

**BODY SATISFACTION**  
*Sermon for Pentecost 6—Gal 5:1, 13-25*  
LPC, 6/26/16

How's your body satisfaction?

It has long been a truism that American women generally have poor body satisfaction, thanks to the impossible standards set by advertising and the fashion and entertainment industries. Women see these images, look at their own bodies, and despair at the discrepancy.

A study released in March from Chapman University in California indicates that men may be catching up to women in body dissatisfaction. The Chapman finding would seem to be borne out by the type of television advertising to which we are increasingly subject during prime time.

Western culture has a history of taking issue, one way or another, with physicality. The sexual revolution of the 1960's and 70's mercifully killed a lot of antiquated Victorian hang-ups, but we still don't seem to be entirely comfortable with our bodies.

Ancient peoples, including the Hebrews, seemed to have a more integrated view of body and soul. They could differentiate between different faculties within the human organism, and say things like "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and soul and strength," but they didn't seem to understand these things as separate, and able to act in conflict.

The ancient Greeks were more analytical. They explored the divergence of body and spirit. Their plays and philosophies reveal a keen awareness of the inner conflict people experience between their "higher" and "lower" natures. This shift in thinking had far-reaching influence, and may lie at the foundation of our own culture's continuing issues with physicality.

St. Paul was a product of, and servant to, the Hellenistic, or Greek-influenced, world, and some of his language reflects this distinction of the physical and the spiritual, as we heard in our lesson from Galatians today: "For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other."

On the basis of this and similar pronouncements, the early church developed a culture that at its extremes demonized the body. People abused their bodies with whips and chains and starvation and isolation. Married people in several cases were sainted for eschewing the marriage bed and leaving their children to enter monasteries. And often, the church stood by and cheered.

Now, to be fair, the church at first was standing up to the excesses of the Roman Empire, which were many and egregious. But in some cases the church erred on the side of privation, and this tendency is discernible today. Pleasure of all sorts continues to be suspect in many Christian quarters. A Catholic sister of my acquaintance told me that she was disciplined as a novice for reading too much, because it gave her joy.

The church no longer promotes self-abuse, thank God, but vestiges remain of the convictions that the body is bad, and that pleasure equals sin. I wouldn't be surprised if this

undercurrent in Western civilization contributes to low body satisfaction today, even in the non-religious. Once something gets into the culture, it can float free of its biblical roots, and people adhere to it unaware of either its origins or its pernicious but enduring effect.

Suspicion of the body and of the body's urges and pleasures is a theological and spiritual problem. We believe that God made our bodies. God made human beings to be physical creatures, in contrast to the ethereal angels. God even assumed a human body Godself in coming to us as Jesus of Nazareth. As a priest I used to know would say, "God loves bodies." God loves the material world (otherwise why would God have made it) and the material world includes flesh and blood. To hate and abuse the body is to hate and abuse God's creation, and *that* is a sin.

Secondly, God does not distinguish between our bodies and our souls. Sometimes God communicates with us through our bodies. This is sometimes true when we become tired and sick. God may be saying, "Slow down. You don't have to take care of everything. That's my job." God may also be communicating with us when we experience great joy.

I have spoken before of spiritual gifts: talents and passions that God gives us so that we may help God build the kingdom of heaven. One of the ways we identify spiritual gifts is from the pleasure they give us. To be suspicious of all pleasure is to run the risk of ignoring God's call on our lives.

So, how then are we to read scriptures like this one from Galatians that condemn "the flesh"? It may be helpful to consider that St. Paul was a product of his culture, which like all cultures used language with subtle connotations that may or may not convey in translation. Differentiating between "spirit" and "flesh" was going to resonate with St. Paul's Hellenistic audience, but those words don't mean the same thing to us.

These days we have language that would have meant nothing, or something different, in the ancient world. Look at the word "ego." In Latin this word is simply a first-person singular pronoun, meaning "I" or "me." Thanks to Sigmund Freud, today we think of "ego" as self-centeredness. A person with ego issues is underdeveloped in a psychological sense.

What if we replace the word "flesh" in Paul's tirade with the modern word "ego?" I think this works and is true to St. Paul's original meaning: "The works of ego are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, etc., etc. etc."

What St. Paul is obviously trying to tell the Galatians is to act according to their higher nature, not their lowest. The way this can speak to us today is for us to gauge our behavior on whether or not it is ego-centered. We can act from purely egotistical, immature motives or we can act as adults, integrated in body and spirit and belonging to God.

Both our bodies and are spirits are gifts from God, and all St. Paul wants us to do is to act like it.