

Flaming Enthusiasts

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Proverbs 9.1, 5-6; John 6.63

St. Paul and the writer of John's gospel have both been misused to cause a lot of self-hatred in the world. People actually are afraid of their physicality because of some of the quotes they have heard from Paul and John.

In the rural South where I grew up, preachers would often preach against "fleshly" desires and they would warn against being too "carnal." Everything from playing cards to dancing to listening to almost any song that would be played on the radio was considered questionable, and the hardliners would even say such activities were evil.

Of course, sexuality was viewed with suspicion, and same-gender love and attraction were viewed with hostility and contempt. The message that I received from many directions in my childhood was that the body was basically evil, and Religion's job was to help us rein it in and keep it under control so that it wouldn't experience too much pleasure. There really was this desperately neurotic fear among the adults of my community that someone somewhere might be having a good time. And they were determined to put a stop to it if they possibly could.

Some churches were even concerned with appearance. Make-up was discouraged for women, and forbidden for men. Tattoos, piercings, jewelry, certain styles of clothing, hair styles even were all taboo and were thought to be doorways to perdition. Apparently, not only was one not to feel too good, one wasn't even supposed to look good. The amazing thing was that such hatred of physicality ever appealed to anyone.

Now, I don't mean to be unkind. I have no doubt that the people who taught and believed these things were completely sincere. I have no doubt that they were trying to please the god of their understanding. Of course, the God they were trying to please seemed pathologically unpleasable, but still, the devotion of the faithful is not what I question.

What I take issue with is the interpretation of a few isolated verses of scripture that fed this fear of the flesh and all things physical.

Of course, the local congregations in my small town growing up were not the first to doubt the body's sacredness. In antiquity, there people who honestly believed that all things heavenly were good, and all things earthly were at best inferior, and at worst evil. Some even believed that a good god created the heavens, while a less honorable deity created the world. That sort of thinking made its way into some early Christian congregations, which is why when the creeds were being hammered out, the church councils tried to put an end to such dualistic thinking. They said, "We believe in ONE God- the creator, the almighty – maker of heaven AND earth, of all this is seen and unseen."

One God as the Source of all that is...seen and unseen, heavenly and earthly, spiritual and physical.

This is the God that looks at Creation in that mythical tale in Genesis and says of the physical world that it is VERY GOOD.

This is the God of the lovers in the Song of Songs...that highly erotic book in our bible where lovers praise the way each other looks and smells and tastes!

This is the God for whom King David danced naked in the street!

This is the God people encountered in the physical, living, breathing, human person called Jesus.

So when we hear the gospel writer today say, “It is the spirit that gives life, while the flesh is of no avail,” let’s not hear that as a call to hate our bodies. In fact, we are told that our bodies are a temple of the spirit (1 Cor. 6.19), and the author of the drama of Job portrays Job as experiencing extreme physical discomfort, and still saying, “yet in my flesh I will see God” (Job 19.26).

The flesh, of itself, may be of no avail, but the flesh enlivened by spirit is how we know life. The flesh, enlivened with the breath of life, is how we experience life. The flesh, enlivened with the divine energy we call spirit is how we interact with all that is. The spirit gives life, and what does it give life to? Our physical selves. God is “is-ness,” or as Jesus said, “God is spirit...” (John 4.24). The spirit of Life creates life out of itself. The flesh we see is an echo of the spirit which we cannot see.

There is no good spirit and bad flesh...there is only Spirit...it gives life, it is life, and it is All Good.

“The flesh is of no avail” doesn’t mean that our bodies are bad or worthless; it means our bodies are not separate from the love and goodness of God. Our bodies are spirit...spirit is life and life is made manifest in many forms, including our own!

Proverbs says, “Wisdom has built her house...” And guess what? We’re it! We are one with the Source of All that is; It expresses in, through, and as us. We and the eternal are one. That’s the house that the spirit of wisdom has built. That is the spirit that gives life. And affirmations of this oneness, of this goodness, of this endless Life are the words that are for us spirit and life!

To paraphrase our second reading today, “Take this peace into your Selves...the divine spark is within you all. Seek inside...and you’ll find it; and once you find it, you’ll express it in your physical, earthly, living, breathing lives.”

Let me share something that John Wesley said. He said, “Catch on fire with enthusiasm and people will come for miles around to watch you burn.” Enthusiasm...that’s another word for energy, another word for spirit. We the see the flames of the spirit, the flames of a new outlook, the flames of enthusiasm in the Pentecost narrative in Acts.

We have a choice today...fear or love. Despair or hope. Anxiety or peace. Hatred or healing. Denigration or affirmation.

The negative choices are lifeless, but the positive choices are life-giving. They are the words that give life. They are the channels through which spirit flows. As we learn to believe in ourselves, to be thankful for who we are, to trust our innate goodness, to know that in our physical experience of life we can exude the very spirit of life...then that will attract many others who need to know they are lovable, they are capable, they are worthy, just as they are. It’s time to catch on fire with enthusiasm. Let’s be enthusiastic about our possibilities, about our mission, about our community, about our love, about our relationships, about our bodies, about the gifts we have to share with the world.

I am enthusiastic about the Sunshine Cathedral.

I am enthusiastic about Sharing the Light with the world.

I am enthusiastic about your innate goodness and sacred value.

I am enthusiastic about the possibilities that exist for all of us.

I am enthusiastic about who we are, just as we are.

I think that's the way and the life of the spirit. I also believe that this is the good news. Amen.

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I acknowledge the divine light within me.

I am filled with spirit.

I am with filled with enthusiasm.

I am filled with gladness.

And so it is!

“I love you when you bow in your mosque, kneel in your temple, pray in your church. For you and I are [children] of one religion, and it is the spirit.” Kahlil Gibran