

*Dual Citizenship: We Believe Holiness Has a Body*

From Genesis 2 and Psalm 139

In 1997, a news story captured the public's attention--so much, that twenty years later newspapers came back and did anniversary stories about it. You may remember it yourself, still. In a house near San Diego, 36 people who had joined a cult called Heaven's Gate waited for the arrival of the Hale-Bopp comet. As the comet got closer to earth, they put on matching black track suits and brand new Nike shoes, and packed duffel bags. They were convinced that just behind the comet there was a spaceship waiting for them; that it would pick them up and take them to a better world. They were sure *this* world was facing Armageddon, total destruction. God was giving them an exit, they were sure: to a 'Level Above Human'. When the right moment came, they swirled powerful barbiturates into pudding, tied plastic bags around their heads, laid down in their beds, and died. They didn't think of this as suicide; they called it 'graduation'. They were sure that the people killing themselves was everyone who stayed behind.

It sounds crazy, right?

The founder of the Heaven's Gate cult was the son of a Presbyterian minister. He'd grown up in the Church. And he wasn't the first Christian to tip off the edge of a fine balance Christianity stands on, between life in this world and confidence that our ultimate reality lies somewhere beyond this life.

One of the earliest controversies in the Church, way back in the first centuries after Jesus lived, was a belief, held strongly by some early Christians, that even though Jesus appeared to be human—to walk and talk and sleep and eat the way most people do—he couldn't possibly have been a real human being. The human body is so flawed, so *mortal*, they reasoned, that it could never have actually housed the presence of God. Therefore, the Jesus that people thought they saw and followed must have been an apparition. God with the appearance of a human, but not really made out of flesh and blood. Jesus didn't actually die; he just resumed the spiritual, non-material form that he'd actually been all along. This theory was called Docetism. It was one of the first heresies condemned by the Church.

I can see how people go off-track. It can be confusing, our tradition that says God is fully engaged in this life *and* that there's another life, beyond this one, that is life with God. That we live as dual citizens, people committed to the fullness of life in this world for ourselves and others *and* who expect that a more perfect world lies beyond this life.

The argument about Docetism might sound kind of esoteric, but it actually does matter, even now. Because who Jesus was, how we believe *God* chose—chooses—to engage with life on earth, gives us some idea about where to focus *our* attention, *our* commitments, *our* hope. Is this life mostly about making ourselves ready for the next life, our *real* home, a spiritual reality, that we can't see yet, but that will be revealed to us? Or is it *this* life, the one we live in now, that's the real thing, the place where we will encounter God and know the fullness of God's hope for us?

Yes.

Let me ask that theological question in a more personal way. Does this body I live in, this scarred, stretch-marked, often-disappointing human body, this thing that will no doubt run out of vitality before I am ready, hold the essence of my life? Or is it simply a house for something we might call a soul? Is this body a vehicle I have to perform necessary maintenance on so that it will take me to the to the life that matters most?

I don't have to tell you what ambivalent feelings we have about our bodies, and what mixed messages we get about whether to honor them or beat them into submission. Our bodies so regularly fail us—with illness, or tiredness, the marks of aging, their constant neediness. Our bodies are our most regular source of shame, and our worry. How many hundreds of hours of this life have I wasted, anxious about what I was going to dress this torso in, or looking in a mirror and evaluating what parts were too big or too small? Or planning how to treat, or prevent, or work around my body's refusal to work properly at all times?

It is also true that our bodies give us moments of absolute delight, pure joy. Your body is an instrument of intimacy, communion with another human being. It gives you the power to create and nurture life. It holds the pleasure of a good meal, and play, the satisfaction of moving and stretching. It gives you hands for doing good, feet to move you toward the things and people and places you love.

For all of this body's mixed-bagged-ness, the story we live by says that God, the Creator of the universe, looked at an earth filled with human bodies and said, 'I want one of those.' That God came to join us in this human, body-contained life. 'Incarnation' is the theological word for what is at the center of Christianity: that God chose to speak the most ultimate truth by living in a body that was as uncooperative and worrisome and short-lived as our bodies are.

Some people have called Christianity the *most material* of all religions, the religion most concerned with concrete, everyday human life. Think about it. God didn't beam himself to earth as a fully-formed adult; God started life as an infant, which means he went through all the indignities of growing up. Puberty. Acne. Growing pains. Hunger, that most basic human need, makes regular appearances in the stories we have of Jesus. Even after his resurrection Jesus asks his disciples for something to eat, and then he returns the favor by cooking breakfast for them on the beach. He uses his hands, even his spit, to heal people. He *dies*, and his bruised body bears scars from his injuries. Just like ours do.

On the last night of his life, when Jesus tells his friends how they should remember him, he makes that too about life in a human body. Taste me, he said, while you chew bread and swallow wine. Feel me as you kneel on the hard ground and wash each other's feet. He didn't tell them to hold onto him through some kind of knowledge project, or some ethereal spiritual connection. Live in your body, he said. Love each other, feed each other, bend down and serve on another, with your bodies. That's where you'll find me.

And then he walked straight into death as if he was unafraid. As if his body did not hold the whole of him. As if somehow, when his lungs stopped breathing and his heart stopped pulsing, his life might not be over. And indeed it was not.

That's our story. That's the story we live by. We are a people who stake our lives on the truth of this story: that all of life is contained in this body *and* that even after the last drop of life has been poured out, there's still more. That this story is true not only for Jesus, but for us, and for the people we love, and the people we have lost.

I don't want to be glib about this. No doubt the questions are different for people like us, we who have a reasonable possibility of flourishing in this life, than they are for people whose experience says that life is mostly cruel, brutish and short. There are millions of people in this world for whom the promise of a better life ahead is the only thing that gets them through grinding days of no-hope. This is a huge, defining difference between people of privilege and those for whom life in this body is desperately hard. But maybe our willingness to cross that chasm of difference with compassion is what characterizes dual citizens, we who live with a foot in both worlds. Maybe our work is to weave together life in this body and hope for what comes when we leave it behind. *On earth as it is in heaven.*

This week I finished reading a memoir by a writer named Jesmyn West, called *Men We Reaped*. It's the story of four years of her life—2000-2004—when five young black men she was close to died, including her younger brother. They didn't all die from the same thing; there was drug addiction, and suicide, and car accidents, a random shooting. But those deaths prompted her to reflect on what happens when you grow up poor and black in Mississippi, the despair and self-destructiveness that accumulate. I recommend the book to you; it's as powerful an insight into the consequences of racial injustice as anything I've read in the last six months.

But it's a story that's bigger even than race. It's about what it means to be human, and how we live in our bodies, and how we pour ourselves out into this life even when this life doesn't promise much in return.

Right at the end of her story she says this about her people, the community she comes from: "We love each other fiercely, while we live and after we die." *We love each other fiercely, while we live and after we die.* This is what we do when we are fully and finally invested in this life, when we are living as though these bodies hold all the life we have. And this is what we do even if this life is just a prelude, an anticipation of completeness that lies ahead.

So let's keep widening the circle of 'each other', until it begins to resemble God's idea about how far it can stretch. And then, with all the limitations of this body and all our hope for a perfection yet to come, let us *love each other fiercely, while we live and after we die.*