

“Everything is Holy: Our Bodies”
Psalm 139:1-16

Today we are invited to look at the holy in our human bodies. They are amazing and frail at the same time. Yet, this is the mystery and beauty of life that lies in the tension between the fragility and glory of our human experience. When we are able to live accepting that tension, we learn to see the holy even in our fragile human flesh.

Here is a story from author Rachel Naomi Remen. She tells the story of a 24-year-old man who had bone cancer and had to have one of his legs removed at the hip to save him. “He was overcome with anger and hatred for having to endure this so early in his life. He was referred to a psychotherapist. The therapist used art therapy and other methods as the man remained in his tomb of bitterness. After approximately two years, she observed a shift when the man started to visit other people who had endured catastrophic physical losses.

One day he went to see a woman around his same age who had been diagnosed with breast cancer and had a double mastectomy. She was so depressed about her situation that she refused to look up at him. The nurses were playing music in her room to try to cheer her up, but nothing seemed to brighten her spirits. Desperately struggling to connect, the man looked down at his leg. Since it was a warm day and he was wearing running shorts, he had an idea. As the music continued to play, he unstrapped his leg and started to dance around the room on one leg, snapping his fingers as he danced. Finally, the woman looked up and couldn't stop laughing. ‘If you can dance, I can sing!’ she exclaimed.

A while later, the man revisited his therapist. He discussed what was significant to him, including the visits to others who had endured loss. The doctor showed him one of his earliest drawings, including one image of a vase with a deep black crack running through it. Angrily grinding his teeth, he had used a black crayon and repeatedly drawn the crack running through it. He said the vase was his body and the crack reminded him that it could never function as it was intended to ever again.

Looking at the picture years later, he said, ‘This one isn't finished.’ The therapist suggested that he complete the drawing. Picking up a yellow crayon, he began to draw several yellow lines as he pointed at the crack in the vase: ‘You see here where it is broken this is where the light shines through.’”

This is the power of our human experience of having a body that is magnificent and fragile at the same time. In our fragility, we get to know the mystery of the divine and how God works through the cracks of brokenness in our lives. With every health challenge, we learn to surrender a little more. With every glorious physical experience like the smell of fresh flowers or a beautiful view of a sunset, we know the amazing magnificence of the divine. As the Apostle Paul puts it, “We have this treasure in jars of clay.” 2 Corinthians 4:7a. The same sentiment was expressed in Psalm 139 about the amazing gift of God's creation.

The power of this psalm is looking at its historical context of suffering. When we read its words knowing what the people of ancient Israel were experiencing, we can appreciate the power of these affirmations about the goodness of life, especially the frailty of our human flesh. The Psalms were written after the exile experience of the people of ancient Israel. The temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed in 587 BCE and most of the people were expelled from their homeland to live in Babylon. We tend to read the Psalms as individual prayers separated from each other. But biblical scholars have discovered that we need to see that the book of Psalms is one book and read it much like we read Jeremiah or Isaiah. With this understanding we see the importance of the 5 sections of the book of Psalms. Each of these sections deals with the questions of Israel's suffering: Book I (Psalm 1-41) mostly lament, Book II (Psalm 42-72) mixed Psalms, Book III (Psalm 73-89) which questions God's faithfulness to Israel, Book IV (Psalm 90-106) which is a response saying that God has been faithful to Moses, and Book V (Psalm 107-150) which is another response saying that God is faithful. The first two Psalms in the book of Psalms define the whole problem of suffering in the world. Basically, they say that the world is divided into two camps: Those who are righteous and those who are evil. Then they affirm that God will be on the side of the righteous, even though it may take a long time to get to that. The coming of the Messiah and the hope of redemption is never lost even when evil seems to prosper. This is what helped the people of Israel get through their tough times. They held on to the hope of God's redemption. When we read Psalm 139 in its context of exile, pain, lament, and doubt, we can see that it is a prayer that mixes lament, a call for help and faithfulness, and trust. In verse 2 we hear some of the frustration of the writer of the Psalm saying that you discern my thoughts from far away. Normally in the biblical tradition, God is presented as knowing us closely. But here we have some distance that the Psalmist sees between the people of Israel and God. Then the verses we did not read today go on to declare the frustration of the people of Israel out loud and without any niceties. The whole Psalm is a reminder to God about God's promise of faithfulness to the people of Israel. It is as if the Psalmist was saying, "We have had a good deal going together! Remember the promises you have made for us that you would never leave us alone. Remember that the faith we have in you that you are our creator and protector. We still trust in those promises. We are still here waiting for you to act. We are going through some tough times of darkness but we know that in you there is no darkness. We are going to hold on because we trust you and have had a good thing going with you." In Psalm 137, we hear about the people of Israel sitting by the rivers of Babylon and weeping and remembering their life as a people. The despair is so severe in that Psalm where God is seen as aloof. But in Psalm 139, the Psalmist moves to respond to that despair, still lamenting but from a place of hope and trust in the goodness and faithfulness of God.

One of the great experiences of faith is knowing that God is with us all the time in loving and gentle ways and in all the seasons of our lives. The challenge is to be aware of God's presence with us. We live in the illusion that we are separate from God and from others. We sometimes even feel disconnected from ourselves. The main goal of faith is not to make you a moral person or a nicer person, even though these will be the results of faith. Faith is about becoming more aware of our connection to God and to others in the world.

One of the best vehicles for regaining or awakening to the awareness of God's presence is our human body. A deep breath can help us feel centered. The scent of incense can help us remember the holy. Looking at beauty, whether it is an icon or a sunrise, can help remind us to see into the realms of the eternal. A warm embrace of a baby or the holding of the hand of a loved one who is dying can give us that sense of deep connection and love. Hearing a beautiful piece of music, the sound of waves, or the song of a bird can transport us into new heights of love and gratitude. The taste of fresh fruit or a homecooked meal remind us of the abundance of God's creation. All of our bodily senses are used in worship to help us reconnect to the source of our being. When we pray with the vehicle of the body, we know the depth of God's presence in everlasting ways. As much as our bodies are frail, they are also holy because they enable us to experience God's loving presence and our connection to others in so many amazing ways.

And so we are going to prepare to receive communion through our five senses. One sense may connect better for you than others. Feel free to linger in that sense if you need to. I invite you to hold your communion elements in your hand or have them close to you as part of your meditation. First, connect to the feelings you are experiencing. Hot or cold, a breeze, humidity, sensations in the body. Then feel the sensation of the bread and cup in your hand, knowing that you are holding a part of the mystery of God's awesome presence in your human experience.

When you're ready, move on to your sense of sound. What do you hear? Listen to the sounds around you and how they remind you of your connection to the rest of the body of the earth and the body of Christ.

When you are ready, very slowly blink open your eyes. Stare at the communion elements. Take in what catches your attention. Behold the elements.

Next, we move on to our sense of smell. Take a deep breath in through your nose, feel the air entering your nostrils. Get the elements close to you and smell the bread and the cup. Now imagine the aroma of the last meal Jesus shared with his disciples, especially the bread and the cup. Let the smell of your bread and cup remind you that the same grace and love of that meal was present to you.

And now remember with me the words of Jesus to his disciples on that night after he gave thanks to God for the bread and broke it and gave it to them say, "This bread is my body broken for you, whenever you eat from it, do this in remembrance of me." And remember that in the same way, he took the cup, and after giving thanks to God, he gave it to his disciples, saying "this cup is the new covenant sealed in my blood shed for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink from it, do this in remembrance of me." Now behold these elements for a moment with the awareness of Christ's presence in and through them. Give thanks to God for this feast of love which you can experience in your body reminding you of all that is holy about our human experience of the body. When you are ready, eat the bread remembering that it is the bread of life. Drink the cup remembering that it is the cup of Christ's love...Amen.