

Our Spiritual Reality: We Also Have Bodies

A Sermon by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith

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Readings

Psalms 139:13-18 (Kempton Project Translation, modified)

- ¹³ You formed my kidneys,
You sheltered me in my mother's womb.
- ¹⁴ I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
Wonderful are Your deeds, and my soul knows this very well.
- ¹⁵ My bone was not concealed from You, when I was made in hiding,
I was embroidered in the lower parts of the earth.
- ¹⁶ Your eyes saw me rolled up,
And in Your book the days were written, all of them; they were formed,
And not one of them was absent.
- ¹⁷ And how precious are Your thoughts to me, O God!
How numerous is the sum of them!
- ¹⁸ If I should number them, they are more multiplied than sand;
I awake, and I am still with You.

Matthew 26:36-46 (Kempton Project Translation, modified)

³⁶ Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to the disciples, "Sit here, while I go away and pray over there." ³⁷ And taking Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, He began to sorrow, and to be in agony. ³⁸ Then He said to them, "My soul is surrounded with sorrow unto death; remain here, and watch with me."

³⁹ And coming forward a little, He fell on His face, praying, and saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will."

⁴⁰ Then He came to the disciples, and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, "Did you not have strength to watch with Me for one hour?" ⁴¹ Watch and pray that you do not enter into temptation; the spirit indeed is eager, but the flesh is weak."

⁴² Again for a second time going away, He prayed, saying, "My Father, if this cup cannot pass away from Me unless I drink it, Your will be done." ⁴³ And coming, He finds them sleeping again; for their eyes were heavy.

⁴⁴ And leaving them, going away again, He prayed for a third time, saying the same word. ⁴⁵ Then He comes to His disciples, and says to them, "Do you sleep still, and rest? Behold, the hour is near, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴⁶ Arise, let us lead the way; behold, he who betrays Me is near."

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After the death of the body, our spirit has a human form that is visible in the spiritual world, just as it had a human form that was visible in this world. Our spirit enjoys the abilities to see, hear, speak, and have sensations, just as it did in this world, and is endowed with every faculty of thinking, willing, and doing, just as it was in this world. In a word, we are human beings in absolutely every respect, except that we are not clothed with the dense body we wore in this world.

Arcana Coelestia 4622:3

It is not the body which sees, hears, smells, and feels through touch, but a person's spirit. [W]hen the spirit sheds its body it retains the sensory powers it possessed when within the body; indeed these are now far keener. For that which belongs to the body, being gross compared with that belonging to the spirit, has blunted those sensory powers; and these have been made even blunter because of the person's immersion of them in earthly and worldly interests.

Introduction

- You don't have to raise your hand or anything; you can just think to yourself.
 - Have you ever fallen asleep in church?
- What does that mean about you as a person?
 - What does that mean about how spiritual you are?
- I think it might just mean that you're tired.

- Think of the story from our lesson of the disciples with the Lord in Gethsemane.
 - The Lord wanted them to stay with Him and watch but they kept falling asleep.
 - And the Lord understood why; He said, "the spirit indeed is eager, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26:41).
 - Much though they may have wanted to be there for the Lord, their eyes were heavy, and the limitations of their flesh won out over what their spirits wanted to do.

- Today, we're continuing a series of sermons on our spiritual reality.
 - Understanding the spiritual lay of the land, the way things work in our spiritual lives.
 - Often that's about raising our minds above things in this natural world.
 - Thinking about the Lord and heaven and all those good things.
- But another important part of understanding our spiritual reality is understanding that we also have a body.
- The question for today is how can we better navigate our spiritual reality when we take our bodies into consideration?

Outline

- First, we'll talk about what it's like when we do NOT take our bodies into consideration.
- Then, we'll talk about a couple of different ideas from the Lord's Word about our bodies, their connection to spiritual realities and as a context for spiritual work.
- Then we'll talk a bit about how connects to Memorial Day.
- And then we'll be done.

When We Do Not Take Our Bodies into Consideration

- Here are just a few examples of the kinds of things that we all do when we're trying to do the right thing and handle the situation but our bodily circumstances are making things more difficult for us.
 - Those times when we are feeling more and more irritable and like nobody is doing anything right and everyone is doing everything wrong.
 - And entirely unrelated, we also haven't eaten anything in a long time.
 - Or times when we're trying hard to focus and be useful and productive
 - and we also have a terrible headache.
 - Or when we're having a conversation with someone and it's turned into a difficult conversation and we're getting more and more impatient
 - and we also need to go to the bathroom.
 - Or times when we're feeling overwhelmed and like we're going to explode or like we can't concentrate on anything
 - and it turns out that we're too hot or too cold.
 - Or times when we're trying to make the right decision
 - but our nervous system is feeling more and more panicked.
- And there are many other situations like this that we find ourselves in.
 - Our spirits may be willing and eager to do the right thing, but our bodies are weak.
- Part of the point, then, is to just do the things to care for our bodies so that we can have a better foundation from which to do the spiritual work.
 - Listen to this passage about the point of feeding ourselves.
 - *Arcana Coelestia* 3951:3
 - The point of feeding ourselves is to have a sound mind in a sound body. If we starve our body of sustenance, we also rob ourselves of that state of mind and body we are aiming for. When people are spiritual, then, they do not look down on food or on the pleasure it provides. Neither do they make it their goal but rather a means that serves the goal.
- And then the passage ends by saying, "Conclusions can be drawn from this example about other kinds of goodness."
 - We should do what we need to do to support our body so that it can support our mind and spirit.

- We should get something to eat.
- We should take a nap or some painkillers or both when we've got a headache.
- We should change what clothes we're wearing.
- We should ask for a pause in the conversation and go to the bathroom.
- *Etc.*
- Those things are definitely easier said than done and we don't always have a choice about whether we can give ourselves a break or have to just keep going.
 - But you should know that you have permission and encouragement from the Lord to pay attention to your bodily needs.
 - That's the right thing to do.
- Now let's get into some other ideas about our bodies from the Lord's Word about their connection to spiritual realities and as a context for spiritual work.

How Do You Picture the Relationship Between You and Your Body?

- How do you picture the relationship between you and your body?
- One option is to imagine that you are your body.
 - That your body is all that there is to you.
 - If your body were to die, you would die too.
 - Some people believe that.
 - That's not what the Lord teaches us in His Word.
 - And we occasionally have experiences that can give us the sense that we are not just our bodies.
 - There are those times when you wake up and your arm has gone to sleep and you have that creepy experience of feeling like your arm isn't your arm.
 - That feeling goes away but it reminds us that this body is a tool that we're using for now, not all of what we are.
 - People also have the experience, as they get older, of a disconnect between how young they feel on the inside and how old their body has gotten on the outside.
- Another option for how to imagine the relationship between you and your body is that you are some sort of wispy spirit thing, living inside of your body.
 - Kind of like a formless ghost thing.

- There are people who believe that that is how it works, but the Lord tells us that we do have a spirit, but it's not some wispy, ghostly thing.
- Or maybe you picture yourself like a little person living inside your brain, driving the controls to this machine.
 - Kind of like a human mech or robot with you as the little driver.
 - That's getting closer to the truth but we're not quite there yet.
- What the Lord teaches us in His Word, through the teachings for the New Church, is that we have 2 bodies.
 - We have our natural bodies and our spirit also has a spiritual body that is in human form.
 - And our lesson said that, even when we're still living in these natural bodies, it's actually our *spiritual* body that sees, hears, smells, and feels through our natural bodies.
 - Our whole natural body is connected to and corresponds to our whole spiritual body.
 - One passage says,
 - *True Christian Religion* 375:2
 - There is nothing in the mind which does not have a corresponding part in the body, and this corresponding part can be called the embodiment of what is in the mind.
 - And another passage says this:
 - *Heaven and Hell* 463
 - The details of our thought and intention are inscribed on our brains... [and] on the whole body as well, since all the elements of our thought and intention move out into the body from their beginnings and take definition there in their outmost forms.
- So it seems like the best way to picture the relationship between you and your body is to imagine yourself in human form, filling the whole of your natural body.
- Your natural body is not a perfect representation of your spiritual self.
 - It can get injured or sick or old.
 - But your spiritual body *is* a perfect representation of your spiritual self

- When you die one day, you will be done with your natural body and then will be aware of your spiritual body and will carry on living and sensing things through it, but just in the spiritual world instead of in the natural world.
- And the Lord tells us that when are done with using this natural body, we will have such a keener, more vivid experience of everything.
 - It's like everything in this natural world is blurry and muffled and blunted, like we're always squinting our eyes, plugging our ears, have a congested nose, and are wearing thick gloves.
 - Won't it be great when we finally get to experience spiritual reality with all its detail and beauty!

Our Bodies Are an Image of Everything That Matters

- Our bodies are paradoxical in that they are weak and frail and they do give us this blunted experience of reality, but at the same time they are also breathtakingly beautiful, incredibly intricate, and the best image we have of everything that matters in existence.
- As Psalm 139 says, "We are fearfully and wonderfully made."
 - "How precious are Your thoughts to me, O God! How numerous is the sum of them!"
 - All the thought and care that the Lord put into the design and function of our bodies is beyond our ability to comprehend.
 - And the teachings for the New Church reveal that all the different parts of our natural bodies correspond to all the different structures and neurons in our brains, which correspond to all the parts of our spiritual bodies, which correspond to all the different people and societies in heaven which is arranged in an equally complex and beautiful human form called the Grand Man or Greatest Human and all of that corresponds to our Divine and Human God who created everyone and everything and Who first breathed life into our nostrils.
- What matters in the universe?
 - People and community and heaven and the Lord.
 - All of these things are arranged by the Lord into human forms and each of our own frail little bodies is a representation of each and all of those things.
- If we are trying to understand how to navigate the fact that we have bodies, it does seem like we should also try to hold onto some of this reality too—the reality of all that we are connected to through correspondences in our bodies.

Our Bodies as an Indicator of Our Spiritual State

- Our bodies are also, unfortunately, connected with the monstrous form of hell.
 - We experience the effects of hell on our bodies through sickness and also through the hells trying to get us to do things that hurt ourselves and hurt other people and through trying to get us to do selfish things that feel good.
- Because our bodies are connected to all of these different realities and at the same time are the medium through which we appear to experience things, they also can be a very useful tool for self-examination and self-awareness.
- Have you ever said, "I'm fine!" through clenched teeth, with clenched fists, while breathing heavily?
- It is hard but when we can learn to notice what is going on in our bodies, that can help us understand what is flowing into us.
- There are also times when we experience strong desires to do the wrong thing in our bodies and when we can remember that we are *not* just our physical bodies, it can help us to not just act on those things but instead just pay attention to what's going on.
 - "Wow, body! You really want that a lot. It's OK, we don't have to do that."
 - We can do things to try to calm our bodies and our nervous systems to allow better things to flow in.

How the Lord Works With Us At All Levels

- Here I think it would be useful to engage with a collection of teachings from the book *Divine Providence* about how the Lord works with us at all levels.
- It will get kind of technical and abstract for a bit, but I think you'll find that it's remarkably practical by the end.
- The topic is how the Lord works with us to help us turn away from evil, and what we do in our bodies has an important part to play.
 - *Divine Providence* 124
 - The Lord never acts upon any one constituent in a person individually without acting at the same time on all their constituents. [O]ne constituent cannot be shifted from its position and its state changed except in harmony with the rest. For if one constituent were to be shifted from its position and its state changed, the form, which has to function as a unit, would suffer.

- In this way the Lord... acts upon every person, directly upon all the constituents of the person's mind, and through these on all the constituents of his body. For a person's mind is their spirit, and in the measure of its conjunction with the Lord, an angel, with the body its obedient servant.
- The Lord can't just act on one part of us; He needs to act on all parts of us if He's going to help us change in a way that won't destroy us.
 - If He is going to change our minds or our spirits, He also needs to change things in our bodies.
- And for the Lord to be able to work with us, with all the parts working together, He needs our cooperation.
 - *Divine Providence* 125
 - The Lord cannot act from anyone's inmost elements and outmost elements simultaneously without doing so in concert with the person, for the person is present together with the Lord in their outmost elements. Consequently, as the person acts in their outmost elements, which are under their control, being within the scope of their freedom, so the Lord acts from the person's inmost elements and in their subsequent elements to the outmost ones.

The things that are in a person's inmost elements and in the subsequent ones extending from the inmost to the outmost are completely unknown to the person, and therefore they are not at all aware of how the Lord is operating there or what He is accomplishing there. But because those inner elements cohere as one with the outmost ones, therefore it is not necessary for the person to know anything more than to refrain from evils as sins and look to the Lord.

Only in this way can a person's life's love, which from birth is hellish, be put away by the Lord, and a heavenly life's love be implanted in its stead.
- In this division of labor, we work to turn away from evil in our outmost elements and the Lord does all the rest on the inside.
 - Working in our outmost elements means working in the lowest level of our thoughts and feelings.
 - Noticing evil thoughts and inclinations coming in from hell and working to reject them.
 - And it also means working at the level of our bodies.
 - Not doing evil and harmful things with our bodies.

- We will feel the pull to do evil things in our physical bodies (see *Divine Providence* 112) and so part of our work will feel like it is in our bodies.
 - Sexual desire that leads away from marriage.
 - The desire to hurt and get revenge.
 - The desire to take what is not ours.
 - The desire to greedily consume things that we know will not serve us well.
 - The desire to be puffed up with pride and look down on others with contempt.
 - The desire to control and dominate others.
- We feel all of these desires in our bodies and in different parts of our bodies and part of cooperating with the Lord is learning how to recognize those hellish desires and do what we need to with our physical bodies to reject those desires and not act on them.

Connection to Memorial Day

- On Memorial Day we honor and mourn for people who died while serving in the armed forces.
 - They committed to serving their country and died while serving that use.
 - They made a sacrifice—they laid down their physical bodies in service of their country.
- We also honor the family members and friends of the people who died.
 - They also made a big sacrifice.
 - Those friends and family members may still be alive in this world but their bodies carry the memory and the mental and emotional wounds of the loss of that person they love.
 - We acknowledge that pain and that loss.
- We also acknowledge that some people who serve in the military and survive come back with mental and emotional wounds that last for the rest of their lives.
 - *Heaven and Hell* 463 says
 - Things that are inscribed on our memory from our intention and consequent thought are inscribed not only on the brain but also on the whole person, where they take form in a pattern that follows the pattern of the parts of the body.

- Painful memories inscribed on the brain and the whole person sounds a lot like trauma.
- Obviously that is a huge topic of its own, but it seems worth acknowledging that veterans and many, many other people carry the scars of traumatic experiences in their brains and in their bodies.
 - And it is no simple task for them to figure out how to cope with that aspect of being people living in physical bodies.
- For now, we will simply acknowledge how hard that is and try to keep it in mind when we see someone clearly not coping well with a situation.
- And we will also look to a future when each of us will eventually shed our natural bodies and live on in our spiritual bodies in a place where “there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying” (Revelation 21:4).

Conclusion

- You have physical body that is weak and is also “fearfully and wonderfully made.”
 - Both of those things are true.
- We have only scratched the surface of all the ways in which it is significant to understanding our spiritual reality to better understand our bodies.
 - Remembering that it is good and right to care for our physical needs.
 - Remembering that we have a spiritual body as well as a natural body.
 - Remembering that our bodies, down to their smallest details, correspond to everything that matters in existence.
 - And remembering that our bodies are an indicator of what’s going on for us spiritually and a context where we can do work to try to invite the Lord in.
- With help from the Lord through His Word and with help from other people we can continue growing in our understanding and compassion for ourselves and in our understanding and compassion for other people as we all navigate our way through our lives in this natural world in these weak and wonderful bodies.
- *Amen.*

If you would like to talk more about this topic, get in touch with Malcolm at malcolm.smith@brynathynchurch.org.