

The Body Tells the Tale: Communicating the Gospel through the Reconciled Local Church

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Introduction

I was among a line of people streaming off a bus. We all filed by a weathered homeless man tucked into a small alcove. He appeared very uncomfortable. His hair was greasy. His face leathery. His eyes stared down. He looked tired. And, he had no legs. His body told a tale.

We have all seen it. From the homeless to a family member who experienced a great trauma or addiction. Unwittingly, we read people based on what the body tells. From the homeless to the obese to the chiseled athlete, we do this, and we do it with ourselves when we look in the mirror.¹

The body can attract or repulse. Whether we engage the person is shaped by the tale the body tells. We are more likely to want to engage with the healthy rather than what seems unhealthy. And yet, this too is imperfect and tenuous. I did stop and talk to the legless, homeless man and the conversation revealed a man of sorrow but also an inviting tenderness, even joyfulness. Conversely, the physically fit body may attract, but what if that drive to fitness is no less rooted in trauma than the addict? What if beauty is only skin-deep? Might the homeless man be communicating greater authenticity than the gym-goer? The body tells the tale, but we are more than what others see.

¹ Charlie Sorrel in “How the Invention of the Mirror Changed Everything” (www.fastcompany.com) notes a shift in human social and self-understanding with the arrival of the silvered glass mirror among the rich and royalty in the 15th century. He quotes Ian Mortimer’s *Millennium: From Religion to Revolution: How Civilization Has Changed Over a Thousand Years*: “The very act of a person seeing himself in a mirror or being represented in a portrait as the center of attention encouraged him to think of himself in a different way. He began to see himself as unique. Previously the parameters of individual identity had been limited to an individual’s interaction with the people around him and the religious insights he had over the course of his life. Thus individuality as we understand it today did not exist: people only understood their identity in relation to groups—their household, their manor, their town or parish—and in relation to God.”

In *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, medical doctor Bessel Van Der Kolk researches the impact of post-traumatic stress on the whole human being: “We have learned that trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on mind, brain and body. This imprint has ongoing consequences for how the human organism manages to survive in the present” (2014, 21). The imprint of the past on our mind, brain, and bodies has telling consequences. The body will keep score and tell the tale.

Healing requires a work of wholeness. As van der Kolk’s learning reveals, healing requires a whole and communal response. He summarizes, “People who feel safe and meaningfully connected with others have little reason to squander their lives doing drugs or staring numbly at television; they don’t feel compelled to stuff themselves with carbohydrates or assault their fellow human beings.” (2014, 353). So, we note that while our whole beings keep a score and the body tells a tale, wholeness requires community.

If, however, the body tells the tale—whether authentically or inauthentically—then what is necessary for true community that brings wholeness? What if we were attracted to the wrong story or a false story?

Let us consider the attachment theory of psychologist Gordon Neufeld: “...attachment is the pursuit of proximity, of closeness and connection: physically, behaviorally, emotionally, and psychologically. As in the material world, it is invisible and yet fundamental to our existence.... When we ignore its inexorable laws, we court trouble.” (2004, 17). Neufeld calls for attachment awareness because multiple forces—social, relational and economic—have eroded natural attachments creating “...an unprecedented cultural breakdown for which our instincts cannot adequately compensate.” (2004, 31).

The tale being told by so many, and by the wider social reality, is a great challenge for the healing community. Van der Kolk says we need to overcome the traumas our bodies keep score of (2014). So, in the end, our bodies are telling a tale and crying out for an integral wholeness while we increasingly find ourselves formed by a cultural reality that disempowers the attractive attachment that is crucial to make us whole.

These insights on the impact of meaningful community and attachment leads us to the consideration of this paper: If the Church is the expression and presence of the body of Christ, have we considered deeply enough what tale the local Christian fellowship, as Christ’s body, communicates? In what follows we will explore these questions in hopes

of a better communication of the gospel in the current social reality through an exploration of the local fellowship as the body of Christ telling the tale. This is crucial for healthy attachment to God is. Christians must confess that the increasing unattachment of people from God in secular society is intricately connected to the tale the church has told, less in the message we have proclaimed from pulpits but from lack of embodiment of the Good News we proclaim.

Miroslav Volf writes, “Misconceptions of the Christian faith mirror the widespread misbehavior of Christians; and the misbehavior of Christians is associated with the misconstruals of their own faith...” (2011, 52). It will be attentiveness to the embodiment of the gospel of God’s kingdom that Christians must attend to now. The “hermeneutic of suspicion” that Lesslie Newbigin says dominates the secular mind and society as it looks at the tale the church is telling must be countered with an embodied hermeneutic: “...the only hermeneutic of the gospel is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it” (1989, 227).

This embodied hermeneutic of the gospel will be small and localized, requiring discipline and patience, a rejection of the grandiose, and lived in view of neighbors, co-workers, and schoolmates. It will require a body of people who live as Cyprian said of the third-century, pre-Christendom church, “...we do not speak great things but we live them” (Kreider 2016, 13). The church must tend to wholeness and authenticity as the body of Christ to tell the tale of the good news and make attachment to God attractive.

This community has at its heart the remembering and rehearsing of his words and deeds, and the sacraments given by Christ through which it is enabled both to engraft new members into its life and to renew this life again and again through the body broken and the lifeblood poured out. It exists in him and for him. He is the center of its life. Its character is given to it, when it is true to its nature, not by the characters of its member but by his character (Newbigin 1989, 227).

In what follows, we will look particularly at Jesus’ words and deeds to see how the gospel of the kingdom was communicated through his body that told the tale and how *his* body—the church—is to be the avenue by which people in a culture of eroded attachments find wholeness and hope.

The Body Tells the Tale: Jesus' Body in Word and Deed

The mystery and hope of the gospel of the kingdom is tied up in the promise of Immanuel, God with us (Isa 7:14; Matt 1:23). God came not disembodied but in human flesh: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).² The Apostle Paul connects this divine embodiment to the very nature of the church: “And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (Col 1:18–20).

The mystical, spiritual understanding of the church as the body of Christ in the world is rooted in what God accomplished in Christ's physical body. God the Son was reconciling all things through his *very real* body (John 20:27). The early church always pointed to Jesus' *very real* resurrected body and to the church as the very real body of Christ, filled with the Spirit of God, after the ascension. In summary, Jesus Christ was God in bodily form and the church is the body of Christ embodied in fulfillment and in continuance of God's mission to extend his reign and presence to the ends of the earth.

So, how did Jesus reveal God in bodily form? And how did this form his disciples to be his body that keeps telling the tale? To answer, we will look at three dimensions of the bodily life of Jesus: embodying embrace; active faithful presence; and localized transformation.

Jesus Transformed through Embodying Embrace

Jesus began forming his spiritual —the church—through invitation and hospitality. “Come, follow me...” (Mark 1:17; Matt 4:19) are his first words to those who would become his disciples. This invitation was with rabbinic purpose. It was an invitation to a way of life that would be revealed through word and deed and then carried forward by his apprentices as they journeyed with God and others. In Jesus' interaction with his disciples and in his interaction with others as his disciples watched, Jesus modeled an “embodying embrace.” He was the God who saw (like Hagar discovered of God in Genesis 16:13) and who welcomed others into his most authentic reality. This

² All Scripture quotes from *Holy Bible, New International Version*, 2011.

hospitality and embrace surprised, challenged, and transformed. His welcome was laser-focused on forming a community that embodied the transforming presence of the kingdom. His declaration of the timely nearness of the kingdom of God was a call to embody a new reality (Mark 1:15).

Enveloped into closeness, the disciples witnessed the cost of embodying the Jubilee vision of Yahweh. The popular awe of his declaration of Isaiah's words at the synagogue in Nazareth turned to outright hostility when the words were moved toward their intended application (Luke 4:16–30). From the outset the disciples were invited into the applied hospitality of God's will that made room for the oppressed and found evidence of living faith embodied in the despised foreigner—like the Sidonian widow and Naaman and the Syrian officer. Invitation into the kingdom vision was to find the hospitality of God embodied in unexpected and unsettling ways. The body of Jesus touched undesirables (Mark 1:41) and entered homes the “righteous” and “unrighteous” would not or could not let their bodies go (Luke 7:36–39; 19:1–10).

The invitation of Jesus to the first disciples brought them into conflict with the holy presence and perplexity of God. They witnessed and eventually came to embody this radical hospitality as well (consider Ananias' welcome of Paul in Acts 9 or Peter's entering of Cornelius' home in Acts 10). In invitation, Jesus was attaching human beings to God himself. In hospitality, Jesus was embodying the very nature of God and inviting human beings into that same nature with the intention that God's reign may be seen and attached to through them.

Forming this kind of body required bringing opposites together. Jesus invited twelve into radical hospitality. The calling of the twelve names sets of brothers, a tax collector, a political zealot, and an eventual traitor (Luke 6:12–17). The group would become a body of invitation and hospitality by being with Jesus and working through the practical successes and disappointments of life together (Matt 20:20–28). Jesus embodied the will of God and the reign of God, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes community, “in the thick of foes” (1954, 17). The twelve were learning by the embodied embrace of Jesus to have their illusions shattered so a new reality could emerge. Bonhoeffer again sheds light on the impact of this, “Only that fellowship which faces such disillusionment, with all its unhappy aspects, begins to be what it should be in God's sight, begins to grasp in faith the promise that is given to it” (1954, 27). This is what the disciples were invited to discover, so that they might carry this invitation and transformative hospitality forward.

Rosaria Champagne Butterfield writes, “...Christian hospitality and the community that develops from it is, I believe, the ground zero of our life in Christ: it is how our faith is visible and serviceable, powerful and potent. Hospitality from the home, in the neighbourhood, and through the membership of the local congregation has the potential to transform us” (2015, 147). Transformation into the likeness of Christ is the point of the body telling the tale. Jesus intended that the nature of the inviting and hospitable God may become the nature of the disciples who would become the body of Christ in the world. Invitation and hospitality are gospel communication only to the extent that God in bodily form becomes the transformed and transforming body life of the Christ-centered community.

To summarize, the local body of Christ that tells the tale of the gospel of the kingdom will embody the invitation and hospitality of Jesus lived on earth. Such invitation and hospitality only tell the tale when they result in transformation of broken lives into wholeness and attachment to the Father in heaven. Thus, to live is to continue the life of Jesus with his first followers. To continue this embodying embrace is to become attractive to the world in the same way Greeks came and asked Philip, “Sir...we would like to see Jesus” (John 12:21).

Jesus was an Active Faithful Presence

God in human flesh did not sit still. When pressure came for Him to settle and have the crowds come to Him, He chose differently. “Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come” (Mark 1:38). He had his regular routes and roosts (like Capernaum and Bethany), but the body of Jesus was active as the body was created to be. Each gospel follows the Son of God as an actively faithful presence in many places and among many peoples. It was His followers He would commend to a Spirit-filled ministry to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8), but His activity laid the logical foundation in the disciples for the Spirit’s eventual dispersing of the Good News.

David Fitch writes, “Faithful presence names the reality that God is present in the world and that he uses a people faithful to his presence to make himself concrete and real amid the word’s struggles and pain. When the church is this faithful presence, God’s Kingdom become visible, and the world is invited to join” (2016, 10). This faithful presence that the local church is called to embody is not sedentary. The active way of Jesus has always formed the way of Christians. When active, moving, faithful presence has been abandoned the church risks unfaithfulness to the essence of the words and

deeds of Jesus. The active movement of the church is a sign of the activity of the Holy Spirit and is the expected nature of the believing community. The body of Christ simply goes. The church is a body in motion.

This active incarnation was the practice of the disciples and the early church. In His resurrected body, Jesus commanded His disciples, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations...” (Matt 28:19). The emphasis is on making disciples, an attaching of them to their Trinitarian home, but that requires an active body life, not sedentary spirituality. The other gospel writers all point to this way of the body telling the tale. Mark’s Gospel states, “Go into all the world...” (Mark 16:15). The good news in the Gospel of Luke will be proclaimed to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem (Luke 24:47). John’s Gospel has Jesus sending the small body of disciples in the same way He was sent (John 20:21). It is the Holy Spirit that will of course animate all this action of the body of Christ—just as it had for Jesus in the flesh—but that is the point: the Spirit is the breath of God animating for activity.

The first disciples were attached to a non-sedentary Jesus. They saw Him cross seas (even walk on them), traverse turbulent territory like Samaria, enter places of theological debate, dance at weddings and wander big cities. The four Gospels reveal God on the move and so they too became a body telling the tale in this way when the Spirit was poured out at Pentecost. Human transformation into the likeness of God and attachment to God demanded this movement. Everywhere Jesus took His disciples was aimed at transforming them into the body of Christ and bringing God’s revelation to unlikely places. The fruit of this is seen in Paul’s desire to get to Rome (Acts 19:21) and Spain (Rom 15:24) and in the unavoidable non-sedentary nature of the body of Christ that is still on the move.

The church body loses its effectiveness, health, and ability to tell the tale when it stops moving. A retreat into buildings and a “come to us” sedentary programmatic structure is not what Jesus modeled. The church is “...not...a community of completed disciples who are simply adding to their ranks, but (are) ‘a people on the way,’ a people who are still being molded into mature disciples themselves” (Tizon 2018, 148). When we are on the move like Jesus, we commit to our own ongoing transformation and bring faithful presence to a world prone to retreat, selfishness, think-alike and look-alike grouping, or self-promoting agenda, and even violence. Being on the move Jesus’ way requires discernment and the leading of the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 1:8; 8:1–5; 16:6–10).

A body on the move must employ all the body's gifts and abilities—spiritual and natural—to tell the tale of the gospel of the kingdom. A sedentary church tends toward teaching (symbolically locked in place by pulpit) at the center of telling the tale. Conversely, a people on the way must be holistic in the way the human body is. An active local church will see the need for every gift and skill engaged in the movement. Construction skills, making meals, health care, mowing lawns, running an ethical business, tilling the soil, starting socially active organizations, and using the arts (even Jesus doodled in the dirt [John 8:6]) , or coaching sports will be honored by a sent body of Christ on the move. The disciples remained fishers in practice and Paul never abandoned his tent-making craft. A people on the way use their whole bodies and harness the whole body to tell the tale.

To summarize, the body of Christ that tells the tale will be active and on the move. Only in going locally and globally and being present in places we have not yet been can we be a people on the way. This faithful presence that gets up and goes along the way transforms disciples into better fitness as the body of Christ. We need to be on the move for the sake of others and for our own health.

Jesus Was Locally Transforming

Jesus' embodying embrace and active faithful presence was purposeful and aimed at localized transformation. Elias Chacour tells the story of his professor calling students to a life of active faithful presence:

“If there is a problem somewhere,” he said with his dry chuckle, “this is what happens. Three people will try to do something concrete to settle the issue. Ten people will give a lecture analyzing what the three are doing. One hundred people will commend or condemn the ten for their lecture. One thousand people will argue about the problem. And one person—only one—will involve himself so deeply in the true solution that he is too busy to listen to any of it. Now,” he asked gently, his penetrating eyes meeting each of ours in turn, “which person are you?” (Chacour 2013, 134).

Jesus was the “one person.” Jesus' word and deed, his entire being, were the true solution to the localized problems that beset people and kept them from attaching to the Father.

When the twelve were disputing who was the greatest, Jesus says, “For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves” (Luke 22:27). The localized problem of communal competition is solved, not with a lecture or a book, but by pointing to His own person—to what He did with His body among them. Jesus consistently brought localized transformation wherever His faithful presence went, beginning with His closest followers and then extending through them to the world where they were present.

The gospels repeatedly reveal Jesus’ bringing about localized transformation that seem to follow a pattern: Jesus initiates and enters with His whole being into relationship with a person (or group), that person or group experiences the true solution only His person can provide, and the overflow of that encounter brings localized transformation to the personal and social life of a place resulting in the multiplied embodiment of God’s kingdom.

Let us look at three examples in the gospels to illustrate this. First, Jesus’ active faithful presence with the demon-possessed man of the Garasene (Mark 5:1–20). The account includes all the elements noted: Jesus embodies embrace and active, faithful presence by taking his disciples into Gentile territory and engages the fearful man among the tombs (Mark 5:3–5). Jesus’ full person becomes the man’s true solution, and this leads to localized transformation. The demonized person is set free, and the wider community is impacted. The encounter with power is not solely for the man’s sake. In fact, Jesus prevents him from leaving with the twelve. Instead of abandoning the local, the restored man is to be the body of wholeness there: “Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you” (Mark 5:19). His body will tell the tale.

A second story in the gospels is Jesus’ interaction with the woman of Sychar (John 4:1–42). Jesus embodies active embrace and active faithful presence by leading His disciples into hated Samaria and engaging a woman in conversation. This leads to her personal encounter with God in the flesh (John 4:26–29) and this spills over into a wider localized transformation resulting in Jesus and His team staying two more days (John 4:40). In fact, Jesus’ bodily life—even thirst—becomes a key moment in shaping His followers to see the world differently and engage it like He had just done. “I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest” (John 4:35). In other words, Jesus exhorted them to engage their full selves in His work. The bodies of those with us tell a tale, and our whole selves must have a story to tell that brings transformation even to our enemies, so that they can embody the kingdom, too.

A third localized transformation account comes at the cross. Jesus embodies embrace in various interactions through the passion narratives. In the chaos of the darkened garden, Jesus initiates and embodies embrace with Malchus, the servant of the high priest (John 18:10–11; Luke 22:49–51). He embraces His mother and John, uniting them as family (John 19:26–27). He embraces the criminal (Luke 23:42–43). Jesus models in word and deed an active faithful presence as he moves toward the cross, all with localized transformation in mind. The interaction with His mother and John, the criminal, and even Pilate reveal a very localized transformation within a grander, cosmic transformation. The cosmic transformation won at the cross and the resurrection is, as John depicts it, ultimately expressed locally with Peter’s reinstatement after his grievous denials. This localized transformation rooted in Peter’s experience of the wholeness of Jesus’ resurrected body overflows into Peter’s passionate ministry to the body of Christ in new, active, and unexpected places:

Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin. As a result, they do not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God” (1 Pet 4:1–2).

Peter is encouraging the local believers in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia to be the body of Christ, just as Jesus was God in the body. They were to represent Christ where Jesus never visited in the flesh. These new Christians were the body telling the tale and bringing overflowing local transformation in word and deed—even if they suffered like their Lord. Being a body that tells the tale, they were helping previously unreached peoples attach to the Father through their experience of God in the flesh evidenced in the local body of Jesus’ Spirit-filled disciples. In short, the New Testament reveals that the body telling the tale is the only way the will of God advances.

Conclusion

Miroslav Volf writes, “We live in an age of great conflicts and petty hopes” (2011, 99). The local church, the body of Christ, is a new creation, a radical community, that is the continuance of the one body of Christ. This union is through the Holy Spirit. The Apostle Paul writes, “For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink” (1 Cor 12:13). The breath of God gives life to the church and reconciles and unites unlikely people, sometimes those who were enemies or strangers, into one body so that the words and deeds of Jesus have expression everywhere. This Spirit-filled body shaped

by the embodying embrace and active faithful presence of Jesus will bring a locally transformative solution—the presence of Jesus—for the great conflicts and petty hopes besetting the realities people are living today. Thus, the body, reconciled and Spirit-filled, will tell a tale. Johannes Reimer writes, “A church which does not follow its missionary call and does not embody the gospel has lost its nature and represents a religious club rather than the people of God” (2017, 60).

In the end, the local church is to be in function the body of Christ bringing an overflow of localized transformation through the same embodying embrace and active faithful presence God the Son lived in human flesh. The local church is now the “one person” involved deeply in the true solution—which is Jesus Christ, God with us.

The body of Christ needs to communicate the good news with a wholeness of being. A reconciled way of relating with one another, society, and even enemies, is to be evident when people interact with believers. This body-life should be measured by one metric: by whether the local church body reflects the person of Jesus. This body active in the community needs to be healthy, intentional, and must awaken a desire for those outside the body of Christ to become attached to the Father so that “...we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Eph 4:15–16).

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