

“Let the Mystery Be”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
1 Corinthians 15: 35-57
May 12, 2019 - Fourth Sunday of Easter

In order for this reading from 1 Corinthians to make any sense, we need to quickly recap last Sunday’s lesson. (And even then, it’ll still be a confusing reading.)

We’re in the time between Jesus’s resurrection and the writing of the gospels, getting a glimpse into the early church through letters Paul wrote to the congregation he had established in Corinth. He’s answering their questions, addressing their quarrels, and correcting them where they’ve gone off the rails.

Earlier in this chapter, we heard Paul ranting against some Corinthians who could accept that Jesus was raised from the dead, but were trying to reinterpret another piece of what the apostle had taught them: that eventually all the faithful will be raised, in a very real and physical resurrection, as God’s finishes off death — *thanatos* — once and for all.

Now he moves on to anticipate their next question on this topic.
Hear these words from 1 Corinthians 15:

But someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?”
How foolish!

What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as God has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. Not all flesh is alike, but there is one flesh for human beings, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one thing, and that of the earthly is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; indeed, star differs from star in glory.

So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. Thus it is written, “The first man, Adam, became a living being”; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first, but the physical, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.

What I am saying, siblings, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will

be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.” “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

It happens every time my mom’s family gets together. The reminiscing goes long into the night, beers and ginger ales are shared, and the conversation gets *deep*. We start pondering existential questions and telling tales of unsettling coincidences. Theories of the meaning of life are shared.

Those of you who have lovingly let me be your preacher for a while are expecting a story about my mom, Becky, right now. But I need to introduce you to Aunt Dianne. She married into our wacky family nearly sixty years ago and has been a bonus parent to my mom through thick and thin. Her exploits through the decades are legendary.

My brother and I love her dearly, but we also know she’s the one who told my mom that if you’re having bad luck, it’s likely because someone put a curse on you, and that you could block the curse by writing down the suspected enemy’s name on a piece of paper and then putting it in water and freezing it. This led to the time I opened my mom’s freezer and discovered a dozen red solo cups, each containing one name. Apparently my mom has lots of enemies. (Okay, so you got a Becky story after all.)

During one of those late-night deep family conversations, Aunt Dianne proclaimed, “Listen, kids! I’m gonna tell you how it all works. This world is hell and heaven is what’s next. Everything is horrible here!” Aunt Dianne is kind of the Eeyore of the family, it’s true, but within minutes, without a hint of irony, she was showing off pictures of her granddaughters and telling funny jokes. Aunt Dianne contains multitudes.

It’s these kinds of conversations that get the Corinthians in trouble. Paul wishes they would just accept what he teaches them and not argue. The Corinthians are, from Paul’s perspective, constantly backsliding into depravity with their ignorance and silly questions and demands for clarity. I know they’re making some serious mistakes here, but I’d rather laugh with the Corinthians than cry with St. Paul. The Corinthians are much more fun.

They’ve hitched their wagon to the Jesus train, but they wonder how it all works. Paul’s told them that God insists on raising bodies. If God insists on that (and God does!) then what will that all look like?¹

Preachers like to give these ancients a hard time for their disdain for the body — their interest in separating body and spirit. But not only do we often head in that direction, it’s easy to understand why. Even with all the wonders of modern medicine, these bodies we’ve got are problematic. They’re miraculous, yet they require so much maintenance. You’ve gotta keep ‘em clean. You’ve gotta fuel ‘em up. They’re vulnerable to injury in a thousand places. You can’t always get new parts. And even if you swaddle them in bubblewrap and never take them out, they still age.

¹ Dr. Carla Works, commentary at https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3968

Now imagine the Corinthians, lacking MRIs and hip replacements and hearing aids and vaccinations and antibiotics and basic germ theory. Death was far more prevalent and present and the hope that at least it might bring escape from these troublesome meat suits is understandable. So let's separate the spirit and free it from its mortal sheath.

But Paul will have none of it. Christ walked the earth in one of these bodies and Paul and the other apostles met the resurrected Christ, and he was not a phantom, but flesh. Paul is adamant that God created this physical body and aches to redeem it. In his letter to the Romans Paul describes how all of creation is longing for redemption — the earth and its creatures and the creaturely bodies we have been given. Everything has been corrupted by sin — this is so very Presbyterian of Paul — and so everything is in need of redemption.

These bodies are sacred and so the redemption that is to come is not a redemption *from* the body, but a redemption *of* the body. Paul gets poetic and imaginative and describes a transformation that demands that the earthly body is holy, but that it is not the end. Where it is weak, we will find strength. Where it withers, we will find persistence. Where it has been corrupted, we will find glory.

I've never liked you more, Paul. We cannot treat our bodies like packaging for the important part. Bodies are incredible works of creation with systems so complex that we learn new things about them all the time. The power we find in them, the joys they bring us, the wonders they allow us to accomplish are not to be tossed aside or repressed in favor of spiritual matter.

And, for all of that, in God's great story, these bodies do not limit us.

My mom got a call from one of her best friends this week, a woman named Jackie she's known since elementary school in the late 50s. Jackie's youngest grandchild is named Alex, and a couple of weeks ago an eye doctor diagnosed Alex with congenital nystagmus, a neuro-ophthalmological disorder in which the eyes oscillate back-and-forth, causing crummy vision or really crummy vision, depending on the severity.

Jackie was heartbroken, more for her daughter, Alex's mom, than anything. Alex's mom was angry and scared and frustrated with the physical things that can go wrong with bodies. She was terrified about what this would mean for her son's life. And so Jackie turned to her friend, my mom, knowing that she had been in this exact situation in the early 1980s with her eldest son, who, despite becoming a Presbyterian minister and moving to Alabama, had turned out more-or-less okay.

When we have a funeral here at Edgewood, I often find myself saying in the homily that I don't know precisely what heaven is like. But I imagine that if Paul has anything to say about it, on my first day there I will get to play one inning at third base and the ball in the field and at the plate will be clear and crisp and seem like it's the size of a beachball. For the purpose of this exercise let's ignore the fact that Paul would likely smirk and whisper to you that *I'm* not getting into heaven at all.

Paul is speculating here, and I think he knows it. But he's speculating based on what he knows in his own bones and flesh — that the resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of God's people are inseparable, and that God is really interested in bodies and also really interested in renewal. So he gets going about this confusing idea that yes, you will be raised in your body, but no, it will somehow not be the very same buried corpse that was aching before it was put into the ground. Paul writes of celestial glory and sounds like a hippie and he writes of dust and eternal life and gets as animated as any member of my mom's family telling us how it's all going to play out.

There are two practical ramifications for our modern lives at play here that I want to address briefly. First, while it's becoming more and more common, I think Paul helps us with any lingering fears we might have about cremation. (And yes, you can tell all your friends that they talked about cremation at your church on Mother's Day!) More importantly, I think if Paul could quickly catch up on a couple thousand years of medical breakthroughs, he'd readily sign up to be an organ donor, asserting that the life given through donation far outweighs any issues God might encounter in the work of redemption.

With all this talk of bodies these past two Sundays, I can't help but think about the bodies in the news. I think about small government politicians in Montgomery being forceful and yet cowardly in their cruelty as they seek to control the bodies of Alabama's women. Of course, these same politicians seem disinterested with providing care for those bodies, or the bodies of anyone else in our state, unless they can incarcerate them. And then the power of the state over the earthly body will turn from cruel to violent.

I think about Kendrick Castillo, the high school student who charged one of the gunmen at his Highlands Ranch, Colorado school on Tuesday and was shot and died. He gave up his body that his classmates might survive. And now we argue about whether it was the right strategy. It seems our best response to bodies being shot in schools is to figure out how best to prepare the students, hope for the best, and get our thoughts and prayers ready. If there is simply no other way to handle this situation, we are mired in the dust and the need for redemption is greater than even Paul imagined.

Paul didn't answer all our questions about how all this afterlife stuff might work. "Listen, [kids!] I will tell you a mystery!" he writes. He has offered his Corinthians, and us, a lesson in trust and in God's tremendous creativity and ingenuity and in hope. And, also, he offers a lesson in mystery. Not knowing the flowchart, the biochemistry, the physics and art of it all does not preclude us from resting in wonder and taking comfort in a composer of redemption, a narrator of eternal life, a sculptor of bodies, a God of deepest nurture and intimacy who brings all to glory.

Thanks be to God,
and to God's abiding Spirit,
and to Christ, our Redeemer.
Amen.