

The Rev. Dean Lindsey

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Respect for the Body

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 4;14-21; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

After landing at O'Hare, the pilot had a few final words for the passengers: "Thank you for flying Business Express," he said. "We hope you enjoyed giving us the business as much as we enjoyed taking you for a ride." We all know that flying is not as much fun as it used to be. Some have said that airports have become the bus stations of the twenty-first century. The only problem with that comparison is that I've never been patted down, had my bags searched, or even had to produce a photo ID to board a bus.

Now whole new levels of indignity will be added to the experience of flying. Full body scanners are being rolled out in some airports even though security experts are already telling us that these devices will not protect us from a highly determined terrorist. They contend that what we really need are scanners that will peer inside the body and not simply reveal its outer contours.

Sheepishly, the flying public submits to this continuing escalation of scrutiny. We take off our shoes, our jewelry and our belts today. Tomorrow, it may be our pants and underwear. This certainly raises some questions, though few seem

to be asking them nowadays. Is there anything sacred about the human body? Is there anywhere that we should not look, any part that we should not reveal? In other words, ought there be anything private about our bodies or should we surrender them to whomever wants to see them for whatever reason?

These questions come to my mind as I read the twelfth chapter of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. In the chapter, Paul develops an analogy between the church and the human body. "We are all a part," he wants to tell us, "we all matter to the health and good functioning of the body." Then, in the middle of developing this idea, Paul notes some important aspects of being in a body which sound almost quaint by today's standards. "The members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable, we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect."

Paul wants to guard against some members of the community of faith thinking more highly of themselves than others, but he develops a metaphor that assumes the dignifying role of clothing, the value of only revealing some parts of the body while keeping other parts hidden. Paul doesn't dwell on this aspect of the argument. We might say, he simply assumes certain things are shared cultural values that don't need deeper explanation. The question for us is, do we hold the

same values, or have other concerns completely supplanted the desire to protect the privacy of our bodies?

In the area of airline security, we have been running scared for nearly a decade now, and there is no doubt in any of our minds why this is the case. But, running scared is not the same thing as running smart. Let's suppose that a grandmother from Clarendon Hills is flying off to see her grandkids in Des Moines. Is it really necessary to pat her down or peer beneath her clothing to determine if she is planning to bring down the plane? The common sense answer to this question is "no." And yet we do spend an inordinate amount of resources searching, inspecting, scrutinizing people who are no threat to anyone.

The lawyers in our congregation could surely teach us more about the meaning and purpose of the Fourth Amendment to the Constitution. In part, it ensures that "the right of the people to be secure in their persons, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause . . ." One of the more interesting Fourth Amendment cases recently decided by the Supreme Court involved a thirteen-year-old girl who was strip-searched by school officials because another child alleged that she had several ibuprofen tablets. No pills were ever found, and the Supreme Court ruled that in this case "the content of the suspicion failed to match the degree of intrusion." In other words, the school officials violated the rights of this child.

Still, it is curious how many of us Americans are willing to abandon our own rights. Some say anything must be permissible as long as it makes us feel safer. And we are certainly quick to jettison the rights of someone else, particularly the members of a different group who do not sound or look like us.

I have no policy prescriptions to offer this day, but I do feel the need to lift up a lament. A lament over something lost, or at least gravely threatened, the belief that there is something quite precious, sacred even, about our bodies.

That is certainly the view of the New Testament. Jesus, after all, came in bodily form. He walked and breathed, he suffered and died in the body. And he rose again, in a body. The Scripture writers are unanimous on this point. We believe in the resurrection of the body.

When the Apostle Paul looks for a good way to explain the ongoing life of the church and the Spirit-inspired mission which we share, one metaphor stands above all the rest. We are the body of Christ. He does not say “we are the tree of Christ, with roots that run deep, branches that reach high, and leaves that scatter throughout the world.” He does not say, “We are the mountain of Christ, for all the world to see.” These and many others make for perfectly good analogies, but they cannot convey what needs to be said, that we are living, breathing, and active together as individual members of the body of Christ. To use such an analogy

serves also to ennoble our understanding of our own bodies. They are precious in God's sight and ought to be treated that way.

No doubt, those who are seeking to improve airport security see their mission as one of 'protecting bodies.' The problem is that protecting bodies happens best in communities, most likely relatively small communities, especially those which encourage mutual understanding, and love. Governments cannot do this job very well. Corporations certainly cannot. Bureaucracies of any kind are notoriously bad at it.

Communities, you see, have a distinct advantage. They possess mechanisms both for encouragement and correction. I would say that there are members of this congregation who are not very good with children, just to cite one example. I wouldn't want such a person to teach a Sunday school class, because they might lose their temper, or simply be ineffective. That does not mean they shouldn't be a part of the church, just that they are not gifted in this area. There are members of the congregation who probably should not handle the money. Handling someone else's money may be too great a stress upon them, or too great a temptation. In a community, we understand who might be such a person. We can see opportunity. We can measure risk.

So it is that Paul writes, "Those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are

treated with greater respect.” In other words, in the community, we watch out for one another. In some instances, that may mean protecting one or more of us from our own worst instincts. Sadly, in the case of the recent bombing attempt on Christmas day, the warnings of the father of the man who planned the attack were not heeded in a timely manner. He knew his son and the dangers he posed.

In a community, we know who is angry or grieving or maybe just a bit unstable, and we certainly do not want to worsen their distress. We also know who is healthy and whole and fit for service. We want to smooth the way for their continued progress.

The thing is that a metal detector cannot make these judgments. Nor can a body scanner. Or a bomb-sniffing dog. The irony is that the more the parts of a person’s body are exposed, the less is actually revealed of what matters most: the thoughts and intentions, the hopes and dreams, the deepest commitments and the most profound aversions of a given person. We learn none of these things when the body is laid bare and intimacy is lacking.

Separating the body from the person is often a sign of the worst abuse of power. You may summon to mind such humiliating scenes, of men or women unclothed, vulnerable before the barrel of a gun or the point of a sword, and such scenes must include those forced by circumstance to perform before leering strangers. I would also include Jesus, stripped bare, his body hung upon a cross.

Christian ethics always tries to bring the body and the person together. Body and soul may be a more traditional way of describing what I mean, but the fundamental truth is the same: our bodies matter. What we do with our bodies matters. What others do to our bodies matters, as well.

For Christians, a respect for the body has often been practiced through modesty of dress. Over time, styles have changed radically, but a certain principle persists. We do not seek to draw undue attention to our bodies by what we put on or don't put on. More than that, we are stirred to compassion by those whose bodies are much too vulnerable: a Haitian child who only has rags, a homeless person who lacks a coat in our Chicago winter. Jesus says, "I was naked and you clothed me." Placing clothing on the one who lacks it. Shielding what should not be exposed and vulnerable. It may seem like a simple act, but it is a profound affirmation of respect for the body, and love for another.

That is our mission, for we are the body of Christ.