



April 2, 2023

Rev. Dr. Thomas Evans

Genesis 6:6, Matthew 27:15-26

The Body of Christ:

To the Heart



Golden Verse

"Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it." I Corinthians 12:27

There is a temptation with all this Biblical language about the human body, to consider it mere metaphor.

Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law.

The very hairs of your head are all numbered.

How beautiful are the feet which bring the good news.

[He] place his hands on him to restore his sight.

Strengthen the knees that are feeble...

But in truth; it is our physical nature through which we encounter others, the world and God.

To consider them metaphor suggests that the body is a mere vessel. That our hands are not truly the hands of Christ, that seeing into another's face is not to see the face of God but perhaps simply reminds us of God. And that language about the heart is actually about our deep-seated feelings not anything physical.

Unfortunately, such notions inherently degrade the human condition,

leading us to devalue the beauty and wonder of simple interactions such as hearing an unexpected voice call your name across the room.

Scripture tells us the Word became flesh. And if this flesh and this world were of little worth and meaning, would God dared even come down? He breathed, He prayed, He ached, and He felt in His body the hunger, the hopefulness, and the pain of human existence.

And perhaps in this, Gods' very self, God's very being expanded and finally too, understood – understood what it is to be human.

From the beginning, God has been deeply connected to us. And when the sin of humanity was great in the earth we are confronted with a most shocking and desperately sorrowful verse:

The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.

The Hebrew word here means "cut" the pain of human evil caused God pain, cut

at God's heart for it so wrenched this heart of holiness and love. But overtime God relented and had a plan. He would take our hearts of stone, our hearts that had become hardened through tragedy, and greed, through apathy and hunger. And God would replace our stony hearts with a heart that feels all it needs to in order to understand – understand another's pain, understand true goodness, understand true love.

This heart of flesh was born in a manger and our Lord on this week, the holiest of weeks, felt the hearts of the crowd swell with hope at this arrival, and so they said, "*Hosanna to the Son of David*", that is, "*O save us, our hopeful king of triumph!*"

And I think Jesus understood them, in His heart. Not because He was the eternal Word of God in heaven but because He had come down and lived with us; He *was* one of us.

One of the heresies of the early church was that Jesus was not truly a physical being; but human in appearance only; it was an illusion; in their minds God was the ultimate abstraction which transcended the temporal plane entirely.

But today we say Jesus was born.

This is the power of Christianity. The notion, not shared in the same way by other world religions, that God could be cut to the heart; that God is not divorced from this world; and that in its most material manifestation of the human body Jesus truly suffered.

This sacred enshrinement of materiality is critical to understanding the core of Jesus; in His hunger, in His weariness; in His pain; in His hands, in His feet, in His legs, in His face.

When Jesus rode on that donkey, when He walked up Calvary, was nailed to the cross I think it changed Him and changed God forever.

It is often said that through heartache and brokenness that people come to know the presence of God most powerfully and clearly. But I think for Jesus it was reversed.

In His heartache He came to understand...us.

God has always been connected to us, but before perhaps never quite understood, why it is so hard for these breath-pumping, heart-gasping bipeds to get it right. To be generous, to be forgiving, to be faithful – why – God must have wondered and was clearly exasperated in Genesis, "*Why are these humans so bad at being human!*" Something like my saxophone teacher felt when I was in fourth grade. "*Tom, how can you be so bad at playing this instrument!*" It was hard to convince him I simply had no talent.

We can see in Jesus of Nazareth God shifted even further; from sorrow and anger and frustration in Genesis six when He regretted creating humanity into a deeper empathy.

They say you have to walk a mile in someone's shoes to gain perspective and understanding.

All through COVID I knew not only of the heartache but the hardship this plague had caused so many people. It meant conducting funerals by zoom and children saying final goodbyes to their parents through glass, or even on the phone.

Some months ago, I contracted COVID. I was sick. I could not come to work for a week. Wendy and I had to avoid each other in our apartment. It was miserable. And I complained, A LOT!

But even though I was sick I was not incapacitated. I could work from home, through emailing, phone calling, and sermon writing. My salary would still come in. Even though I had to avoid Wendy, Matthew and I could hang out because he had it also. And yes, I was trapped in the apartment, but it is spacious, and we only had three people living there.

Even though my trial was trivial in comparison, suddenly I had the merest glimpse of what so many hourly workers, who became much sicker, whose family depended on their daily income, whose spouse needed help navigating their children. It is hard to imagine.

But God in Jesus Christ lived here on this earth. So, He knows you. He wept; He was tempted, He was tired, He was rejected, He was belittled, He was tortured. So, He knows.

Christ on this Holy Week came to know the fickleness of humanity, the "Hosannas" of joy from the crowd one day and the blood thirsty jeers, "Crucify him." Who would blame Jesus had this heart been broken and thus resolved to no longer allow Himself to be hurt ever again.

Thanks be to God that He did not.

At that moment on the cross when He cries, "Why have you forsaken me?" I believe that's the moment that God finally knew what it is to be us.

In this Jesus understands the contradiction of the human spirit; that it is not evil continually; not prideful or selfish; but broken. Broken and breached and infected and the cure is compassionate understanding to all who are broken. For when you lose a child as God the Father did to the cross, it changes you.

One mother I knew committed to using her pain for others. Her daughter was born with special needs.

That night I was holding her, I remember that feeling, "What was happening?" And I felt a voice that was clear, "I will take care of her; it is going to be okay." Over the years it did not seem okay, but I always tried to do the right thing. However, whether teacher or school, wonderful people turned up in my life and, for 24 years, she was wonderful, chatty, and happy... But little things cropped up. They did not know what it is, her kidney and heart. . . She was

*diagnosed at 24 with a rare disease...
She died suddenly at 25.*

I could tell by the way she described the moment, even in her daughter's death, she found a moment of knowing God's grace. I was hesitant but desperate to understand and so I asked her to explain.

We never had to tell her there was nothing we could do for her; it gave me a lot of strength. I learned so much from her. . . I am committed to using my experience to help others. I feel committed to the idea. . . What is the point if I don't use it for something good?

She devoted her life to helping others find God in their loss and sorrow. And God uses the death of Christ, to bring hope not judgement, as well.

She holds onto hurt and pain to help others.

...When Christ's loving heart breaks on the cross, God's mercy is complete.

...God's grace becomes *the overriding factor* for all interactions with humans.

...God's compassion knows no limits; has no provisos, is utter and absolute.

...Jesus, sacred head now wounded, is the head that connects to the heart of God.

At the final moment on the cross Jesus has put away all His justified condemnation, all His truly righteous anger no more castigating the disciples; no more moral teachings simply, "*Father forgive them for they know not what they do.*" Amen.