

“Our Real Bodies”

February 10, 2019

The Rev. Heather Janules

Like many children, I played with Barbie dolls, either by myself or with friends. It was so much fun, imagining what it would be like to live as a grown up. It wasn't hard, seeing Barbie's adventures in my friend's wood-paneled basement as a window into my future. Barbie had white skin and I had white skin. Barbie had long blonde hair and I had long blonde hair. If you asked me, I might say it was only a matter of time before I had a dream house and a pink sportscar of my own.

But, as I grew up, my hair grew darker. It was still blonde but inspired adjectives like “dirty” and “dishwater.” Eventually, I stopped being blonde and became a redhead through the magic of hair dye. As an adult, I still have white skin but developed all kinds of freckles and marks that I never saw on a Barbie doll. My right pinkie finger is crooked from when I broke it in gym class in seventh grade and both my feet have scars from bunion surgeries. I envy those who have angular faces, not oval-shaped faces like mine. And my hips and legs look nothing like Barbie's.

As the staff and I began planning this service about loving our bodies, we talked about how truly difficult it is to celebrate the bodies we have. Our real bodies. We talked about how, based on her shape, if Barbie were a real human being, her legs wouldn't be strong enough for her to stand, about how she was so thin she would be very sick.¹ Marianne reminded us that in animated Disney movies, the characters we want to win are often thin, blonde, handsome and beautiful. And Sam pointed out the other side; the villains are often fat and dark-skinned. And these are just a few of the messages we take in at a young age that encourage us to love the bodies we want, not the ones we have.

So many people spend a lot of time and energy trying to appear as close to Barbie and Disney images as possible. A Christian minister, Nadia Bolz-Weber, observes in her book *Accidental Saints* that,

¹ https://www.chapman.edu/students/health-and-safety/psychological-counseling/_files/eating-disorder-files/13-barbie-facts.pdf

We carefully create a persona but it's always one that's only partially true. And maintaining this partial truth...can be pretty exhausting. Facebook is the perfect medium for this bit of artistry. It allows us to present an image of ourselves from just the parts of our lives and personalities we wish to project. This is why we almost never see updates on Facebook that's say: *Spent evening alone again last night. Or: Wonder if I'll ever be loved. Or: Just manipulated my spouse to get my own way.*²

Yes, it is exhausting, trying to look and act like one of the attractive people. And it is also easy to forget that even the people we think of as attractive often feel ugly or lonely or unloved too.

Nadia Bolz-Weber goes on to describe Jesus as “the friend who relentlessly tags unflattering photos of us. Photos where our hair is a mess, our butt looks too big and an eye is half-closed.” You might be thinking “If Christians say that Jesus loves us, why would he make people see us when we look so terrible?” I think Nadia Bolz-Weber means that Jesus does not see us as ugly but as we truly are. And he finds us beautiful!

I am not a Christian so I might say that everyone is a child of Creation – each and every one of us – and everything that comes from the Spirit of Life is part of Life and is therefore a being of beauty. As we are all connected, we are related to the light of the stars, the music of the rivers...and the bugs and rats and worms too. Everything has an important place in the world. Even me. Even you.

There are other ways in which it is hard to love our bodies. To some here today, I am rather old and to others I am young. I can say I am old enough to know personally that our bodies change over time in ways we sometimes don't like and young enough to know that needing reading glasses and feeling stiff in the morning is only the beginning of many changes. If I am lucky enough to live into old age, I will likely experience more. Maybe I will no longer have strong legs that help me carry heavy things upstairs. Maybe I will lose my ability to hear or see. Maybe I will get an illness that makes me very tired. Maybe all these things will happen at the same time.

² Bolz-Weber, Nadia. *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People*. 124.

People older than me have taught me that it is common to lose our ability to do what we could always do when we were younger. They have taught me that I am a TAB – a “temporarily able-bodied” person. And they have taught me that sometimes it feels good to get in a group and talk about how hard it is to go through these changes. Sharing these complaints about the body, they say, is called an “organ recital.”

When we can no longer do the things we love to do, when we lose the freedom we long-cherished as grown-ups, we may feel real loss and grief. This grief may be so painful we may pretend the changes aren’t happening.

And, I have also learned from elders that even when our bodies age and change, life can still be full of meaning, meant to be lived with joy.

No matter our age, no matter the bodies we have, I find truth in Nadia Bolz-Weber’s understanding that:

The effort we put into trying to pretend something about us is true...is based in a fear of being...seen, as we are. Perhaps we each have a wound...we have to protect in order to survive. And yet sometimes we overcompensate so much for the things we are trying to hide no one ever suspects the truth...and then we are left in the true aloneness of never really being known.

She continues, “In the end, the only real love in the world is found when you let yourself be...and in just being, in the fierce and loving eyes of God, be known, be whole, maybe even find a little rest. Because just keeping it all going is just exhausting.”³

Can we hear our bodies whisper “Could you just love me like this?” Can we trust the love of Creation more than the messages about our bodies all around us? Can we trust this love is with us from the day we are born to the day our bodies are done?

³ Ibid. 125-126.

These are the questions that people with real bodies – and, by that, I mean all of us – may ask at some time in our lives. I pray we each, in our own way, find our path to an honest and enthusiastic “YES!”