

# **Mirror, Mirror on the Wall...Reflecting God's Image**

Genesis 1:26-31; Psalm 139:1, 13-18

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Sexuality Series

I love the bodies of babies and young children. It amazes me how they enter the world with everything they need in order to survive--healthy lungs that breathe and support their strong voices, digestive systems that take in food and expel what is not needed. And yet, these bodies are vulnerable, weak--most newborns can't hold their own heads up. But each day, those little vulnerable bodies get stronger and stronger, until within weeks, they can hold up their own heads, they can smile, and within months, are rolling over, crawling and then standing. The human body is truly remarkable!

And we delight in these little bodies. We see babies, we hold babies, and regardless of whose baby it is, most of us nestle, nuzzle, smell, kiss, tickle and hug these little bodies. We tolerate all the messy bodily functions of these little people, even smiling or laughing at the burps and other noises which escape from these bodies. We kiss their toes, we breathe in the lovely baby smell of them! We delight in and celebrate the little bodies of all the babies that are part of our congregation--Isaac, Thiago, Luke, Theo, Abram, Abigail, Brennan.

Not only do we take delight in the bodies of babies, but they also take delight in their own bodies. I remember when each of our children, around 4 months old or so, was mesmerized by their own hands, staring at them in wonder! When was the last time you really looked at your hands, staring at them in wonder? Or when they discover their voices, and the power that gives them! Or the delight toddlers have in running around naked--free and unconfined. Or the delight they take in recognizing their own reflection in the mirror. When they look in the mirror, they see reflected back someone who is delighted to see them, someone who delights in them, and in whom they delight!

It doesn't take long for us to stop kissing toes and breathing in the smell of other bodies. Bodily functions and noises are soon confined to the bathroom--they are not to be celebrated or applauded, but rather become a source of embarrassment and shame! We very soon stop caressing and tickling and nuzzling other people's bodies. And at a certain age, we discourage running around naked. And for the most part, this is probably appropriate; but there is also a loss that comes with this. How sad that we stop being

delighted in the reflection we see in the mirror. How unfortunate that we are no longer in touch with God's delight in our physical bodies as reflections of God's own image.

As human beings, we are created in God's image as a complicated mix of body and soul. We know that we are much more than our physical bodies, that our souls will outlive the physical bodies that house them here on this earth. We are most keenly aware of this when a loved one dies. We reassure ourselves that their souls are with God; that their bodies are but the shell that is left behind. We know that those we meet and relate to each and every day are more than their physical bodies. We know this.

And yet, it is in our physical bodies that we live in this world. Our bodies are crucial to our experience of life, our ability to function in this world, our ability to relate to others, to give and receive love, to talk, and laugh and run and see the beauty around us. Without our bodies, we'd be disembodied spirits floating around. The pain of death is that on a physical, relational level, we keenly miss those bodies of our loved ones, which can no longer hug us, eat with us, converse with us. In and through our bodies, we give and receive love and affection.

We have some Biblical clues as to the importance of our bodies, with 2 creation accounts: Genesis 1 which tells us we were made in the image of God, male and female; and Genesis 2 which gives an account of how we were lovingly shaped and formed from the dust of the earth by a Creator who gave us breath. Psalm 139 affirms this image of being lovingly created--you knit me together in my mother's womb; my frame was not hidden from you when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. This is the image of God that God intends for us to see when we look in the mirror.

What does it mean to have been created with physical bodies in the image of God? As physical beings, we were created as gendered people, as sexual beings, male and female. "All we perceive and experience is through our sexual and gendered bodies." (Gayle Gerber Koontz, "Created in the Image of God", *Leader*, Summer, 2008, p. 5) I can't relate to you in any other way than as a gendered female, and that shapes how I see the world, and it shapes how you interact with me. All of us are caught up in our own ideas of what it means to be male and female, and how we should relate to each other. We have familial, societal, ecclesial and Biblical messages churning around in us; these messages are complex and sorting them out takes no small degree of wisdom and care.

We are more than our bodies, and our bodies matter. Rob Bell, in his book, *Sex God: Exploring the Endless Connections between Sexuality and Spirituality*, addresses this complexity in a chapter entitled, "Angels and Animals". He is really addressing the Greek

idea of the separation of body and soul, the separation of physical from spiritual. Bell says that if we were just bodies, we would be like animals, unable to think and reason, only submitting to the instincts of our bodies for food and procreation. "I couldn't help myself", a phrase used in relation to the inability to stop ourselves from over-eating, or one-night stands, feeds into the idea that our physical bodies control our actions and decision-making; that these physical drives are so strong that they cannot be controlled.

But neither are we angels, for whom there is no temptation in the realm of our physical, sexual lives. If we were angels, without bodies, then we would not experience any real temptations. And that does not reflect who we are as God's creation. So we are neither animals nor angels. We are human beings, created in the image of God, created with bodies and souls in which to live and reason.

The voices that would have us doubt that we are made in the image of God batter us every day. Commercials, billboards, magazines continually bombard us with messages that tell us what needs to be fixed in order to be more beautiful, more desirable, more popular, a better lover, more successful. We should be buying products to alter our appearance; starting diets to lose those extra pounds; buying particular equipment to get our bodies into the right shape. For women, the messages are about bigger breasts--so you can buy padded bras that give just the right amount of lift for the best cleavage, and if that isn't enough, you can buy padding to give you a curvier butt! And we only want hair on our heads, with just the right amount of sheen, and bounce, and colour and curl, and if we swing our hair in just the right way, we will be desirable by all those handsome men. And speaking of handsome men, the messages for men are no less insidious and destructive: bodies need to be firm and muscular, with broad shoulders, abs that are like a washboard, with each muscle clearly defined; oh and size matters a great deal to how you will be able to pleasure a woman. And if you buy just the right car, or razor, you'll get a very attractive woman to go along with it!

These advertisements play into our feelings of inadequacy; our doubts that we are good enough, smart enough, attractive enough, lovable enough. The messages from our culture tell us every moment of every day that on our own, we are not worthy. When we look in the mirror, we see reflected back at us complexions that are blemished, bodies that aren't the right shape or size; we see reflected back at us all the ways in which we are inadequate and unlovable.

In her book, *Honouring the Body*, Stephanie Paulsell tells the story about a father who taught his teenage daughter how to wash her face. Her face was so marked by acne, that she had a hard time leaving the house. "Seeing her distress, her father asked if he could

help by teaching her a new way to bathe. Leading her to the bathroom, he leaned over the sink and splashed water over his face, telling her, "On the first splash, say 'In the name of the Father,' on the second, 'in the name of the Son,' and on the third, 'in the name of the Holy Spirit.' Then look up into the mirror and remember that you are a child of God, full of grace and beauty." (p. 48) Can you imagine the gift that father gave to his daughter? With each bath, with each washing of the face, that act became a baptismal act in which she was marked and claimed as child of God, made in the image of God. What would happen if every time we bathed, it became a baptismal act in which we reminded ourselves that we are marked and claimed as children of God, made in the image of God? What difference might it make for us to splash water on our most despised or hated body-parts, in the name of God who created us, Christ who redeems us, and the Spirit who sustains us?

Here in this place, this sanctuary from the world, we need to hear that we are created in the image of God, and the image of God includes our bodies, and that image was deemed by God to be good. Here in this place, the good news is that God made us, knows us intimately, loves us fiercely, and God delights in us, just as we delight in the babies around us. Here in this place, we get the whole picture of God's varied and beautiful creation.

Look around you. See the beauty of God's creation. We come in varying sizes, shapes and abilities, and each of us, in all our beauty and imperfections, reflects and radiates the image of God! Look around you and see the image of God!

Our bodies matter so much that God chose to become flesh and dwell among us in the human form of Jesus. Our bodies matter so much, that Jesus, after experiencing a bodily death, also had a bodily resurrection. Our bodies matter so much that they will also experience a bodily resurrection.

The good news is that we are fearfully and wonderfully made, knit together with care in our mothers' wombs. The good news is that God declared creation good, and that includes us. The good news is that because of the incarnation, it somehow matters that we have physical bodies, and that our bodies will be redeemed.

And so it matters how we care for our bodies, how we view our bodies, how we honour our bodies and those of others. When we look in the mirror, may we see reflected back to us, not all of our inadequacies and shortcomings, but may we see the reflection of God.

May we look in the mirror, not with eyes of hatred and self-loathing, but with eyes of compassion and self-love.

This morning we want to gather around the table of our Lord as embodied people, the Body of Christ. We invite you to enter into this ritual as an affirmation of the image of God in you. You are invited to participate in this ritual as a way of claiming your body as a reflection of the goodness of being created in God's image. Bring your brokenness to the table and let Christ meet you here.

We bring ourselves, our wounds, our feelings of inadequacy, the ways in which we have not let the goodness of being created in God's image reflect in our lives. We confess the ways in which we have not honoured our own bodies as God's good creation, and the ways in which we have not honoured the bodies of those around us as God's good creation. We place all of this at the table of our forgiving Lord, inviting Christ into our brokenness, inviting Christ to receive us, feed us, and transform us into wholeness. At this table, we are re-membered into the Body of Christ.

**Prayer:** (from Jan L. Richardson, *Night Visions*, p. 79)

O God, with each of our breakings,

    you break,

and with each of our woundings

    your own wounds grow deeper.

Yet you hold the pieces together

    till we learn to make the new connections,

and you guard each throbbing wound

    till we have had enough of pain.

You remind us it is our delight you seek,

    not our suffering.

And you tell us it is not the wounds that give us life,

    but the tending of them in each other.

And you say it is not the breaking that makes us whole

    but the mending of the pieces

        that brings us life anew.

Amen.