

The Practice of Caring for the Body

Session Focus

This session presents the Practice of Caring (or honoring) the Body. The practice of honoring the body is born of the confidence that our bodies are made in the image of God's own goodness. As the place where the divine presence dwells, our bodies are worthy of care and blessing and ought never to be degraded or exploited. It is through our daily bodily acts that we might live more fully into the sacredness of our bodies and the bodies of others. Stephanie Paulsell writes, "The practice of honoring the body challenges us to remember the sacredness of the body in every moment of our lives... Because our bodies are so vulnerable, we need each other to protect and care for them."

Session Activities

There are seven activities on the Practice of Caring for the Body that can be used to design an intergenerational program.

- Activity 1. Stories of Caring for the Body
- Activity 2. Your View of the Body
- Activity 3. Society's View of the Body
- Activity 4. Jesus Cares for the Body
- Activity 5. Living the Christian Practice of Caring for the Body
- Activity 6. Integrating the Christian Practice of Caring for the Body into Daily Life
- Activity 7. Prayers for Honoring the Body
- Additional Activity. We Are Created in the Image of God

Children's Activities

There are four children's activities to use with children and family activities.

1. Caring for the Body in My Family
2. Jesus Cares for the Body
3. Try It!—Caring for the Body I
4. Try It!—Caring for the Body II

A Learning Process for Christian Practices

The dynamic of forming people of all ages in a Christian practice incorporates four movements.

Movement 1. Reflecting on Our Lives

The first movement, *Reflecting*, taps into a basic area of human need that can find meaning and purpose in a Christian practice. Reflecting gives people an opportunity to become aware of how they experience a basic human need and hunger for the Christian practice in their own life. Reflecting also provides space for people to become aware of how they already engage in this practice, and the things that

distort or hinder the practice. Oftentimes this first movement begins with real-life stories (presentations, print, audio, and/or video) of people who seek meaning and purpose for their lives through a particular practice. This helps spark people’s reflection and storytelling.

Movement 2. Exploring the Christian Practice

The second movement, *Exploring*, grounds the Christian practice in the Bible by describing how the biblical story deepens our understanding of the Christian practice and connects to people’s human needs and hungers. We present the wisdom of the Christian tradition on a particular Christian practice, describing what people today, and throughout history, actually do when they are engaged well in a particular practice—how people or communities live the practice with exceptional grace and skill. By connecting the Christian practice to human needs and hungers, people can identify how and why a practice is important to living a meaningful life.

Movement 3. Experiencing the Christian Practice

The third movement, *Experiencing*, immerses people in the actual practice—opportunities to experience activities that lead them into the Christian practice. This immersion can take place in programs, within the life of the Christian community (such as worship and ministry activities), and/or out in the community (serving people, providing hospitality, etc.). The key is that people actually experience the practice.

Movement 4. Living the Practice

The fourth movement, *Living*, includes reflecting on the experience of the practice activities (Movement 3); showing people how to make the Christian practice a part of everyday life; and providing people with a variety of tools and activities to integrate the Christian practice into their daily life—at home, at work, at school, and in the world.

Learning Activities through the Four Movements

Movement 1. Reflecting on Life Experience

Activity 1. Stories of Caring for the Body

Activity 2. Your View of the Body

Activity 3. Society’s View of the Body

Movement 2. Exploring the Christian Practice

Activity 4. Jesus Cares for the Body

(Additional Activity. We Are Created in the Image of God)

Movement 3. Experiencing the Christian Practice

Activity 5. Living the Christian Practice of Caring for the Body

Movement 4. Living the Practice

Activity 6. Integrating the Christian Practice of Caring for the Body into Daily Life

Session Plan

Intergenerational Design: Whole Group with Age-Appropriate Table Groups

This session works best with the whole group in the same room and a presentation/facilitation team that guides people through the activities in age-appropriate table groups. Guide the table groups through each of the activities at the same time.

- Organize people into table groups based on age groupings: families with children (grades 1-5), middle school adolescents, high school adolescents, young adults, and adults.
- The lead facilitator guides the entire group through each of the learning experiences. All presentations and activity instructions are given to the whole group.
- The age-appropriate learning activities within each learning experience are conducted in table groups. Give them all the handouts and learning materials needed for the learning experiences.
- Where needed, small group leaders facilitate the work of the table groups.

Part 1. (5 minutes) Gathering & Opening Prayer

- Use the Psalm 139 prayer service or one of the prayers for Caring for the Body (Activity 7)

Part 2. (25-30 minutes) All Ages Learning: Your View of the Body

- Distribute the handouts for Activity 1 and 2 to each table group. Distribute **Caring for the Body in My Family** to children's groups.
- Begin by sharing one or more stories from **Activity 1. Stories of Caring for the Body** with the whole group. You may want to find your own stories to read that reflect the ages of the group, or find videos of stories about people caring for the body.
- Conduct **Activity 2. Your View of the Body** with teens and adults, and **Caring for the Body in My Family** with children or families with children (see children's activities).

Part 3. (75-90 minutes) In Depth Learning Experience: Jesus Cares for the Body

- Distribute the handouts for Activity 3 and 4 to each table group. Distribute **Jesus Cares for the Body, Try It!—Caring for the Body I & II** to children's groups.
- **Optional:** If time allows in your design, begin by conducting **Activity 3. Society's View of the Body** with age appropriate advertisements for the children, adolescent, and adult groups.
- Conduct **Activity 4. Jesus Cares for the Body** with the whole group. Introduce the activity and then guide the table groups in preparing and presenting a skit on one of the Gospel stories, . Make sure that each group has a different Gospel story.

After the skits use the discussion questions to guide the table groups in reviewing what they learned.

- Present the key points of how Jesus cared for the body using the content on Activity #5. (Children can complete the **Jesus Cares for the Body** handout.)
- Conclude by using **Activity 6. Living the Christian Practice of Caring for the Body** to help people care for their own bodies. The goal of this part of the learning design is to have people experience one or more activities to help them imagine ways of caring for their own body. Families with children can do these activities together. Distribute the two Try It! Activities to groups with children.

Part 4. (20 minutes) Applying the Learning

- If time allows in your design, conclude with **Activity 6. Integrating the Christian Practice of Caring for the Body into Daily Life** or review the activity for people to complete at home. This final activity helps people identify ways that they can integrate the Christian practice of Caring for the Body into their daily life.

Part 5. (15 minutes) Closing Prayer Service

- Use one of the prayers or ritual actions for Caring for the Body (Activity 7).

Materials Needed

Check each activity for the materials that are needed.

Activity 1. Stories of Caring for the Body

Plan

Share with the group the stories about caring for the body: “Anne’s ‘Heart Attack,’” “A Married Couple’s Touch,” and “Mom’s Last Bath.” Have people read the stories or identify three people who will read each story.

Have people reflect on the stories in small groups using the following questions:

- ◆ Our bodies speak to us all the time. How we listen to our bodies can make all the difference in the world! What do you think Anne’s body is telling her? Why was it hard for her to hear what her body was saying?
- ◆ Isn’t it remarkable, almost startling, how different Thelma’s story is from Anne’s story? What do you notice about Thelma’s response to her own failing body as compared with Anne’s response? What is Kay, Thelma’s daughter, learning from her mother? How is dignity being honored in this story?
- ◆ How does the married couple’s experience of touching connect them at a deeper level? What is God saying to them through their bodies and the many different ways they touch? What have they learned about the importance of touch over their twenty-five years of marriage? How is the dignity of the body honored in their lives?

Activity

Anne’s “Heart Attack”

Anne was surprised when her cardiologist suggested stress management to treat heart attack symptoms. At thirty-six, she was the marketing director for an aggressive high-tech firm, in line for promotion to vice-president. She drove a new sports car, traveled extensively, and had an active social life. Sure, she felt stressed occasionally, but she was in control of her life and doing quite nicely, thank you.

That was on the outside; on the inside, she felt “the wheels on my tricycle are about to fall off. I’m a mess.” For several months, she had had attacks of shortness of breath, heart palpitations, chest pains, dizziness, and tingling sensations in her fingers and toes. Filled with a sense of impending doom, she would become anxious to the point of panic. Every day she dreaded the panic attacks that could strike without reason or warning.

The symptoms were so bad that on two occasions she rushed to a nearby hospital emergency room, fearing she was having a heart attack. The first episode followed an argument with her boyfriend about the future of their relationship, and the second followed a fight at work with her boss over a new marketing campaign. Tests showed nothing wrong with her heart. She left the hospital with instructions on how to breathe into a paper bag to reduce hyperventilation, and a prescription for tranquilizers. She felt foolish, and went home feeling embarrassed, angry and confused. She remained convinced that she had almost had a heart attack.

A Married Couple's Touch

For our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, my wife gave me a picture album with photos of the two of us from the time we started dating to the present.

As I paged through the years. I was struck with the way we touched each other in all those pictures: holding hands in front of a fountain, arm in arm, sitting on my lap at a picnic table, sitting on a sofa with her head on my shoulder. I thought about how connected we are by our touching each other over these twenty-five years, and what a great gift that is in our marriage, and in my life.

I recall holding her hand as she was rolled down the hallway to surgery recently, and the reassurance of our daily kisses good-bye in the morning. I think of how calming it is when she rubs the back of my shoulders after a tense day at work.

Our touching each other, even when it's done unconsciously, connects us on a level we seldom talk about. Touch seems to strengthen our life together whether we are making love or just holding hands during the sad part of a movie. It seems that something passes between us, a kind of energy that is sometimes passion, sometimes reassurance or comfort or peace.

Some of the ways we touch are so much a part of our daily routine that we are not even aware of their effect on us; her taking my arm when she wears high-heeled shoes or our "sleeping like spoons" on cold winter nights.

I grew up in a family where we hardly ever touched one another except when it was necessary. Maybe that's why I was so struck by the effect touch has had on our life together.

We received a lot of gifts on our twenty-fifth anniversary, but that album is my favorite!
(Mary Jo Pederson, Thomas Greisen, and Ronald Wasikowski)

Mom's Last Bath

Thelma is living her last days. Her family surrounds her. Kay writes to me of her mother's last bath.

She insists on being clean,
and today Amy and I invited her to a bath
if she was up to it
in the late afternoon.
The appointed time came.
Mom worked and worked and finally sat up
on the side of her bed,
legs down
feet toward the floor.
Then the vomiting began,
Violent vomiting taking her last bit of strength.

She told me to draw her bath
showing me with her hands how deep.

I turned the bathroom heater on.
I cleaned the hair out of the drain trap.
I ran all hot water at first to warm the tub
then moderated it, checking with my wrist.

She shuffled to the bathroom,
sat down on a towel I had placed on the edge of the tub.
We undressed her.
She stood up, grabbed the grip bar that dad had installed for her.
I stood behind her, straddling the tub,
ready to catch her
in case she fell.
She told me I needed to trust her to know what she could do.

And then
that precious body that I have looked at and loved and memorized
lowered into the water.

She never opened her eyes
lay there
still
silent
then put her hand out and I placed a plastic cup in it
as we had discussed I would.
She slowly lifted a cup of water
and poured it over her arms.
Lying back down
she poured another cup over her throat and neck
sighing a tiny sound of pleasure.
The water sounded like baptism
holy, quiet, small splashes.

The bath ended with Kay pouring cup after cup of water onto her mother's head, gently moving her fingers through the tiny bit of hair still growing there. Thelma kept both ears shut against the water with the pointer finger of each hand. Her quiet sighs of pleasure were matched by the sobs rising up from inside my friend as her tears fell into the water of her mother's last bath.
(Stephanie Paulsell in *Practicing Our Faith*)

Our Bodies Are Speaking

Our bodies speak to us all the time. How we listen to our bodies can make all the difference in the world!

- ◆ What do you think Anne's body is telling her? Why was it hard for her to hear what her body was saying?

- ◆ Isn't it remarkable, almost startling, how different Thelma's story is from Anne's story? What do you notice about Thelma's response to her own failing body as compared with Anne's response? What is Kay, Thelma's daughter, learning from her mother? How is dignity being honored in this story?

- ◆ How does the married couple's experience of touching connect them at a deeper level? What is God saying to them through their bodies and the many different ways they touch? What have they learned about the importance of touch over their twenty-five years of marriage? How is the dignity of the body honored in their lives?

Activity 2. Your View of the Body

Invite each person (or family) to review the handout, *Your View of the Body* and complete the questions.

Give participants time to think about their responses. (Families can work together on the worksheet.)

Then invite them to share their responses to the questions with their group. Remind people that this is a storytelling experience so be sure to give each person/family time to share their story without interruptions or discussion.

Conclude the activity by inviting insights and reflections from the whole group.

Your View of the Body

Explore your own perspectives about your body by using the following questions.

- ◆ How do you honor and care for your body?
- ◆ How do you dishonor or abuse your body?
- ◆ What do you see when you look in the mirror? Do you focus on what is beautiful, or do you obsess over perceived flaws? How has media advertising influenced your view of your body? How does it affect what you wear, what you eat, which products you use to care for your body or make you look good, and so on?
- ◆ The best thing about my body is _____ because _____.
- ◆ If you are married, how do you care for your spouse's body?
- ◆ If you have children, how do you care for their bodies?
- ◆ How do you reach out to the suffering bodies in your community, in our nation, and in the world?

Activity 3. Society's View of the Body

Preparation

Prepare for this activity by collecting advertising that targets the body, for example:

- Fashion magazines, and “lifestyle” magazines focused on men, women, teens, and even children. These types of magazines typically have lots of “body product” ads. Place a variety of magazines on each table prior to the session.
- TV commercials that are targeting the body and/or selling “body” products. Try to record up to 10 commercials so that you get a good selection, targeted to different audiences. Since most commercials are 30 seconds or less, this will only be 5 minutes of viewing. Remember that some commercials send positive messages about the body. Create a PowerPoint presentation with the name of each commercial so that people will be able to recall what they have seen.
- Create a video or presentation with online advertising and videos that are targeting the body and/or selling “body” products. Include apps in your research.

Plan

1. Present the TV commercials and online advertising. Review the list of ads (or distribute a handout with the ad) so that people will be able to recall what they have seen.
2. Ask each table group to analyze the media messages about the body using the worksheet, *Society's View of the Body*. They can use one worksheet per ad or group several ads together. Groups can work together or organize into small work groups, by household or ages, with each one taking 1-2 ads.
3. Ask individuals or households to select a magazine to review and to find up to 5 ads focused on the body: “beauty products,” “body care products,” etc. Using the worksheet, *Society's View of the Body*, they should summarize their impressions of the ads they have selected and write their answers on the worksheet.
4. As a group, have people share their reflections on their analysis of the magazine ads and the messages about the body that were being communicated.
5. Ask the groups to summarize their analysis by identifying 5-6 messages society communicates through advertisement about the body. These can be written on newsprint and posted around the room. Conclude by asking each group to share one or two messages they discovered in the advertisements.

Activity

In fairness to Anne and those of us like her, it's not entirely our fault if we neglect what our bodies are telling us. We see the message of materialism thrown at us almost unceasingly from the entertainment industry, the food and beverage industry, the toy industry, the cosmetics industry, the housing industry,

the sports industry, the automobile industry, the communications industry; the list can go on and on. This materialistic approach in our culture cheapens the value of bodily existence. We become convinced that physical things, including our bodies, are nothing more than sources of pleasure and entertainment. Discomfort becomes an enemy to be avoided and masked at all costs rather than a sign from a body that needs some attention and care. Materialism denies that the body and the physical world are expressions of a deeper spiritual life.

Our society is teaching us that our bodies are objects that can be used, abused, perfected, enhanced, and so on. Pick up any popular, secular newspaper or magazine. Watch television commercials or listen to radio commercials during prime viewing and listening time. It won't take long for you to notice our obsession with the appearance of our physical bodies, as opposed to an appreciation for our bodies as sources of spiritual meaning. You'll even notice a disturbing presentation of unrealistically "flawless" bodies during prime children's programming. Many of the favorite kid shows, including cartoons, feature highly sexualized characters that are portrayed as role models for young children. Our children are taught at a very young age that the look of their bodies, not the goodness of their bodies, is of great importance for success. It's also interesting to note that these shows are generally flooded with advertisements that teach kids that they need to have the latest stuff in order to be cool. Body materialism and stuff materialism are two sides to the same coin.

But it's not all bad news. The hunger for spiritual integrity, expressed in care for the body, is not entirely absent in our culture. There is good news, and there are signs that some are listening to and promoting good news. Even some marketing experts are seeing that the supermodel image for women is an empty pursuit. Dove soap, Bath and Body Works, and American Girl have teamed up to promote a new image of beauty. They call it their "real beauty" campaign. They are advertising their product lines using models that look more like the average woman, and they are presenting these fuller-bodied, and often older women as beautiful for who they are. When you see the ads, you immediately sense a difference from traditional beauty ads. These women are beautiful inside and out, but it's their inner beauty that grabs your attention. You don't get the sense that they are trying to seduce you if you're a man or challenge you if you're a woman. You find yourself enticed by their strength and their natural goodness. They are who they are, and their beauty rests in that alone.

Society's View of the Body

The following questions help us to evaluate the messages we receive from commercial advertising about our bodies. Use as many of the questions that are helpful for the ads you are evaluating. Be sure to answer the final question: *How would summarize this advertisement's message about the body?*

Ads: _____

- ◆ What do you see and/or hear? Which images, sounds or characters really caught your eye or ear?
- ◆ How does this ad make you feel?
- ◆ What did you like or dislike about this advertisement?
- ◆ What do you think this advertisement is telling you? What's its message?
- ◆ What isn't this advertisement telling you? What's being left out?
- ◆ What did this commercial try to convince you that you personally need? Did it say anything about what our family might need? Do you or do we really need this?
- ◆ What does this advertisement want you to do? How does it want you to behave?
- ◆ Who created this advertisement? What is the producer's purpose? Who is the target audience?
- ◆ How would summarize this advertisement's message about the body?

Activity 4. Jesus Cares for the Body

Plan

Presentation

Prepare a presentation organized around the five ways Jesus cares for the body in the Gospels. Use a PowerPoint presentation to share your key points. Use the Gospel stories to illustrate each of the four themes.

1. Jesus affirms the body.
2. Jesus affirms the body by healing people.
3. Jesus affirms the body by consoling people.
4. Jesus affirms the body by feeding people.
5. Jesus affirms the body by suffering and rising from the dead.

Dramatize the Gospel Stories of Caring for the Body

Explore the stories of Jesus caring for the body by engaging people in enacting the Gospel stories of Jesus' healing and care for the body. You want the participants to use their body in enacting and giving life to the story.

Organize the participants into drama groups. Assign each group one of the Gospel stories below. Select the stories in advance. Try to get a good mix in the stories you select.

Provide the group with the following guidelines. (Feel free to adapt these guidelines as needed).

1. Have someone in the group read the story aloud.
2. Work together as a group to develop a drama that will act-out the story. Assign each character in the story to one person in the group. Assign a narrator to read the Gospel story while the actors dramatize the reading. Give everyone a specific role (even if it is part of the crowd). Everyone needs to be involved in giving form to the story through movement, touch, facial expressions, etc. For example, a drama may include more than one person to be healed by Jesus.
3. Create or find any props that would be helpful to the drama.
4. Rehearse the actions as a group.
5. Present the drama. Remind the narrator to read the story slowly and with emotion.

The Gospels are filled with stories of Jesus' care for the body. Select stories for the dramas from the following list. Make sure there is at least one story in each of the four categories.

1. Jesus affirms the body by healing people.

Actions of Jesus	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Healed a leper	8:2-4	1:40-45	5:12-16	
Healed a centurion's servant	8:5-13		7:1-10	
Healed a paralytic	9:1-8	2:1-12	5:18-26	

Healed a woman hemorrhaging	9:20-22	5:25-34	8:43-48	
Healed two blind men	9:27-31			
Healed a man with a withered hand	12:9-14	3:1-6	6:6-11	
Healed the Syro-Phoenician woman's daughter	15:21-28	7:24-30		
Healed an epileptic boy	17:14-18	9:17-27	9:38-42	
Healed two blind men near Jericho	20:29-34			
Healed the Gerasene demoniac			8:26-33	
Healed a deaf mute		7:31-37		
Healed the blind man at Bethsaida		8:22-26		
Healed blind Bartimaeus		10:46-52	18:35-43	
Healed an infirm, bent woman			13:11-13	
Cured the crippled woman			13:10-17	
Healed a man with dropsy			14:1-6	
Healed ten lepers			17:11-19	
Healed a nobleman's son				4:46-54
Healed an infirm man at Bethsaida				5:1-15
Healed a man born blind				9:1-41

2. Jesus affirms the body by consoling people.

Actions of Jesus	Matthew	Mark	Luke
Raised Jairus' daughter	9:18-19, 23-26	5:22-24, 35-43	8:40-42, 49-56
Raised a widow's son at Nain			7:11-17

3. Jesus affirms the body by feeding people.

Actions of Jesus	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Feeding more than 5,000 people	14:13-21	6:30-44	9:10-17	6:1-14
The Feeding of the Four Thousand	15:32-39	8:1-9		

4. Jesus affirms the body by suffering and rising from the dead.

Actions of Jesus	Luke	John
Jesus appears to his disciples	24:36-49	
Jesus and Thomas		20:24-29

During the dramatic presentations encourage people to take notes on what they are experiencing. This will prepare them for the concluding discussion.

Discussion

After the dramatic presentations, have people in groups discuss the following questions. Give each person an opportunity to think about the questions and then invite them to share their responses. Display the questions on a PowerPoint presentation or on newsprint for all to see.

- ◆ What were you feeling as you experienced the dramas? Which drama was the most meaningful for you?
- ◆ How would have felt if you were the person experiencing Jesus' care for the body (e.g., being healing, being fed, being freed of demons)?

- ◆ Why do you think Jesus cared for people’s bodies?
- ◆ What do you think Jesus is teaching us about the body through these stories?
- ◆ How do you see God at work through these stories of caring for the body? How do people experience God by caring for the body?

Activity

“In Christian teaching, followers of Jesus are called to honor the bodies of our neighbors as we honor our own. In his expanded teaching by example, this includes leper bodies, possessed bodies, widow and orphan bodies, as well as foreign bodies and hostile bodies—none of which he shied away from. Read from the perspective of the body, his ministry was about encountering those whose flesh was discounted by the world in which they lived.

“The daily practice of incarnation—of being in the body with full confidence that God speaks the language of flesh—is to discover a pedagogy that is as old as the gospels. Why else did Jesus spend his last night on earth teaching his disciples to wash feet and share supper? With all the conceptual truths in the universe at his disposal, he did not give them something to think about together when he was gone. Instead, he gave them concrete things to do—specific ways of being together in their bodies—that would go on teaching them what they need to know when he was no longer around to teach them himself.” (Barbara Brown Taylor in *An Altar in the World*)

Jesus Affirms the Body

The Word became a human being and, full of grace and truth, lived among us. (John 1:14a)

Jesus is hope for the body because the birth of Jesus is the coming of God in bodily form. The light of Jesus Christ came into the world, and he didn’t come as an outsider. He became a person with a *body*. His mission was to bring light to humanity from the inside out. One thing is certain as a result of the birth of Jesus: our bodies are *good*. Yes, bodies are even good enough for God. When God became a human being, God said once and for all that bodies are essentially good. In Genesis God said it with words. In the gospels God said it with actions, the actions of Jesus! How can we presume to contradict God’s active affirmation of bodily existence by believing, even for a moment, that our bodies are not good?

The goodness of Jesus Christ, the revelation of God, was offered to the world in a human body. His body was an expression of deep goodness, and he used his body to care for the bodies of others. Finally, his life on Earth culminated in the giving of the precious gift of his body for our salvation.

The struggles we experience in our bodily existence tempt us to denigrate our bodies. We are tempted to believe that all would be well if it weren’t for our flawed bodies. But the incarnation, the birth and bodily existence of Jesus, challenges us to affirm and celebrate both having and being a body.

Affirming the Body by Healing People

Jesus affirms the body by seeking out those who are sick and making them whole again. Healing the body and spirit is at the heart of Jesus’ great care and compassion for people. Story after story in the

gospels recount his embrace of bodies in need of healing. Consider the story of a leper who approaches Jesus for his healing touch.

Then a man suffering from a dreaded skin disease came to him, knelt before him, and said, "Sir, if you want to, you can make me clean." Jesus reached out and touched him. "I do want to," he answered. "Be clean!" At once the man was healed of his disease." (Matthew 8:2-3)

The blind, the deaf, and the mute come to Jesus to have their sight restored and again Jesus heals them in body and spirit. Consider these two moving stories.

When Jesus had gone indoors, the two blind men came to him, and he asked them, "Do you believe that I can heal you?" "Yes, sir!" they answered. Then Jesus touched their eyes and said, "Let it happen, then, just as you believe!"—and their sight was restored. (Matthew 9:28-29)

Some people brought him a man who was deaf and could hardly speak, and they begged Jesus to place his hands on him. So Jesus took him off alone, away from the crowd, put his fingers in the man's ears, spat, and touched the man's tongue. Then Jesus looked up to heaven, gave a deep groan, and said to the man, "Ephphatha," which means "Open up!" At once the man was able to hear, his speech impediment was removed, and he began to talk without any trouble. (Mark 7:33-35)

Jesus wants wholeness in body and spirit for each of us.

Affirming the Body by Consoling People

Jesus embraces both the joy and the pain of life. To those who are grieving the loss of a loved one or the suffering of a family member Jesus offers his consoling presence. To the widow whose only son has died, Jesus offers consolation and a surprising gift.

The dead man was the only son of a woman who was a widow, and a large crowd from the town was with her. When the Lord saw her, his heart was filled with pity for her, and he said to her, "Don't cry." Then he walked over and touched the coffin, and the men carrying it stopped. Jesus said, "Young man! Get up, I tell you!" The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother. (Luke 7:12b-15)

Affirming the Body by Feeding People

Jesus is concerned about the bodily needs of people. Crowds of people often gathered to hear Jesus teach at a distance from their homes. As the day wears on people are growing hungry and Jesus notices their physical need. He expresses his caring for their bodies by feeding people. Here is one story of Jesus feeding people.

Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I feel sorry for these people, because they have been with me for three days and now have nothing to eat. I don't want to send them away without feeding them, for they might faint on their way home." The disciples asked him, "Where will we find enough food in this desert to feed this crowd." "How much bread do you have?" Jesus asked. "Seven loaves," they answered, "and a few small fish." So Jesus ordered the crowd to sit down. Then he took the

seven loaves and the fish, gave thanks to God, broken them, and gave them to the disciples; and the disciples gave them to the people. They all ate and had enough. (Matthew 15:32-37)

It is also enormously significant that at the Last Supper Jesus chose his body to be the memorial sign of spiritual nourishment for the bodies of his followers. Recall the words of Jesus to his disciples: “Then he took a piece of bread, gave thanks to God, broke it, and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in memory of me’” (Luke 21:19).

Affirming the Body by Suffering and Rising from the Dead

The Christian practice of honoring the body requires that we view the world through the lens of Jesus’ wounded but resurrected body. His broken body brings into focus the bodies of the sick and the wounded and the exploited. His resurrection shows us the beauty God intends for all bodies. As we love and suffer, as we seek God and each other, with our bodies, we remember that God blesses every body, and every body deserves protection and care. (Stephanie Paulsell in *Practicing Our Faith*)

Jesus was not afraid of suffering bodies. Throughout his ministry he embraced the pain of people and offered them healing, consolation, and hope. His death on the cross shows us that Jesus was willing to offer the gift of his body on the cross for our salvation. He was willing to suffer and die so that we may have new life with God. Jesus’ body becomes the good news! By offering his body Jesus liberates us.

But his suffering and death was not the end of the story. Jesus was raised from the dead by God, showing us the beauty God intends for all bodies. Even after the resurrection Jesus continues to attend to people’s bodies—by healing, consoling, reassuring, and even feeding people. After the resurrection Jesus uses his body to help the disciples recognize him: “Look at my hands and my feet, and see that it is I myself. Feel me, and you will know, for a ghost doesn’t have flesh and bones, as you can see I have.” He said this and showed them his hands and his feet.” (Luke 24:39–40) Jesus uses his body to help Thomas’ unbelief, “Put your finger here, and look at my hands; then reach out your hand and put it in my side. Stop your doubting, and believe!” (John 20:27). He feeds the disciples after they have been fishing, “Come and eat.’...So Jesus went over, took the bread, and gave it to them; he did the same with the fish”(John 21:9–13).

These are the touchstones for a contemporary Christian practice of honoring the body. That God created our bodies good. That God dwelled fully in a vulnerable human body. That in death God gathers us up, body and all. That through our bodies we participate in God’s activity in the world. (Stephanie Paulsell in *Practicing Our Faith*)

Activity 5. Living the Christian Practice of Caring for the Body

Plan

People Who Care for the Body

This would be a good time to utilize a panel of people who care for the bodies of others on a daily basis: doctors, nurses, health care providers, hospice workers, mother of infants/young children, fitness trainers, physical therapists, etc. Invite several members of your church community who are involved professionally in caring for the bodies of others to serve on panel to share how they care for the bodies of others, what it means to them, and how these see God at work through their care for the bodies of others. Identify these people in advance and prepare them for their role. Give each person 5 minutes to share his or her story and experiences.

Caring for Your Body

Part One of the Activity: Caring for Your Body includes 5 activities to help people care for their own bodies. The goal of this part of the learning design is to have people experience one or more activities to help them imagine ways of caring for their own body. Families with children can do these activities together.

Review all 5 activities with people, using a PowerPoint presentation. Select one or more of the following activities to do with the group. Make sure people have copies of the Activity handout.

1. Change your mindset.
2. Take a body inventory.
3. Listen to your body.
4. Examine “body habits” and develop a plan to care for your body.
5. Take delight in your sense of taste.

Caring for the Body of Others

Part Two of the Activity: Caring for the Body of Others includes 7 activities to help people care for the bodies of others. The goal of this part of the learning design is to present and/or have people experience one or more activities to help them imagine ways of caring for body of others. Families with children can do these activities together.

Review all 7 activities with people, using a PowerPoint presentation. Select one or more of the activities. Make sure people have copies of the Activity handout.

1. Be awestruck by eye contact.
2. Reach out to an ailing body.
3. Care for the Body of Christ
4. Enjoy the bodies with whom you share your meals.

5. Clothe your body with an awareness of others.
6. Connect family and church.
7. Work to free people who are enslaved.

Activity

Caring for Your Body

Change your mindset.

Think about the joy your body provides for you rather than lamenting your flaws. When you were a baby, you had no sense that you were too short, too tall, too fat, too thin, too bald, or too anything. And you didn't care if people stared. You had no need for privacy. You could not be embarrassed. You marveled at your mother's voice. You were captivated by your father's eyes. Colors were exciting. Warm baths were soothing. Clothing meant nothing more than warmth and protection.

- ◆ Restore your childlike appreciation for your body by writing a simple list each evening of the wonderful sensations you experienced throughout your day.
- ◆ Thank God and your body for those simple and abundant gifts.

Take a body inventory.

- ◆ List the things you love about your body.
- ◆ Name one thing that needs to change about your body so that you can live well.
- ◆ Identify three things you can do to make that change.
- ◆ Identify at least one person you can ask to hold you accountable for that change. You will likely fail to make the change if you do it in secret and on your own.

Listen to your body.

We began with a story of a woman who could not discern the voice of God speaking to her through her body. Don't become that woman. When your body is in pain, what is God trying to say to you through your body?

- ◆ What is God saying to you when you have a headache?
- ◆ What is God saying to you when you gain weight?
- ◆ What is God saying to you when you are struggling to stay awake during the day?
- ◆ What is God saying to you when you have pain in your muscles, especially recurring pain?
- ◆ What is God saying to you when your body is in balance and feels well?

Examine "body habits" and develop a plan to care for your body.

- ◆ *Food*: what are the primary foods in your diet? Are you eating healthy foods and meals? How can you develop a healthier diet?
- ◆ *Exercise*: what type of exercise do you engage in? Do you get enough regular exercise? How can you develop a better exercise plan?
- ◆ *Sleep*: how much sleep are you getting? Studies show we need at least seven hours of sleep daily. Are you getting enough sleep? How can you allot more time for sleep?
- ◆ *Recreation*: how do you recreate, that is, take time to relax and enjoy yourself? How can you set aside time for recreation and renewal?

- ◆ *Stress*: how do you deal with stress? How can you reduce the level of stress in your life?

Take delight in your sense of taste. Eat your next meal very slowly.

- ◆ Focus on the textures and flavors of the food you eat and the beverage you drink.
- ◆ Discern the sweet, salty, bitter and sour sensations on your tongue. Enjoy each sensation for what it is. This practice may help you to develop an appreciation for some foods that you currently do not enjoy.
- ◆ Savor your next meal and enjoy the gift of your taste buds.

Care for the Body of Others

The practice of honoring the body challenges us to remember the sacredness of the body in every moment of our lives. We cannot do this alone. Because our bodies are so vulnerable, we need each other to protect and care for them. A woman giving birth needs others to help her; adolescents struggling with sexual pressure need a community that insists on the autonomy of bodies made in God's image; those living with bodily illness need others to care for them and touch them in ways that heal and soothe. Our fragile bodies require communal attention, and so honoring the body is a shared practice, one that requires the participation of all. (Stephanie Paulsell)

Be awestruck by eye contact.

We often lose our amazement with eye contact as we age. We protect our feelings by sheltering our eyes from each other. Pay attention to how you converse with your family members and your coworkers. Are you able to show genuine interest in your conversation partner by looking directly at him or her? This is not to suggest that you stare at people in a creepy way, but generously give your attention to others when you share conversation with them.

Reach out to an ailing body.

Recall Thelma and Kay from the opening stories. Is there someone close to you who is struggling with an ailing body? Did you notice in the story that Thelma, the care-receiver, was calling the shots? Kay, the caregiver, was the obedient servant.

- ◆ Over the next day or two, look for somebody whose body needs your care. Respond to that need as an obedient and loving servant by allowing the one with the ailing body to take the lead.
- ◆ Volunteer in a nursing home or hospital to care for the ailing bodies of people in your community.

Care for the body of Christ.

Saint Paul called the followers of Christ the "body of Christ." Like any other body, it needs care to thrive. How do you care for the body of Christ?

- ◆ The body of Christ becomes well when its members work together. The first step is getting to know the other members. Identify one person at church who you don't know. Make it a point to get to know that person. Don't limit yourself to people your own age. Try to get to know people younger and older than you.

- ✦ Identify one weak and vulnerable member of your church, perhaps a person who is often ignored. Take some time to give this person some extra attention this Sunday.
- ✦ Become an active member of at least one ministry or organization in your church. Your active presence matters to the body of Christ as much as your thumb matters to your body. Go a day without using your thumb, and you'll get a sense of how important you are to the church.

Enjoy the bodies with whom you share your meals.

Don't just eat in close proximity to other bodies. Share the experience of caring for the body while you dine together.

- ✦ Share in the preparation of the food.
- ✦ Share in the table preparation and serving.
- ✦ Share in the conversation. Take responsibility to bring up at least one topic of conversation at every meal you share with others.
- ✦ Share in the clean-up.
- ✦ Share everything and enjoy the care that is expressed by sharing.

Clothe your body with an awareness of others.

What do your clothing choices say about you and others? Do you choose your clothing as a way to compete with others in your community? Do your clothing choices cause others to work in deplorable conditions? If so, what can you do about it? Should you boycott these clothes, or should you put pressure on the clothing manufacturer to care for its employees? Your choices in how you clothe your body can make a difference in the bodily care of others. Search the Internet for "fair trade clothing."

Connect family and church.

The church cares for bodies in much the same way that families care for bodies. Be conscious of how connected church life is with family life.

- ✦ Bathing bodies: families show their care for young bodies and ill bodies by bathing them in water. The church shows its care for new members by baptizing them in water.
- ✦ Feeding bodies: families break bread together around a dining room table to nourish the body. The church breaks and shares the blessed bread around a common table to nourish the body of Christ with the body of Christ.
- ✦ Soothing and protecting bodies: families rub oil on aching muscles to soothe them or on dry skin to protect it. The church uses oil in a variety of rituals as a sign of God's healing and protection.
- ✦ Dressing bodies: families dress and adorn the body in particular ways to signify particular occasions and to acknowledge different seasons. The church dresses and adorns its members to signify differing roles and the meaning of distinct occasions and seasons.

Work to free people who are enslaved.

As hard as it is to believe, over 25 million people in our world are enslaved and living in bondage today. They are part of a global slave trade. And many are children and teenagers! Join with others in fighting slavery and freeing people. To take action, work with organizations such as the United Nations Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking, the Polaris Project (<https://polarisproject.org>), and International Justice Mission (<https://www.ijm.org>). Be sure to check for organizations in your area

Activity 6. Integrating the Christian Practice of Caring for the Body into Daily Life

Plan

Help people identify ways that they can integrate the Christian practice of Caring for the Body into their daily life. Have individuals, couples, and families develop a plan for caring for their own bodies and caring for the bodies of others.

Review the ideas presented in Activity 6 and in the session. Ask people to consider other ways they can live the Christian practice. Then explain this simple process of moving from idea to action. Give people a worksheet or piece of paper to create their action plan.

1. List 2-3 actions you would like to take to live the Christian practice of Caring for the Body by focusing on caring for your own body.
2. Describe what you will do to put each action into practice, and the steps you will take to ensure that it will happen.
3. List 2-3 actions you would like to take to care for the bodies of others.
4. Describe what you will do to put each action into practice, and the steps you will take to ensure that it will happen.

Conclude by inviting people to share one action idea with their table group.

Activity 7. Prayers for Caring for the Body

Psalm 139 Prayer Service

Scripture Reading

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

Prayer

God, who knit us together in a mother's womb, help us honor what you have made.

Let us touch this masterpiece gently,

with reverence,

with delight,

blessing what you have blessed.

(Worshippers may touch named body parts as they are blessed.)

The face

For the housing of our thoughts,

For the muscles of our emotion.

The arms,

For embracing what is sacred,

For grasping, then releasing, your gifts.

The belly

For taking in nourishment,

And, in some, for the nurture of new life.

The thighs

For carrying another's burden,

For pushing off from the ground.

The feet

For walking your paths of peace,

For standing on holy ground.

God, who formed these inward and outward parts,

Fill us with wonder at such knowledge,

knowledge that we are wonderfully made. Amen.

Closing Prayer

Blessed God, you created us in your image, making each of us an unrepeatable miracle. Help us see how valuable and vulnerable every body is. Teach us to care for, honor, and cherish our bodies even as you cherish and care for us, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prayers for Caring for the Body

Body of Christ
And we say "Amen!"
"So be it!" to the great body
What the body says...Amen!
What the body does...Amen!
What the body is...Amen!

The bodies of my sisters and brothers
The body aching to be touched and healed
The body longing to be noticed
The body pining for nourishment
Aching...longing...pining
What the body says...Amen!
What the body does...Amen!
What the body is...Amen!

The body that I am
Beautiful repulsive
Physicalspiritual
Good Amen
Amen Amen.

God, who knit us together in a mother's womb, help us honor what you have made.
Let us touch this masterpiece gently, with reverence, with delight, blessing what you have blessed.

You may want to touch each body part as you pray...

The face,
 For the housing of our thoughts, For the muscles of our emotion.
The arms,
 For embracing what is sacred,
 For grasping, then releasing, your gifts.
The belly,
 For taking in nourishment,
 And, in some, for the nurture of new life.
The thighs,
 For carrying another's burden, For pushing off from the ground.
The feet,
 For walking your paths of peace, For standing on holy ground.

God, who formed these inward and outward parts,
Fill us with wonder at such knowledge, knowledge that we are wonderfully made. Amen.
(Dorothy Bass and Don Richter, *Way to Live Leader's Guide*)

Additional Ritual Actions

Water

Place a pitcher of water, basin, and towel on a small table in the center of the room. Invite participants to come forward as pairs and wash each other's hands, using a blessing such as:

"In the name of God: Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit. Amen."

"In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

"Bless these hands to your service, O God."

Oil

Pour oil into a small bowl. Then move from person to person and "anoint" the palm of their hands with oil. Explain that oil is one of the symbols used in Baptism. Ask participants to close their eyes and slowly and silently massage their hands with the oil. Ask them to think about what the oil does to their skin, and how it feels as they continue to gently massage their hands.

Signing of the Senses

(Adapted from the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*)

Each person will make the sign of the cross several times—on their foreheads, ears, eyes, lips, heart, shoulders, hands, and feet. As you read each signing ask people to make the sign of the cross on that particular part of their body and respond: Lord Jesus, we will be a sign of your love.

Receive the sign of the cross on your forehead. It is Christ himself who now strengthens you with this sign of his love.

Response: Lord Jesus, we will be a sign of your love.

Receive the sign of the cross on your ears, that you may hear the voice of the Lord.

Response: Lord Jesus, we will be a sign of your love.

Receive the sign of the cross on your eyes, that you may see the glory of God.

Response: Lord Jesus, we will be a sign of your love.

Receive the sign of the cross on your lips, that you may respond to the word of God.

Response: Lord Jesus, we will be a sign of your love.

Receive the sign of the cross over your heart, that Christ may dwell there by faith.

Response: Lord Jesus, we will be a sign of your love.

Receive the sign of the cross on your shoulders, that you may bear the gentle yoke of Christ.

Response: Lord Jesus, we will be a sign of your love.

Receive the sign of the cross on your hands, that Christ may be known in the work which you do.

Response: Lord Jesus, we will be a sign of your love.

Receive the sign of the cross on your feet, that you may walk in the way of Christ.

Response: Lord Jesus, we will be a sign of your love.

I sign you with the sign of eternal life in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Response: Amen.

Additional Activity

We Are Created in the Image of God

“The Christian practice of honoring the body is born of the confidence that our bodies are made in the image of God’s own goodness. “Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you,” Paul wrote to the church at Corinth (1 Corinthians 6:19). As the place where the divine presence dwells, our bodies are worthy of care and blessing and ought never to be degraded or exploited. It is through our bodies that we participate in God’s activity in the world....And it is through daily bodily acts—bathing, dressing, touching—that we might live more fully into the sacredness of our bodies and the bodies of others.”
(Stephanie Paulsell in *Practicing Our Faith*)

Our bodies are gifts. They are gifts from an all-loving God, and they are good because they reflect the goodness of the Creator. Integrity in Christian living requires that we care for our bodies and our souls with equal and complementary vigor. Caring for the body is an essential part of Christian spirituality, and a healthy spiritual life requires dignified and humble attention to the body.

We Are Created in the Image of God

God looked at everything he had made, and he was very pleased. Evening passed and morning came—that was the sixth day. (Genesis 1:31)

The first chapter of the Bible is the story of the creation of the universe. Heavenly bodies and earthly bodies are created and arranged in a harmonious balance, and God proclaims that all of it is good, very good. God proclaims the goodness of creation exactly seven times in the first chapter of Genesis (see verses 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25 and 31). Seven is the number in the Bible that symbolizes fullness or completion. In most translations the word “good” is used, but in some translations, we are told that God is pleased. Regardless of the translation, physical creation and the bodily creatures are affirmed seven times, and the seventh affirmation is *very good*, or God is *very pleased*.

The Genesis account turns to the theme of sexuality in chapter two. Here sexuality is born, and the man and the woman become one flesh in the presence of God. Sexuality, like all other parts of creation, shares in God’s blessing. Sexuality, the bodily experience of being masculine and feminine, is fundamentally good.

Then the Lord God made the man fall into a deep sleep, and while he was sleeping, he took out one of the man’s ribs and closed up the flesh. He formed a woman out of the rib and brought her to him. Then the man said, “At last, here is one of my own kind—bone taken from my bone, and flesh from my flesh. ‘Woman’ is her name because she was taken out of man.” That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united with his wife, and they become one. (Genesis 2:21–24)

Unfortunately, the story does not end with the harmony of Genesis 1 and 2. Genesis 3, the chapter that we commonly call the fall, describes the struggle that we all know too well. After giving in to the temptation of the serpent, the woman struggles with her body and with her relationship to the man:

And [God] said to the woman, "I will increase your trouble in pregnancy and your pain in giving birth. In spite of this, you will still have desire for your husband, yet you will be subject to him." (Genesis 3:16)

The man struggles physically against the body of creation:

Because of what you have done, the ground will be under a curse. You will have to work hard all your life to make it produce enough food for you. It will produce weeds and thorns, and you will have to eat wild plants. You will have to work hard and sweat to make the soil produce anything, until you go back to the soil from which you were formed. (Genesis 3:17b-19)

What was originally good is now a mixed blessing.

All of us have a mixed relationship with the body. We both enjoy and struggle with our own bodies, as well as with the bodies of our family members, our friends, our coworkers, our neighbors, and of those we've never met. The Genesis 1 promise of goodness and perfect harmony is real but not yet fulfilled. Genesis 3 reminds us that sometimes our bodies can work against us. We can feel like our bodies are our enemies.

Our bodies grow old and tired. They ache and they break. We experience all kinds of temptations that catch us off guard and lead us down paths that we really don't want to follow. We like to think that we make free choices about what to do with our bodies, but we sometimes find that our choices end up enslaving us in patterns of habitual or even addictive behavior, and we wonder where our freedom has gone.

Personal Reflection

- ◆ Why do I keep eating when I know I'm full?
- ◆ Why do I keep drinking alcoholic beverages when I know I have had enough to drink?
- ◆ Why do I keep shopping when my bodily needs are already met?
- ◆ Why do I cruise the Internet looking for cheap thrills when I have a wonderful spouse?
- ◆ Why do I take that next cigarette when my chest hurts from coughing?
- ◆ Why do I feel the need to change the look of my house, my yard, my body, and even my friends and family members when I know that beauty is deeper than surface appearances?