

Flesh
Fifth Sunday of Lent
April 2, 2017
Lynn Japinga

Texts: Ezekiel 37:1-14, John 11:1-45

I learned a new word last week from Ann Kansfield. She is the pastor of Greenpoint Reformed Church in Brooklyn where our high school students go for mission trips. She is also a chaplain for the New York City Fire Department. Last week, after one of her EMT's died on the job, she wrote a post about grief and loss, and introduced the word **kummerspeck**. It is a German word which literally means grief-bacon, and it refers to excess weight gained from sorrow. Today I will use the word grief-bacon to refer to all the heaviness we might be carrying. Loss, anxiety, illness, anger, sadness, regret, failure, shame.

I don't know about you all, but I'm feeling pretty weighed down with grief-bacon. I have a bad habit of checking my email before getting out of bed in the morning, and that usually includes skimming through a couple of political articles from the New York Times or the Washington Post. After I have done that, I want to pull the covers over my head and go back to sleep!

There is so much anxiety floating around right now. The country, the denomination, health care, immigration, civilians killed in Iraq, the influence of Russia in the election ... Even if we try not to think and read about it all the time, I wonder how much anxiety has taken root in our bodies. Headaches, stiff necks, sore backs, angry stomachs. Or perhaps the anxiety has us operating at a kind of high alert all the time. Sometimes it feels like there so much boiling inside that we might explode into pieces.

Ezekiel spoke to people who carried a lot of grief-bacon. The Israelites had been forced out of their land and were living in exile. For them, everything had exploded into pieces. “Our bones are dried up,” they said. “Our hope is lost.” They had made a mess of everything and now they felt the consequences of their actions. It seemed that God had abandoned them. They were dry bones in the desert.

Mary and Martha also had their share of grief-bacon. Their brother was dead. That was bad enough, but they were particularly upset because they felt that Jesus could have healed him if he had arrived in time. They had deep faith in Jesus, but he let them down. Jesus knew he was trying to make a theological point about the power of God, but they didn’t know that. They felt betrayed.

Jesus also felt overwhelmed by their sorrow and by the sorrow of their friends. He was so deeply moved that he wept. Most of us can probably identify. Sometimes we burst into tears just because we are so overwhelmed and our bodies cannot manage any more. The fact that Jesus wept in this story ought to give us permission to do our own weeping when we need to. Crying is not a sign of weakness, and it isn’t “unmanly” or childish. It’s a way that our bodies deal with pain and loss. The body knows how much grief bacon we are carrying.

A number of years ago when I experienced a big loss, I took my son to *Air Bud*, which was a movie about a Golden Retriever who played basketball. Doesn’t sound like a tear jerker, right? But there was a theme of loss and grief through the movie, and it made me weep. The body knows how much grief bacon we carry.

There is so much loss and pain in these stories, and yet loss does not have the last word. There is healing and redemption here, and it is not just spiritual but physical and fleshy. Ezekiel saw those very dry and very dead bones. But

God's breath or spirit blew over that desert, and the bones came together. And then they were covered with muscles, and then skin! Finally, God breathed into each of the bodies, and they came to life. What a powerful image of healing! God can breathe into our death and loss and anxiety and brokenness, and bring life!

Similarly in the Gospel story, Jesus brought Lazarus back to life! Imagine the stunned surprise when Lazarus staggered out of the tomb, still bound up in the grave clothes. This is a physical, tangible, bodily miracle. Jesus doesn't say, "he will live on in your hearts." Or "he will be raised in the last day." Jesus raised him at the moment. The body, life, and flesh are good and valued.

That's good news for us too. The body has NOT always been valued. Sometimes we've been told in the church that sex is bad, desire is bad, the flesh is bad. But if God values the body enough to put flesh on those dry bones, and if God values the body enough to become flesh in Jesus, and if God values the body enough to raise Lazarus and Jesus from the dead, maybe we should start to realize that God values our bodies. And then, maybe we should value them too!

I wonder if one way to get through the grief-bacon, the dry bones, the disillusion and despair that we feel, is by nurturing the simple pleasures of the flesh. It is the body that anchors us. How do we care for it?

Anne LaMott says that the best self-care is clean sheets, hot baths, and long hikes.

What if we turned off the television news and listened to music instead?

What if we quit reading so many news articles and read a novel?

What if we volunteered to play with children, or used our bodies to care for someone else?

What if we took more time for friendship? If we enjoyed the pleasure of two bodies walking together or sharing a meal together.

Why do this? Some people might say it is selfish, or naïve, or a waste of time in the midst of so much craziness. But God so often gives grace and healing through our bodies. Seeing a beautiful sunset. Hearing a child's voice. The smell of coffee brewing. The feel of exercise. A hug.

I know that God is the source of all healing, and we can't control God. So much of the healing that needs to happen in the world is completely out of our control. We can't fix the government. We can't fix the RCA. We can't fix the cancer diagnosis or the macular degeneration or the abuse we've suffered in the past.

We do have the power to care for our own flesh and the flesh of others. That isn't just new agey self-help talking. I think that God does a lot of healing through our actions. We can decide to put those sheets in the washer. We can decide to cook a good meal. We can get exercise. We don't have to wait. We can be God's breath blowing wherever we live. We can bring grace to other people, and to ourselves. We can be kind to other people and ourselves. We can value the flesh, by feeding it, caring for it, treating it well. We can look for the beauty in the world, and be grateful when we see it.

Yesterday I was sitting outside in the sun, reading commentaries, and one of my neighbors walked by. She was hunched over her walker, she had a hitch in her step from one weak leg. She moved very slowly. Here was a woman whose body had betrayed her. And yet there she was. A model of persistence, courage and strength.

As we celebrate the Lord's Supper today, I encourage you to look at people. Look at their bodies. You know that the people around you have experienced their own versions of grief: loss, or illness, or failure. And

yet, when you look one another, you will see so much strength. So much love.
 So much beauty. So much courage. Amen.

GOOD IS THE FLESH

Words by
 BRIAN WREN

Music by
 RON KLUSMEIER



1. Good is the flesh that the Word ___ has be - come, ___
2. Good is the bod - y for know - ing the world, ___
3. Good is the bod - y, from cra - die to grave, ___
4. Good is the plea - sure of God ___ in our flesh, ___



good is the birth - ing, the milk in the breast,
 sens - ing the sun - light, the tug of the ground,
 grow - ing and age - ing, a - rous - ing, im - paired,
 long - ing in all, as in Je - sus, to dwell,



good is the feed - ing, ca - ress - ing and rest,
 feel - ing, per - ceiv - ing, with - in and a - round,
 hap - py in cloth - ing, or lov - ing - ly bared,
 glad of em - brac - ing, and tast - ing, and smell,



good is the bod - y for know - ing the world, ___
 good is the bod - y, from cra - die to grave, ___
 good is the plea - sure of God in our flesh, ___
 good is the bod - y, for good and for God, ___



Good is the flesh that the Word ___ has be - come. ___
 Good is the flesh that the Word ___ has be - come. ___
 Good is the flesh that the Word ___ has be - come. ___
 Good is the flesh that the Word ___ has be - come. ___

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