippians you hear Paul reminding us that there is more to life than what we see and experience here. We are residents of earth, but citizens of heaven, as Paul says. He urges Christians to let our heavenly citizenship define our life on earth.

But we are creatures of sense and spirit both. As the Christian mystic Evelyn Underhill said, “we must live an amphibious life.” In today’s other scriptures, too, we feel the tug of sense *and* spirit – both important as people navigate the distance between what is seen and unseen in our lives.

In Genesis we have Abram old and barren, longing for a child of his own to be the heir of his household. The Lord is his shield, to be sure. But God has given Abram no offspring, and Abram wants proof of God’s promises. “How will I *know*?” he says. God gives him a sign in a strange and bloody ritual that sounds as *terrifying* for Abram as it is reassuring. Still, Abram gets what he wanted – a physical, tangible sign that God is with him and will do what God had promised. Abram was inclined to believe God before, but it sounds to me like this tips the scales. We walk by faith, not sight; but to see certainly helps.

Then we have the psalmist – assured of God’s presence as his light and salvation. “The Lord is the stronghold of my life,” he says “of whom shall I be afraid?” It’s one of the clearest expressions of trust in the scriptures. “You will hide me in your shelter in the day of trouble,” says the psalmist to the Lord. “You will set me safe, high on a rock. I will make sacrifices to you with shouts of joy!” But even as the psalmist makes these statements of faith, he prays for more – yearning to see the face of God. “Hear me when I cry,” he says suddenly. “Come, my *heart* says, seek the face of the Lord. Do not hide your face from me, O God!” It’s a curious blend of confidence and yearning. The psalmist yearns especially to see God, who cannot be seen. He longs to be sheltered by God, whose presence (it must be said) is rather elusive – especially compared to the presence of the evildoers and enemies surrounding him.

In the gospel lesson, amazingly, the tables are turned, and we have Jesus experiencing peril and longing. He has been healing human bodies all day: touching the sick and curing them. But there is only so much he can do. When the Pharisees come to warn him about Herod, Jesus speaks of his deepest yearning. He wants to gather the people in danger and hold them close, as a hen hugs her brood beneath her wings. Jesus longs for touch and intimacy – to gather and protect God’s children. He understands this yearning of the human body . . . probably better than we do ourselves.

Presbyterians are widely known as God’s frozen chosen. We share with other Christians a long tradition of discomfort about the body, fearing its power and its pleasures, too. But one of the central claims of our faith is that God chose to have a body. When the invisible God became incarnate in Jesus, God began to wear human skin as we do. I think it follows that we can learn about God by paying attention to the bodies God gave us, and to everything our senses tell us about the world around us. Barbara Brown Taylor calls this the “practice of incarnation – of being in the body with full

confidence that God speaks the language of flesh.” She’s says it’s a pedagogy 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.<sup>1</sup>

In some ways, Christianity is less about beliefs and doctrines than it is about practices and habits. And as Barbara Brown Taylor argues, many people hunger not for more information about God, but *to know more God* in our bodies. And it is often *through* our bodies – through the sweat and blood and tears and stuff of our daily lives – that God reaches to us, speaking the language of flesh.

Ours is capable flesh . . . far more capable than we tend to give it credit for. Not long after Jesus’ death, St. Irenaeus wrote this about human bodies. He said:

The tender flesh itself  
will be found one day  
– quite surprisingly –  
to be capable of receiving,  
and yes, full  
capable of embracing  
the searing energies of God.  
Go figure. Fear not.  
For even at its beginning  
the humble clay received  
God’s art, whereby  
one part became the eye,  
another the ear, and yet  
another this impetuous hand.

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<sup>1</sup> *An Altar in the World*, 43-44.

Therefore, the flesh  
is not to be excluded  
from the wisdom and the power  
that now and ever animates  
all things. His life-giving  
agency is made perfect,  
we are told, in weakness –  
made perfect in the flesh.

Can we imagine our flesh to be that capable? Able to receive and embrace the energies of God? Able to move with the wisdom and the power of God? In weakness, even – in our frailty and longing – can we detect the agency of God?

In his autobiography *A Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela recalls the time he first laid eyes on flesh that was dear to him – that of his daughter's daughter. Mandela had been imprisoned on Robben Island for 14 years by then – 14 years of cutting lime in a quarry under a sun so bright it nearly blinded him. Mandela was generally forbidden visitors, but on this day he got permission for a visit from his daughter.

She ran across the room and embraced him. Mandela had not held his daughter since she was a young girl, and it was both poignant and dizzying to hug this fully grown woman, his child. Then she handed over her own newborn baby, Nelson's granddaughter, into his callused, leathery hands. [Mandela says,] "To hold a newborn baby, so vulnerable and soft in my rough hands, hands that for too long had held only picks and shovels, was a profound joy. I don't think a man was ever happier to hold a baby than I was that day."

Mandela's tribal culture had a tradition of letting the grandfather choose a new baby's name, and Mandela toyed with various names as he held that tiny, helpless baby. He settled on *Zaziwe*, which means Hope.<sup>2</sup>

Mandela would serve 13 more years in the prison on Robben Island. And during those years, the memory of that visit sustained him. The embrace shared with his daughter. The warm, soft flesh of his granddaughter. To human beings of sense and spirit, such encounters can become a source of hope. So God can touch us through human flesh.

How remarkable it is to wear this flesh – to have received God's art in our eyes, our ears, these hands . . . to embrace somehow the energies of God, which can bridge the gap between what is seen and unseen. In this wild amphibious life, there are hints of God all around: in the stars above, in the strange and bloody rituals we share, in the sanctuary where we seek God's face, in occasions of healing, in the gathering of people to places of safety. In the beauty of a dance . . . in tears of joy or grief . . . in laughter, as in difficult journeys shared . . . in every embrace conveying love and hope *there are hints of God*. So as we hold each other's hands, as we wipe each other's tears, as we pen letters, bake

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<sup>2</sup> As told in Philip Yancey's *Reaching for the Invisible God*, 78-79

casseroles, hug friends, let us attend to those divine hints. If we pay attention, I believe, we may come to see what is invisible and to hear God speaking to us – the language of flesh.