

I'm the Teaching Pastor at Beaver Creek Church of the Nazarene over in Dayton, OH. My wife Amanda and I have been in Ohio a little over four years. We moved to Dayton exactly one weekend after we got married, so four years is also how long we've been married. It's also how long we've been Nazarene.

Like many of you, I was born and raised in the Church. I grew up Baptist in a church that never really talked about theology, so I didn't really know what any of the denominational differences were until later. I went to a public high school where - I'm sure it will surprise you - I was not one of the cool kids. I wasn't bullied or anything. I just had a small group of friends that existed on the fringes of the high school social world. I want to come back to high school in a moment, but first, how I got from high school to here:

I went to a private Baptist college in MO not too different from Mt. Vernon. We had twice weekly chapels where we were forced to sit through various (and variously interesting) speakers and all that. After college, I served as a youth pastor while I was in grad school. And it was really during that time I learned what it meant to be Baptist, and that I wasn't a very good fit.

When I began looking for my next job, I chose the Nazarene denomination. All that to say: I am Nazarene on purpose. What I love about my job is that I get to tell people all the time the good news that Jesus rose from the dead, and that means we can not only be with God, but that we can become like God. We can find the excessive, overflowing life Jesus offers us.

I also have a deep and abiding love affair with pop culture. I love movies, I read as much as I can. I enjoy comics and when I grow up I want to be Batman. There's a little about me. I'll be around all week, so I hope I can share more of my story with you, and hear many of your stories.

I want to begin with a story from high school (I told you we'd go back there). First, a little background: I had essentially no self-esteem by the time I got to high school. Despite that, I had a group of truly tremendous friends, who loved me a whole lot more than I loved myself. In particular, I spent most of my time with three other guys named Clint, Brandon and Brandon. One regular old day, a day so ordinary I can't even remember what day of the week it was, what *month* it even was, I showed up at my normal time in the morning. Headed to my locker, where I usually met up with the guys. As I was walking down the hall, I saw Clint and one of the Brandons coming my way. I'm sure I gave them the requisite head nod of acknowledgment.

But Clint - my closest friend - suddenly scowled. Before I could make a move or ask a question, he grabbed me by my shirt and threw me against my locker. He got up in my face and said, *Why are you wearing that shirt?*

The shirt in question was an old, faded Reebok shirt. It looked like the kind of shirt someone bought, worn for a few years, then retired to the exercise gear pile for a few more years and then finally threw out. I'm sure I found it at a garage sale or something, but I couldn't tell you where it came from. The point is: it was a gross, trashy shirt.

When Clint saw my confusion, he spat at me: *that shirt makes you look like trash, and you're better than that. If you ever wear it again, we're going to kick your butt (except he didn't say butt because he wasn't speaking at a Christian University chapel).*

In that moment, I didn't really understand what he was talking about, but for the rest of the day, for the first time, I really *looked* at that shirt. And believe it or not, it was the first time I'd ever *really* looked at my clothes at all.

The way I told the story probably makes Clint seem like a bully. But he wasn't trying to hurt me, nor did he. He was trying to wake me up, and he did. Because he was my friend, Clint saw me better than I saw myself (that's what friends are for). He could see that I didn't much love myself, and that lack in my soul was expressed in how I carried myself: my unkempt hair, my thoughtless clothes, my posture.

We could spend more time on how those friends' love for me taught me a good deal about how to love myself, but none of you are being paid to counsel me.

No, I told you that was the first moment I can recall that I began to understand how intimately my body is connected to my soul.

Believe me when I tell you I know exactly how weird that sentence sounds. We're not used to talking about bodies in the Church. We all know the conversations associated with bodies, and we mostly avoid them, taking a don't-ask-don't-tell position on everything from sex and homosexuality and the Christian modesty culture to alcohol and drugs. From health and healthcare issues to how we engage pop culture (or whether we do at all).

Most of us know the church answers to those questions, but we couldn't tell you *why* they're supposedly the right answers. This week, I want to talk about the question behind all those questions, a conversation that's in the foundations of how we build our faith, and how we orient ourselves in the world: do our bodies matter? This week, we're going to talk about our bodies: why we have them, what they're for.

What I hope we'll discover by the end of our week together is that these bodies we have are good. That our flesh is essential to our humanity. And that understanding and loving our bodies is vital to a whole and vibrant spirituality. Loving our bodies well teaches us to love God and people well.

If we have an attitude toward our bodies at all, it's that bodies are dangerous, full of cravings always on the verge of spiraling out of control. The Church warns about our flesh and its temptations. And while pop culture seems to celebrate losing ourselves in the moment – Eminem's new single encourages us to make just like K-Fed and let ourselves go berserk, we're also fascinated and terrified by the zombie, which is a body stripped of all inhibition. Zombies – from World War Z to the Walking Dead – captivate us because deep down we know that a person ruled by their desires isn't really a person anymore. They're a "party animal" or a "cougar". They're walking dead.

Why? Because these things are bad. Our bodies are rife with lusts that we need to control carefully and vigilantly. And our ideas of the afterlife support this enmity toward our bodies: We imagine our Selves to be souls trapped in these flesh suits, at the mercy of our cravings. While our bodies age, wither and die (which you don't think much about when you're in your teens and 20s), our souls stay eternally the same (we imagine). Once our bodies perish, our souls fly away to heaven where they become angels.

If that's how you think about your self, if that's what you think happens when you die, then *obviously* our bodies can't be that important. Our bodies are just temporary shells for our true selves, they're disposable.

And even while we're here on Earth, our bodies aren't an essential component of our faith. What matters to Christianity is believing that Jesus is God, that Jesus died for you. You should read your bible so you learn things about God. You should pray. These are *spiritual* activities. Maybe at best they're mental but they're certainly not physical.

Those of you who have been around the church for a while: when was the last time you heard a sermon or a lesson on fasting? Or on keeping a Sabbath day? How 'bout eating healthily or exercising?

The idea that we'd spend whole sermons on that sort of thing sounds silly. For many of us, the possibility that Jesus cares about the health and wholeness of our physical bodies is remote at best. Because we don't imagine our bodies to be essential, vital to our spirituality. What really matters is our souls. And you don't exercise your soul on the track; you exercise it in a quiet time, at church.

We can't imagine a Christianity where bodily issues like sex or health actually matter because our Christianity is all about the *soul*. To bring in these fleshy issues doesn't make any sense. (anyone getting weirded out by my persistent use of words like 'fleshy'? Isn't that interesting?)

I don't know how many of you grew up with this sort of division between soul and body; I suspect most of us - particularly those of us raised in Western cultures - at least recognize it. It was this neglect of the body that formed me into a person who didn't care for my body.

So in this week together, I want to share with you my spiritual journey, how I learned to love my physical self (I know, I know... "that's what she said". Believe me, there'll be plenty more of that, so get the giggles out now.), and more broadly, how I learned to love the physical world we live in. I want to invite you into my journey, to find the points of contact with your own journey. My prayer has been that this week would be full of conversations about our spirituality and how it can be embodied, made flesh and bone.

When we begin to see our bodies as good gifts from God, as essential to our personhood and vital to our spirituality, we learn to love God and love others and love our world in new, concrete and transformative ways.

The goodness of our bodies is foundational to the Scriptures. The Scriptures affirm that we *need* our bodies, that we are in fact *physical* creatures. The first chapter of the Bible, Genesis 1 affirms this:

"God said, "Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us. They will reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the wild animals on the earth, and the small animals that scurry along the ground."

So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

Then God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it." -- Genesis 1:26-28a

It should matter to us that the first story of the Scriptures is God creating a physical world and filling it with physical creatures. And then, when God wants to create a being in God's own image, we don't find disembodied spirits who float around. We find two bodies. Two distinct bodies: a male body and a female body.

This is the image of God. Distinctive physical bodies created to live and thrive in a wholly physical world. Is this an accident? A coincidence? Or divine design?

As we move through the Old Testament, we see again and again God interacting in distinctively embodied ways with humanity. When God makes a covenant with a man named Abraham, Abraham is required to mark that covenant by circumcising himself and all the men under his authority. Without going into the gory details, circumcision is a decidedly physical action, and it marks and distinguishes Abraham's descendants throughout most of human history (until relatively recently when circumcision became standard in the West).

Several hundred years later, when Moses leads Abraham's descendants, the Israelites, out of slavery, he receives a covenant from God we call the *Torah*, which means the Way, or Instruction. It's the Israelites' guide to how to live as God's people in God's world. And the *Torah*, from the 10 commandments to the construction of the tabernacle and all its sacrifices to all the purity and dietary laws is amazingly physical. Spend a little time in the *Torah*, you can't get away from the physicality of it all.

When God chose to reveal his Way to humanity, it wasn't all about believing the right propositions or the power of positive thinking. It was concrete, embodied practices embedded in a community. If we had a time machine, we could go back and see how God's people were different. From what they ate to how they interacted with each other to what their bodies looked like.

For Israel, how they used their bodies mattered. Loving their bodies well shaped how they loved God and loved people.

Ask an Israelite which was more important - the body or the spirit, they'd have given you a funny look (not just because they didn't speak English). For them there was no difference. Your body and your soul are two aspects of who you are. One isn't healthy without the other. One isn't more important than the other.

A good analogy might be our cars: we imagine our souls to be our true selves and our bodies to be accessories. Similarly, our cars all have various accessories: are they two- or four-door? Do you have a sweet stereo and speaker system? A spoiler? Power windows? Even the most basic car, with no accessories at all, is still a car. It still performs the function of a car. The accessories might be nice, but they're not essential.

We view our bodies the same: they're all different, and they're accessory. They might be nice (or we might hate our bodies), but one day they're going to die and decay and our true selves, our souls, will go to Heaven.

But the ancient Hebrews, had they owned cars, would've seen the body-soul relationship more akin to the relationship between a car's engine and its brakes: they're both essential. If you have a car that has brand new, top of the line brakes, but no engine, you don't actually have a car in the most meaningful sense: it won't accomplish the purpose a car is designed for. Similarly, if your car has the best, most beautiful, powerful and fastest engine, but no brakes, you're not going to drive it. It still isn't a car in the fullest sense because it's still not drivable.

You need both of these very different components fully functioning and working together for your car to be what it was created to be.

So too would an ancient Israelite speak about our bodies and souls. Neither is accessory. To divide them, to ask which is more important is nonsense: if you lack either, you're missing a vital aspect of your personhood. You're less than your created potential.

Nothing affirms the essential goodness and value of our bodies so much as Jesus himself. The story of Jesus we call the Gospel of John introduces us to Jesus as the eternal, uncreated Word of God who spoke the world into being. And in the midst of this cosmic introduction, John tells us this:

The Word became human and made his home among us. -- John 1:14

The Greek there says "The Word became flesh", as in: the eternal, uncreated God became a finite, created body. The creator entered into creation in a concrete, tangible way. In the church, we call this the Incarnation, which literally means "the enfleshment". God becomes human. Creator becomes creature. Maker becomes matter.

The Incarnation is God's affirmation that the physical creation is not evil, not an afterthought. The kingdom Jesus came to announce is a real-world, right now, reign of God. To announce God is King is to embrace the life of God right now, not just later. Jesus' new life isn't just afterlife. It's now-life.

Jesus spoke of God in embodied language: The kingdom of heaven is like a Father with two sons. A father is *very* embodied. You can't be a father unless you have sex, a quintessentially embodied act... okay we've all had *that* talk right?

The kingdom of God is like a man on a journey, set up on by robbers, whose wounds are bound up by a foreigner.

The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant who discovers a pearl worth so much he sells everything he owns to buy it.

Our bodies aren't an accessory to our life with God. Jesus cares about our bodies, and they are an essential aspect of a whole, healthy spirituality. When Jesus was asked to sum up the *Torah*, to give the one commandment that embodied all the commands, he said, "Love God, Love people". For Jesus, that command can't be separated from our physical reality. Loving God and loving people isn't just something you do with your mind or your spirit. It's turning the other cheek, not worrying about your clothes, giving money to the poor, walking an extra mile, healing people, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked.

Loving our bodies well teaches us to love God and people well.

Now, before we close, we should observe briefly how the New Testament addresses possibly our biggest objection: but what about when we die? If we're just going to go to Heaven and be spirits when we die, how much can our bodies actually matter?

I'm going to give you two passages to read over the next couple of days, scriptures that affirm the eternal goodness of matter, that God has not nor will ever abandon the physical world as a temporary idea or accessory.

The first is 1 Corinthians 15. The apostle Paul writes to the church in the city of Corinth about the importance of Jesus' resurrection. And his whole argument hinges on the fact that when God raised Jesus from the dead, it wasn't a disembodied spirit, a sort of ghost or heavenly specter. Jesus was bodily

raised from the dead. His actual body, which was actually killed, actually came back to life and actually walked out of his tomb.

Paul goes on to tell us that Jesus' physical resurrection matters because what happened to him will happen to us. In the end, we will experience a physical resurrection. In the end, we will not be disembodied spirits, but bodies. Flesh and blood.

There's a lot (a *lot*) in 1 Corinthians 15, but one affirmation we can make today: Our bodies are good. And they are essential to who we are. And they are vital to our spirituality. To ignore our bodies and focus only on our souls is like always changing the oil in your car but never the brakes. You're in for pain.

The other passage is the last vision we have in the Scriptures is Revelation 21-22. This is a picture of the End, when creation has been redeemed and evil finally vanquished. And here too, we don't see the people of God escaping to heaven while the Earth is destroyed.

Again, tons to talk about there, but at least we can affirm is that the new heaven and new earth are physical places. God doesn't take us up to heaven, heaven comes down to earth and God lives among humanity. God wipes every tear from our eyes. This is a physical reality.

Which shouldn't surprise us because that's what God's original plan looked like: us living together in a physical world with God, as God's image.

Our bodies are good. They are essential to who we are, and vital to our spirituality. Loving our bodies well teaches us to love God and people well.

The question before us this week is, What does a faithful picture of God look like in Mt. Vernon, OH in 2013? What does it look like for you and me to participate fully in God's kingdom, to follow Jesus into the life that is really life?

Whatever that faithful picture of God looks like, it has skin and bones. It's flesh and blood.

And that's what I want to explore together with you. Tonight we're going to talk about how our culture teaches us to view our bodies, plus *Mad Men*. And then on Friday morning, I'm hoping Sir Mix-a-lot can inspire us to create a better narrative about our bodies than what our culture has to offer.

In the end, I hope our time together can inspire us to love the world better, to love our bodies better and more faithfully and ultimately to look more like Jesus.

For now, as we close, I want to invite you to ask this question: Why do you have a body? (In other words, why did God create us as physical creatures in a physical world?)

Prayer