

Faith Mennonite Church  
September 8, 2013  
Body & Soul: Healthy Sexuality and the People of God  
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**Celebrating the goodness of our bodies**  
*Genesis 1:26-31; Psalm 139: 1, 13-17*

*So God created humankind in God's image,  
in the image of God they were created;  
male and female they were created.*

*For it was you who formed my inward parts;  
you knit me together in my mother's womb.  
I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.*

*God saw everything that had been made, and indeed, it was very good.*

*In the beginning was the Word,  
and the Word was with God,  
and the Word was God.  
And the Word became flesh and lived among us,  
and we have seen his glory, the glory as of an only son,  
full of grace and truth.*

Any conversation about sexuality in the context of the church must begin with the premise that we are inheritors of an embodied faith. Our sacred text begins with a creation story that names humankind in our physicality as male and female as reflecting the image of God. The action of bringing bodies together and creating new life—being fruitful and multiplying—is part of the created order. All this is blessed. All this is very good. In the ancient Near East, where our creation story had its origin, “the notion of bearing the image of God was usually reserved for the king, the pharaoh or an emperor.”<sup>1</sup> It was a notion of privilege, often used to gain or maintain power. In contrast, this Jewish creation story, which we have adopted as our Christian origin story, is a great equalizer: every person, man and woman, bears the divine image.

The psalms, the prayers of our faith tradition, reiterate and reclaim this goodness. Psalm 139 lauds the miracle of our bodies, God's hand at work in our formation.

And the writer of the Gospel of John links the presence of Jesus in human form with the act of creation. God, the Word from the beginning, becoming flesh, is the ultimate statement that all that God created, including humanity is good, very good.

Now, with all this goodness, this affirmation of the body, why is it often so difficult to discuss sexuality in the context of the church? Perhaps it's because we've let the culture around us narrow the definition of sexuality to a focus on sex—specific body parts and how they work. And we lose the broader notion of sexuality as involving the deepest parts of our humanity—the physical, the emotional and the spiritual combined. But even claiming this broader definition still

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<sup>1</sup> Joel Miller, *Body & Soul: Healthy Sexuality for the People of God – Worship Leaders Guide*, Faith & Life Resources, MennoMedia, 2010.

places us in a position of vulnerability; we need to be in a context of trust and respect before we can discuss such matters of the heart and soul. This month, we hope we can offer such a space, here in worship and in our education hour to reflect personally and to discuss together how to live as healthy sexual, spiritual people who can fully embrace our embodied faith, as followers of Jesus and persons who genuinely reflect the divine image.

It's difficult to say exactly what it means to be made in the image of God. The Genesis stories suggest it has to do with our physicality, our creativity and generativity, our responsibility, and certainly our relationality. In each of these ways we are connected both to God, as a reflection of who God is, and to one another. And each of these is part of what it means to be a sexual being. Our sexuality is part of us from the day we are born. It is part of us as children before we become sexually aware. It is part of us whether we are single or coupled. It is part of us whether we are physically fit or disabled.

Even though we receive this affirmation that God loves our bodies, that God took human form in Jesus, many of us struggle in our relationship with our body. Instead of daily marveling in the spirit of Psalm 139 about how wonderfully we are made, we frequently take issue with the body that we inhabit: we feel too short, too tall, too stocky, too thin. We have narrow shoulders, ugly feet, wide hips, a pot belly, bowed legs, impossible hair... Each of us could no doubt quickly list three to five issues we have with our bodies. And likely the issue that may cause us the most grief may be a complete surprise to the person sitting next to us. Our self-image does not always match the image that others see.

Although I am tall and by many standards thin, I have always had an image of myself as overweight because I inherited a round tummy. When I was entering puberty my two closest girl friends had flat tummies and when we went to the beach in our swim suits I noted the difference. I still note the difference, but I've learned to take some pleasure in European art of prior centuries that depicts women with well-rounded stomachs. And I am slowly learning to exercise and eat nutritious food as a matter of overall health and fitness, not with a goal for a flat tummy.

It doesn't help of course, that the media bombards us daily with images of predominantly young, toned bodies with idealized proportions: narrow waists for women, rippled pecs for men. And even if we say these are unrepresentative, unrealistic exaggerations, they're still there in our minds. Some of us may also carry a message of pain in our bodies due to abuse by others or our own mistreatment of ourselves.

Claiming, or reclaiming, our bodies as good is foundational for each of us, young and old, single or coupled. The author of the adult study guide for this series wrote: "We are embodied creatures, and the pleasures of food, touch, work, play, sight, sound and sexual love are gifts of a loving God, sprung from the ecstatic generosity of creation. Sexuality and bodies are God's ideas, and the least we can do is to join our voices with God's in agreeing that they are 'very good.'"<sup>2</sup>

Will you take a moment and place your hands on your body. You may wish to hug yourself, or touch a part of your body that you struggle with or where you experience discomfort or pain. And say with me: Very good! I am fearfully and wonderfully made! Very good!

During this series, there will be some type of food visible to us each Sunday, of which we will partake as part of this celebration of goodness and pleasure. Today we will share bread, remembering that Jesus used bread as a metaphor for himself, his body. Jesus took great pleasure in eating and sharing bread with others. Let us do the same.

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<sup>2</sup> Leonard Beachy, *Body & Soul: Healthy Spirituality for the People of God - Adult Study Guide.* Faith and Life Resources, MennoMedia, 2010