

You Are Your Best Thing: Embodiment as Radical Self-Love

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Date: 23 March 2025

Preacher: Tonetta Landis-Aina

[0 : 00] All right, so by now many of you might know, probably do know, that Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved* holds a special place for me.

I've talked about this a number of times, that just after the Civil War, the novel is a part of what Pastor Anthony actually has called the Newer Testament.

It's a phrase I really, really like. It's this idea of the written and oral traditions that we collect and encounter, and which actually serve as a profound witness of the truth that we see in the world around us.

Beloved is a part of my Newer Testament. And I've talked about how there's this depiction inside of it of hush harbors that really helps me to think about who I am as a pastor and what I think church is.

These hush harbors of enslaved people. But as we've been moving through this Lenten season, and this series on self-care, there's actually another portion of the novel that I have been thinking about, and that's been reverberating through me.

[1 : 14] It's toward the end of the story. It's during this conversation between Setha and Paul D., these two people who have known immeasurable pain and loss and trauma as a result of a society that is seemingly incapable of loving black flesh.

And in the scene, Setha grieves that her daughter has gone away once and for all. She grieves that what she sees as her best thing has finally and fully been lost.

Paul D., the man who loves her, tells her unequivocally, Setha, me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody.

We need some kind of tomorrow. And he leans over and he takes her hand with the other, he touches her face and he says, you, you your best thing, Setha.

You are. To which Setha responds, me? Me? I absolutely love that a book that is about the nightmare of slavery and the ways in which it never stops haunting us is also a book about love, about radical self-love.

[2 : 41] We need to hear that no matter what our yesterdays have held, that we are our own best thing. So let me say it just clearly as one of your pastors.

You are your own best thing. Now, even as I say those words, I know that they might be hard to take in.

Most of us probably have received messages from parents or caregivers, from teachers or from other Christians that make them hard to actually accept in our hearts.

Or if you can take them in, you might receive them with a kind of questioning disbelief. Me? Me? Not my ability to earn and accomplish? Me? Not the ways that I make others feel good?

[3 : 53] Me? Me? Not the way that I can perform goodness? Me? Not the after photo to my before self?

Just me? Well, if that's as hard for you to believe most days as it is for me, you'll be happy to know that we've still got a few weeks to go in the series that we're doing on sacred self-care.

A series that we've named after a devotional by the Dr. Shaniqua Walker-Barnes. For the past few weeks and in a season in which our national leaders seem wildly out of step with our best interests, we are talking about what it means to take care of ourselves and our community.

We are rejecting any false gospel that tells us that we owe it to others. That we owe it to others to be scapegoats in their stories.

For that, we're giving up once and for all the ideas that suffering equals goodness and that self-denial translates to holiness. And we're committing ourselves to practices of radical self-love and community care.

[5 : 22] At least those are the challenges of this series. As we move toward Good Friday and the promise of Easter, we remember that the gospel story is a scapegoat story.

It was written by Christians who were scapegoated by the Roman Empire about a God who became the ultimate scapegoat. This year, in this moment, we remember that the death and the resurrection of Jesus reveals that the world does not have to be founded on the cycle of violence that continues to make victims.

Though that has so often been our yesterday, we can have a different tomorrow. And that tomorrow starts with refusing to allow the sins of society to be born in our bodies.

So here's where I want to take us today. When I tell you that you are your best thing, I am not just talking about your spirit.

I know that we're real holy in here, but I'm not just talking about your spirit. I am not just talking about your mind, even though I know we're real intelligent here. No, I am talking about your body.

[6 : 49] Maybe mostly talking about the you that is your body as your best thing. Dr. Hillary McBride, in her fabulous book, *Practices for Embodied Living*, points out that in Western culture, we often have been taught that our mind and body are separate and that we are our mind rather than our body.

And she then explains what that logic costs us. It costs us connection to ourselves and others. It costs us the joy of pleasure and the sense of aliveness, the ability to be here now.

She says one of the ways this separation occurs is through how we come to identify where our selfness lives. Embodiment is a pathway, she says, to reclaim our body as a place that holds just as much of our self, of our meanness as our minds and our thoughts do.

Instead of our body being a vehicle for the self, a puppet animated by the mind, embodiment invites us to see that we are our bodies. Our selfness exists just as much in our toes and digestive tract and beating heart, the coordinated movements or uncoordinated that we make on the dance floor, memories of smell and sound and laughter as it does in our thoughts and our minds.

Understanding that, let me say clearly that our spiritual formation will be anemic if we are not attuned to our bodies.

[8 : 50] Attending to the body is holy work. Attending to the body is holy work. Okay, so I want to share a story. It's a little embarrassing to share a story. I've only shared this, I think, with Pastor Anthony and my wife.

We'll see. So during the interview process for this job, I was extremely nervous three years ago. I had the hope of an expectation of the Community of Resurrection City behind me.

I had this pressure of like the church, possible church merger, being part of the discussion all along. And getting the job felt like it might be either this like really, really public success or really public failure.

Right? It felt like a source that could be a great source of joy or a great source of disappointment. And I carried that anxiety in my body.

So to offset it, while preparing for the interviews and throughout the different rounds, I developed a little ritual.

[9 : 59] And it looked a little bit like this. Yeah, it did.

This is what I listen to, y'all. You're not the one for me. You're not the one. Then I'll come, I can bring you to your knees.

If you're not the one for me. Yes, that's right. I knew I hate the idea of being free. And if I'm not the one for you.

All right, all right. You're gonna stop holding me the way you do. Now, y'all notice. Oh, my God. Now, you notice on one of them season states, I had just a little knee lifting was all I was doing right there. Okay? A little like, you know. But that is the song I listen to over and over.

[11 : 02] No joke. Adele's *Water Under the Bridge*. If you're not the one for me, you know, I had to. It was a relationship. You know, like, I was in a situationship. All right? I would listen to it.

I would bop in the car. During the in-person interviews, I would listen to it on the way. And it was this way of my body keeping my faith and my hope and my joy intact, even as my mind was really overwhelmed.

To examine it. The body is the word of God who became flesh in John 1. To discern the body is to be concerned about our connection to Christ, in whom Colossians 2.9 says, all the fullness of God lives in bodily form.

[17 : 42] Other parts of the letters of Corinth also make it pretty clear that when Paul warns the believers to discern the body, he's also talking about the body of believers. The church.

To discern the body is to be concerned about our relationship to other disciples. To be concerned for the needs of the community.

But also underneath those two explicit meanings of the verse, verse 29, I think that there's this question that we need for our time.

What does it mean to rightly discern the body of Jesus? Yes. What does it mean to rightly discern the body of faith, the church? Yes.

But also what does it mean to discern your own body? In a time when we need sacred self-care and communal care more than ever, how can we discern the body that is ours?

[18 : 51] In light of the enfleshed Christ and the materiality of community. Y'all, these are bigger questions that I can fully answer, because I'm a beginner on this journey.

I'm waking up. But I want to suggest one or two things here. So a first step to discerning our body, and probably maybe the hardest one in Western culture, is to cultivate what theologian Simon Chang calls a sacramental consciousness.

When we operate within a sacramental consciousness, says spiritual director Cindy Lee, and her book is one of my favorite books on de-westernizing spiritual formation, FYI.

She says the material and spiritual are intertwined, and we can experience the supernatural through our senses and practices. We are not trying to understand God, but to experience God.

In a sacramental consciousness, our cultures and traditions are fully infused with the spiritual. And the Holy Spirit is embodied in our movements and expressions and practices.

[20 : 07] The first step is to return to the truth that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. When you eat and drink and move and laugh and experience pain, or just breathe, God is present in those.

The sad thing is that many of us have only heard the truth from 1 Corinthians 6, that your body is a temple, in really two contexts. One, y'all already know.

Yes, okay. One is when someone is trying to police your sexuality. And, or, the other is when someone is trying to shame you into a diet.

All of a sudden, your body is holy then. That's when your body gets holy. Right? They'll work you to death, but then your body's holy, okay? It's so much easier in our world to believe lies about our bodies.

Dr. McBride, again, provides a really helpful list, and I'm going to read through it, and I'm going to invite you to notice what registers as I do read it.

[21 : 18] Where do you struggle? So here are some of those lies. You are not your body. You need to subdue and control your body because it is dangerous.

Some bodies are better than other bodies. Bodies must present within rigid binaries of gender. Ideal women have sexual, young, thin, and fertile bodies.

Bodies are impure, and pleasure is sinful. Appearance is all that matters about your body. You should change your body.

Fat bodies are unhealthy. Others get to decide what is best for your bodies. Bodies get in the way of pure and right thinking.

If one of those registered is hard for you to believe, or hard for you to disbelieve, I would encourage you to note that somewhere, and to commit a little bit of time this week praying about it.

[22 : 28] For me, I'll just admit, as a woman in my 40s, whose body's changing, who's surrounded by lots of friends whose bodies are changing, I have to grapple with everything that I've been taught.

This is the one for me, about fat bodies being unhealthy. I was raised in a culture that believed fat bodies were desirable for sure. But I was also told the lie that health looked a certain way and was some kind of universal standard.

So what is it for you? What is it for you? In a world in which mirrors and photography are everywhere, it is so much easier to focus on your body as seen rather than as felt.

But your felt body is a primary avenue through which God speaks to you. And when you are only attuned to your body through appearance, which is the temptation of our culture, it disconnects us from the feelings and the memories and the messages that our bodies contain.

Disconnects us from the ways in which God desires to communicate. The only other thing that I'll say, as you consider today and this week what it might mean to discern your body, concerns one of the things that I really, really love about this church, actually.

[24 : 05] We care about justice. Okay, give a little woo, a little woo. Woo! Woo! But Sonya Renee Taylor, she reminds us of this.

When we speak of the ills of the world, violence and poverty and injustice, we are not speaking conceptually. We are talking about things that happen to bodies.

Racism, sexism, ableism, homo and transphobia, ageism, fatphobia, are algorithms created by a human struggle to make peace with the body.

A radical self-love world is a world free from systems of oppression that make it difficult and sometimes deadly to live in our bodies.

And then if you combine that with a piece of wisdom from the brilliant book, *Fat Church*, the power of the Christian gospel has always been in its invitation to organize society in a new way.

[25 : 10] The church can choose to use this power for either colonization or liberation. Now, we cannot resist domination culture and tune into communion without being honest about the ways that we have accepted the hierarchy into which our world places bodies.

We might be woke when it comes to black bodies or queer bodies, but what about elderly bodies or fat bodies or disabled bodies? We can't resist domination culture and enter into genuine communion without interrogating our relationships with our own bodies, the way that we police them.

True communion, both in the mill we take as Christ followers and in the posture we take toward our neighbor, is the end of scapegoating. And we can't move from domination to communion, from colonization to liberation, unless we rightly discern the body.

I will not lie, this was a hard sermon to write, y'all. It was a hard sermon to write because it's hard to know where to begin the journey for many of us in a society that is pervaded by so many myths.

It's hard to know where to begin with things like basic things like getting enough sleep and drinking water, moving our bodies, and a host of other things.

[26 : 49] It's hard to know where to begin when it comes to all the myths and lies. There are lots of resources out there, which is why I wanted to list a bunch for you. Maybe you took note of some of the authors.

And I confess that I don't know if this feels like good news to you. But I do know that you are beloved in your body.

The body that you are. Allow the God who preferred to take on a body, preferred it as a way to connect to us, allow her to whisper the truth that you are your body, and that is good news.

You are your own best thing. Every time you participate in the Lord's Supper from here on out, y'all, may you rightly discern the body and your body.

Amen.