

Faith and Health

Two Sermons Offered by
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Part 2
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Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, just as it is well with your soul. 3 John 1:2
NRSV

Last week we began to talk about caring for our bodies – physically, mentally, and spiritually – not just because it makes good sense, but *as an act of faith*. The good news is that now that we’ve all heard that God wants us to care for your bodies as Temples of the Holy Spirit, we’re *all* eating right, getting enough sleep, exercising regularly and connecting with God and our Christian community every day. Right? O.k., maybe not. But why not? Why don’t we take better care of ourselves?

Even if we never thought of caring for our health as a way of honoring God before, it’s not that we haven’t been told once or twice or a thousand times by experts that we need to take better care of ourselves. Most of us know what we “should” do, and still we don’t do it. I remember one out-of-shape guy pointing to a really fit guy and saying, “I would do anything to have a body like that, except eat right and exercise.” We’d give anything to feel more energy, have a better outlook, and feel more blessed, except care for our bodies the way they were meant to be cared for. Why is that?

Perhaps you are at a point in life where you feel like the damage is already done and there’s little or nothing you can do to reverse the harm you’ve done to your body. That might be so. But perhaps you appreciate better than most how *precious* health is and how *essential* a healthy body is to doing God’s work in the world. Sure-- we can serve God when we’re less than healthy, but it’s a lot less fun, isn’t it?

The Bible tells us that God has numbered our days; we can't change that number. But much about the quality of those days – and how effective we are at loving and serving God and each other is a function of how physically fit, emotionally whole, and spiritually connected we are. The simple but significant choices we make each day contribute enormously to each of these aspects of our health.

Think about what we do to our bodies all week. Many of us live on fast food, Dunkin Donuts, and Coors Light. We're a congregation of multi-taskers, over-schedulers, and couch-potatoes (I'll let you decide who's who). And after a week of revving up our bodies with caffeine, slowing them down with alcohol, masking our emotional hurts with food, filling our days with ceaseless activity, and burning the candle at both ends we come here for an hour or so on Sunday morning in the hopes that God will fix us. That's like praying that 2 plus 2 will equal 5; it doesn't add up.

It's awfully hard to experience the peace that passes understanding if we're hyped up on espresso-mocha-chinos much of the time. And it's got to be hard to tune into the still small voice of God if we can barely keep our eyes open due to sleep deprivation. So many of us are just like the disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane: we want to be close to Jesus – “the spirit is willing,” -- but the flesh is weak.” If there's someone sleeping next to you, now would be a good time to poke them and say, “Wake up, he's talking to you right now.”

The truth is we all need a good talking to. We're cheating God and ourselves out of some the greatest riches in life simply because we haven't cared for our bodies. I know guys who wouldn't dare skip a 5000 mile oil change by 30 days, but they'll go for *years* without getting a physical. Which is more important: your car or your body? Which do you spend more time in? Which has to last longer?

We've got a ton of reasons why we don't care for our bodies like the Temples that they are.

Living healthy takes work. Just like maintaining an awesome relationship with God or your spouse doesn't happen by accident, caring for your body requires time, energy, and some money.

Fresh vegetables and fruits, cost more than less healthy alternatives. Getting to the gym or taking a daily walk around the block can really be a hassle, especially on busy days – and sometimes they all seem busy.

Going to bed early enough so that we can possibly get 8 hours or so of sleep isn't much fun compared with some of the other things we could be doing. Going to the doctor for a prostate check-up, mammogram, or colonoscopy isn't anyone's idea of a good time.

Yes, caring for our bodies is hard. But we do lots of hard things every day, because God calls us to. Our bodies, God says, are not our own – they are simply earthly tents we get to borrow for a time; God expects us to maintain them as long as we're in them.

Caring for our *emotional* selves is hard, too. Life is stressful enough as it is, but during certain seasons of life we can be sorely tempted to take on assignments and relationships that create even more stress for ourselves and others. Some people feel that seeking professional help from counselors and therapists is a sign of weakness or they resent the time and expense involved in getting help. So they quietly soldier on: depressed, anxious, stressed, or angry—not “sick” enough to think they need professional help, but not well enough to truly enjoy living in God's presence each day. When we do this we're missing out.

I think there's something Devilish about the voices that try to convince us to postpone the doctors' appointment, skip the exercise, and eat the last donut. The Devil doesn't have to get us to renounce Christ; he just has to get us sick and tired enough so that we can't put up much of a fight for him.

We have to admit that the church has given mixed signals on this issue. On the one hand we've taught that our bodies are temples and that Jesus “hallowed” our bodies when he was “incarnated” or “enfleshed” through Mary. He cared for his body and spirit by eating, resting, and relaxing with his friends. On the other hand you've heard sermons and Bible studies that have contrasted “spirit” and “flesh” as if they were opposites and essentially at war with each other. We've celebrated spiritual heroes (e.g. monks) who have *appeared* to transcend their bodies' physical needs for food, sex, and rest – as if these needs were *temptations* rather than

essentials. Most often we've spoken of "the flesh" as something to *escape*, not something to care for.

The result has been real confusion about ourselves as physical beings. Are we supposed to care for our bodies or beat them down? If we go back to Jesus himself and look at the way he cared for others' physical needs and cared for his own physical needs, we have to conclude that God is concerned with our whole body: physically, mentally, and spiritually. It's all a gift, all a treasure entrusted to us by God.

Even if the church hasn't always been clear about what to do with our bodies, we've always been concerned about *healing*. From the earliest days Christians took in people with leprosy and cared for them. The first hospitals were founded by Christians in Europe; they were essentially rooming houses for travelers. Over time they offered medical treatment to people whose families could not provide it for them. Think of the innkeeper in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. That's how Christians saw themselves.

That tradition of care has continued in America. Think of some of the best hospitals you've been to or heard of. How many of them were founded by Christians? Of course there's Holy Spirit Hospital in Camp Hill and the St. Barnabas in New Jersey where our sons were born. Presbyterians, in particular, have led the way in many areas. Some of the largest hospitals in Texas, North Carolina, and New Mexico were originally founded by Presbyterians. And New York-- Presbyterian in New York City is one of the best hospitals in the country. Presbyterians have always recognized that access to high-quality health-care is essential for all God's people; we are still building and maintaining hospitals, especially in Africa and Asia where governments simply don't have the resources to do it for themselves. I'm sure we'll be part of the rebuilding of hospitals in Haiti, too.

As a congregation we're doing what we can, too. We've got *healing* ministries to be sure – like the prayer chain, grief group, AA, Stephen Ministry, and the new caregivers group. We also have ministries that promote *healthy* living, like the chair exercise group and the health ministry itself. On top of this, members of this congregation joined with Jennifer in founding the Clean Air Board with the goal of improving the quality of the air we breathe. Through the work of this coalition over the past several years we can all breathe easier today and our children and grandchildren will

breathe more easily in years to come. We know that our health matters—to us and to God.

But there's much more work to be done, isn't there, before Christians are known as the healthiest people on earth. Let's set the example by taking good care of our bodies, our emotions, and our spirits. It's going to take a daily effort – just like prayer requires effort – but we can do it, especially if we encourage each other and work together. Let's promote healthy lifestyles in our homes, schools, workplaces, and even here in our congregation's activities. Christians can model health patterns of eating, resting, working, and playing. Let's treat our flesh and blood as the precious, unique, hallowed gifts from God that they are.

Before we finish, would you join me in this little affirmation – it's one part creed and one part cheer. Repeat after me:

*My body is a Temple of the Holy Spirit,
Fearfully and wonderfully made,
Intricately knit together
In my mother's womb.
Bought with a price,
It is not my own.
I will care for it
As God's own blessed creation.
And I will return this body to him,
In the best condition possible,
When I'm done serving him.
And then he will give me
A new and even more glorious body
That will last forever. Amen.*

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