

[How do we illustrate these stats? Infographic style?] I can't believe I'd be breaking any new ground if I told you our culture has an image problem. We've all heard the statistics - that 42% of girls in 1st-3rd grade want to be thinner. Or that 81% of 10-year-olds are afraid of being fat, that in fact young girls fear being fat more than nuclear war, cancer or losing their parents. That problem only increases as those young girls grow older. 91% of women are unhappy with their bodies.

Men aren't exempt either. As many as 12% of teen boys are already using supplements or steroids. Men's dissatisfaction with our bodies shows up in our speech - 4 out of 5 men talk about their own (or someone else's) appearance in ways that draw attention to weight, lack of hair or frame. Nearly 1 in 4 men say their self-consciousness about their appearance keeps them out of the gym.

To be a body is messy business. And the numbers tell us what we already know - we don't much care for these bodies we find ourselves in.

Despite the fact that everything we experience in our world we experience through our bodies, we don't like to talk much about them. Part of that is our bodies' endless diversity. Your body is very different from mine, and from everyone else's. We're endless combinations of sex and gender and skin color, eye color and hair color (and pattern), body type and leg length, and on and on and on. There's no such thing as a perfect body.

Bodies are complicated, too: keeping them in healthy, working order takes a lot of work, from food and clothing to grooming and exercising (and it all only gets worse as you age). They're messy and hairy and they leak fluid no one wants to see (which is why our bathrooms are always, always private).

Despite our constant vigilance, most of our bodies steadfastly refuse to match the image our world offers. No matter how many diets or runs we go on, we can't lose the weight we want. Or we're plagued by sickness. Or we're aging and our bodies won't do what they used to. Or our bodies are disabled - limbs or senses don't work.

To be a body is a messy business. The vast majority of us struggle with these bodies we find ourselves in.

But what if that messiness is *good*? What if all our confusion over our bodies is a potential source of peace and healing? We have a word for this potential - for something that is good, something particularly pleasing, that points beyond itself to reveal the very fabric of reality. We call that something "beautiful".

What if our bodies - in all their messiness - are beautiful? What if the mess of being a body actually points us to God? What if God is in fact waiting for us *in the midst* of our messiness?

That's hard for us to believe because we see broken or messy bodies not as beautiful, but as bad. And it's no surprise where we *get* that belief - it's not only deeply embedded in the fabric of our humanity, it's reinforced hundreds of times every day, every time we watch TV or flip through a magazine or listen to the radio.

Our American, media-driven, consumer-oriented standard of beauty is designed to make us discontent. To foster a hatred of our bodies. To convince us we're *not* beautiful.

[Google Image search of "Beautiful"] And largely, it works. We're discontent with our bodies. When our bodies won't do what we want, we feel like failures. We feel ugly. We feel less than fully human because we've been told over and over that "fully human" looks like that.

A community that finds beauty in the mess of our bodies would be a threat to everyone who has a vested interest in teaching us to hate our bodies.

This beauty culture is what keeps us buying the right things and admiring the right people and hating the wrong people and pursuing the right behaviors and habits. This beauty culture is all about control.

Which is why a community that refuses to adhere to those impossible beauty standards is a threat. A community that values *all* bodies, no matter what shape, size or color is dangerous to the powers of our culture. That community would be immune to the shame and desire that keeps us behaving in safe, predictable ways.

Throughout history, empires have maintained power by controlling bodies. The most obvious example is Rome's crucifixion - as an empire, Rome ruled over many peoples who would rather have had their freedom. Rome made demands on their world, changing how they behaved and thought. And anyone who opposed Rome, who stood against them, Rome executed.

But they didn't just run them through with a sword or make them drink poison or any other relatively quick and painless method of dealing death. No, when you stood against Rome, Rome turned you into a public spectacle. They publicly beat and mocked you, then paraded you down the center street of your capital, led you outside the city and finally nailed you to a cross. Death by crucifixion was a drawn out, messy affair - it could last *days*.

The whole point was a sort of living billboard. Rome announced to everyone watching that they had complete control over you - so much so that they could do whatever they wanted to your body. You either did what Rome wanted, or Rome would do to you what they liked.

[Bodies who are "in" and who are "out"] Israel too, by Jesus' day, spent a great deal of time investigating and worrying about bodies. The ruling elite, who controlled the Temple - and therefore access to God, refused anyone in the Temple whose body was "messy" - anyone with an illness or a wound. Anyone with a disability. Anyone who wasn't Jewish. All women were excluded.

[Jesus → All Bodies] But in the wake of Jesus' resurrection, his followers understood that everything had changed. In this new thing God is doing, this Spirit-driven movement, God is calling all bodies beautiful and inviting every person, every body to find hope and healing in faith.

[Scripture Slide] If you have a bible, turn with me to Acts 4.

If you were here last week, you know we looked at the fallout from a healing performed by two of Jesus' followers - Peter and John. As they were coming to the Temple, they saw a beggar who had been born unable to walk. Peter healed the man, and the crowd that gathered was astounded. But Peter chided them, saying that the true miracle was not this restoration, but the good news that God is welcoming everyone into his new kingdom. Not just people with broken bodies, but the people who broke the very body of God himself.

This scripture is what happens *next*, when word gets to those who run the Temple about what's happened. Let's read together, beginning in verse 5.

The next day the rulers, the elders and the teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and others of the high priest's family. They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: "By what power or what name did you do this?"

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. Jesus is 'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.'

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved." -- Acts 4:5-12

Peter tells these men much the same thing he told the crowd - they performed this miracle through the power of Jesus, whom they had killed but whom God raised from the dead. No surprises from Peter. What *is* surprising to me is that these men aren't excited. Here was a man who had *never been able to worship God*. Ever. In his whole life. And now, this man who wasn't able now *is* able. He's welcomed!

Isn't that good news?

Apparently not. And *that's* the rub in this passage. These men, these power-brokers, are worried there's a new sheriff in town. That's what they ask Peter - "By what power or what name did you do this?" They're not excited that a man was healed. They're *threatened* that a person

they had determined was *out*, *someone else* decided was in. And that person apparently has the power to make it so.

Which means *they* don't have the power anymore. They feel (rightfully) threatened. Because God is doing something new through Jesus' resurrection and it has to do with bringing in all those who were formerly left out.

Kicking down the gates is good news for everyone except the gatekeepers.

This is good news. It's wonderful, in fact.

Except for one little thing (if I may be completely honest with you). It's that business of the healing itself. You can't stop thinking about it, can you? I can't. We look at a story like this and *all* we can see is a miraculous healing. We are totally captivated by the fact that a person who couldn't walk, who could *never* walk, all of a sudden could. This story - and stories like it - have a special place in our conversations about God.

Preachers either love to talk about this passage or hate to talk about it. I fall into the latter camp. Miracle stories like this make me very uncomfortable. Not because I don't believe miracles can happen. I fully believe people are still miraculously healed today - I've witnessed it.

These stories make me uncomfortable because *God doesn't heal every person*. There. I said it. This story makes me nervous because I know people who are disabled. Or sick. Or dying. I live in the messiness of our bodies with people I deeply love. Their bodies don't work the way they're supposed to and they've prayed and I've prayed and the Pope's prayed and *they're not getting better*.

And I'm supposed to preach a sermon about a guy who God healed?

But then other pastors *love* to preach these stories. Because they say that God wants to heal everyone. That if you're sick, you can be just like this man, fully healed! Just look at what happened in the story! You too can be restored...

...As long as you have enough faith. These kinds of pastors are often called "Health and Wealth" preachers because they have a particular vision of life with God: they believe that God wants everyone to be physically whole and financially rich. Healthy and wealthy.

Most of us have an easy enough time recognizing that saying God wants us all to be financially well-off is silly. Jesus was poor his whole life and he's God! But when it comes to health, this is harder. A lot of us assume that God wants everyone to be healthy and whole. That if we have enough faith or are good enough or *something* enough, then we'll never get more than a headcold.

Did you ever notice that this Health and Wealth theology looks an awful lot like the Beauty Culture? That's a problem. Any time our theology starts to look like Rome's, it's a huge red flag.

As we saw last week, as far as Peter was concerned, the healing wasn't the point of the miracle. Rather, the healing pointed to the fact of Jesus' resurrection.

So what does it mean to say that our physical health is a lot like our financial wealth? What if God *doesn't* actually want to make everyone healthy? What if God is doing something else, something bigger?

I know... that doesn't sit well, does it? But look at today's story - the Bible tells us this disabled man sat at the Beautiful Gate *every day*. Every day. And Jesus went to the Temple many times. That means he passed this guy, probably more than once.

And Jesus didn't heal him. We don't have any record of Jesus even interacting with him.

God doesn't heal everyone. We know that from our own experiences, our own prayers, but we see it also in the Scriptures.

Peter reminds us that God calls us to *faith*. That's what he told the crowds last week and that's what he tells the Temple leaders today:

If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. Jesus is 'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.'

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to humankind by which we must be saved."

Again, Peter says, "The real issue here is faith: God is inviting you into LIFE, even though you killed him. This man is proof of who Jesus really is - the Son of God, now ruling from the throne of heaven."

For Peter, faith isn't a magical cure-all that privileges a particular image of bodily wholeness over those who don't look like they're supposed to. Not a health-and-wealth gospel - that's actually what Rome promised those who bent the knee to Rome.

God calls us to *faith*. A faith that believes God is working, that God is taking the world somewhere. And sometimes that looks like healing, but sometimes it looks like a cross too.

Sometimes God heals, and sometimes God doesn't. Faith is the choice to follow no matter what.

That doesn't sound very promising, does it? I mean, if following God is basically a cosmic coin flip, then what's the point?

Frankly, this faith Peter is advocating sounds a lot like losing.

Peter would agree with you. Jesus was crucified. He lost. Game over.

Except it wasn't.

When Peter is defending himself to the council, he quotes an old Hebrew song. He says, "**Jesus is 'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.'**" Today we call that song Psalm 118 and we know it was a song Israelites sang after winning a battle.

It was a victory song, sort of like "The Star Spangled Banner" - all talking about how the bombs burst in mid-air, but the flag was still there. Or like "We are the Champions".

And toward the end of the song is that phrase - "the stone your builders rejected has become the cornerstone." It was a way of saying, "Ha! The underdog won! You thought you had it in the bag, but you were wrong!"

Everyone in that council knew that song - they'd have grown up singing it. And they couldn't help but get Peter's implication: that in crucifying Jesus, *they lost*. They colluded with Rome to control the people, to maintain their power, their health and their wealth. The price of their collusion was Jesus' life, and they gladly paid it.

On that Good Friday, they seemed to have won.

Except that God was doing something different. Something bigger.

God was breaking the power brokers. God was freeing the imprisoned. God was welcoming the outsiders in. God was doing away once and for all with a world where your size or shape or ability had anything to do with how much love you received.

In fact, by becoming human, God was becoming the lame man at the gate. God was breaking into our broken culture to break through all the powers that *kept* people like that man outside the gate.

By raising Jesus from the dead, God took Rome's power over our bodies. And God took the Temple priests' power over our bodies.

Because - and let's not miss this - the body that God raised from the dead was a broken body. Jesus' resurrected body still bore the wounds of his crucifixion. That alone should tell us that God's healing does not always look like what we expect restoration to look like.

Rather the picture of healing we see again and again in the early church is one in which *all* bodies are welcomed. [Roman statues?] Both Rome and Israel had particular visions of the *kinds* of bodies that were considered good, and they used that vision to control those who opposed them.

But the Church welcomed every body, just as Jesus welcomed every body. And so Peter and John and the rest of the early church was a threat to those powers that ruled by excluding and shaming.

So today, our culture teaches us to be ashamed, to be dissatisfied, to crave impossible things. And we know the fruits of that way - eating disorders, so-called cosmetic surgery, pornography.

Can you imagine if Catalyst were a church that refused to buy into the false beauty culture the powers of our day are selling? Can you imagine if we were a place that all bodies, no matter what size and shape, no matter what color, no matter how abled, came together to find healing?

If we were that sort of place, yes, we would sometimes find restoration like the man healed by Peter and John. Because sometimes faith in God looks like that kind of restoration. But we would not put our hope in that sort of healing because we know faith in God doesn't always look like that sort of restoration. Sometimes faith in God looks like a cross.

So we put our faith not in wellness, but in the God who brings life from death, the God who is faithful in the midst of the brokenness. And so we find true healing in the message that we are ALL beautiful. But not just 'beautiful' in the anemic way our world and culture defines it. Beautiful - as in created in the image of God, redeemed by brokenness of God's body and restored to the wholeness of who we are in him.

That's the sort of church I want to be. A church that's a threat to the ways of our world because it stubbornly refuses to exclude and shame. A church that has been freed *by the same spirit that raised Jesus from the dead* to wrap our arms around everyone, even those our culture has deemed ugly and broken, and in that embrace, to declare them beautiful.

Let today be the day we stand up to the false beauty culture, to declare together as one church, "We are not ashamed. Do not call ugly what God has declared beautiful."

Communion Set-Up

That declaration is grounded for us in the Communion meal, the meal Jesus shared with his followers the night before he was killed. During the meal he passed bread to them, telling them it was his body, broken for them. Broken for their sins, broken by Rome, to demonstrate Rome's might. Broken and shamed. This meal reminds us that God was broken for us, that God is broken for us, that God will continue to be broken - Jesus' resurrected body still bears the scars of his crucifixion. Jesus invites us to participate in that meal, to enter into this other reality that rejects the Empire's definitions of health and wholeness, this reality that finds life in a crucified, resurrected God.

We take wafers to participate in Christ's brokenness, a willingness to embrace the brokenness, to live not by the standards of beauty we have created but to instead live in the beauty of relationship with God.

Later in the meal, Jesus passed a cup of wine, telling them it was his blood, poured out as a new covenant. Poured out to initiate a new relationship between God and humanity. We dip our wafers in grape juice to participate in the new life Jesus' broken body invites us into, a community in which all bodies are welcomed and healed.

You don't have to be a member of Catalyst to receive this meal. If you are searching for healing, for new life, if you are willing to search for God in the midst of your brokenness, knowing that all who seek will find, then you are welcomed to God's table.