

Sermon 7-13-25

Paul Purdue preaching

It was 1979, I was 13, sitting on an uncomfortable pew at church camp. The preacher, who was not much older than us, pleaded *"But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell."* (KJV) Jesus' Sermon on the Mount has lots of helpful messages for adolescents like making peace, doing good, releasing anger, not judging, not name calling, not serving wealth, seeking reconciliation, loving enemies, praying, forgiving, finding forgiveness or weathering life's storms. Instead the preacher used our fear of hell to tell us *"even looking at a woman"* was risky. (Matt 5-7) Scholars tell us Jesus was talking to married people, not teenagers daydreaming about a camp romance. Furthermore, the word for "hell" was the name of a local garbage dump. The New Interpreter's Bible commentary states *"This text does not deal with natural sexual desire and its associated fantasy, but with the intentional lustful looking at the wife of another."* I doubt our very cool, good-looking camp preacher cracked open a commentary as he railed against camp dancing, eyeliner, and camp crushes.

As he preached about the sins of the flesh I was fairly certain I was heading straight to hell- because I could not stop looking at this cute girl from Bowling Green with light brown hair, a winsome laugh, and wicked dodgeball skills. During the sermon, she caught me looking at her and smiled warmly. I know those of you who grew up outside the warped and misogynistic worldview of the Purity culture can't really understand the fear I felt, but sitting there moon-eyed over my god-given camp crush, I wondered if I should pluck out my eye? That would hurt a lot and cause a scene. Thanks be to God, no childhood preacher ever told us to literally pluck out an eye. But if I had taken the passage literally, I would still have the other eye, and the memory of the touch of her hand and the sweet taste of the Mountain Dew we shared at the canteen. *"Angie, Angie , beautiful, when will those clouds all disappear? Angie, Angie Where will it lead us from here? With no money and our coats,"* (Angie by the Rolling Stones) Suddenly, our youth director's voice wrecked my daydreaming, as he had told us the Rolling Stone's "Sympathy for the Devil" described a real pack with the devil. In 1979, I sat there in that wood slat pew feeling guilt, shame and embarrassment. A handful of my childhood preachers had twisted scripture and manipulated emotions to make us feel bad about the budding god-given desires with us. They drew phony dividing lines between what is sacred and profane, Christian and sinful, in regards to dating, movies, music and everything else for that matter.

Hear the Good News! God created not just our spirits but our bodies. In Genesis 1, the Hebrew literally uses anatomical language to describe our being made male and female. In Genesis 2, God like a potter formed our bodies from the clay and then brought us to life by breathing God's very breath into us. Humanity, not just the Scriptures, are God-breathed . In Romans 12, Paul uses the image of our bodies to tell

God has made and values each one of us and every part of our bodies. Jesus' Life was nurtured in the water of his mother's womb and nourished by Mary's bodies.

If the church, marketing gods, social media influencers, or the fashion industry gave you negative messages about your body, it can be hard to "Praise the Lord with tambourine and dance." I have rarely felt free enough to embody praise with my whole body. But the Psalm invites us to....

"Praise the Lord!
Praise God in the sanctuary;
Praise God in heavens!
Praise God who is mighty in deeds"

The Psalm directs our minds beyond the headlines towards the grandeur of the cosmos. On my porch this morning, I paused for 60 seconds. I heard 5 distinct bird songs, saw the goodness of God in my dog, the light's interplay with the trees, the lingering smell of rain, and the beauty of tiger lilies transplanted from my mother's front yard.

God invites us to participate in the praise, not to just consume worship, but to embody it! God invites us to lift our voice, to every voice, to clap our hands, to strum a guitar, and to dance. To celebrate God, the creation and humanity as if our team had won a world championship.

"Praise God with trumpet sound;
Praise God with lute and harp!
Praise God with tambourine and dance;
Praise God with strings and pipe!
Praise God with clanging cymbals;
Praise God with loud clashing cymbals!
Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord!"

If you have ever learned to play guitar you know the blisters or if you have carried cymbals or played the flute in the marching band you know the physicality. Your body feels the music. At our Camp Firelight VBS, our children sang: *"I'm gonna walk, walk the road that you set before me. I'm gonna run, run the race that you've given me. And I'm gonna dance, dance, dance like nobody's watching. I will trust and follow you!"* Wouldn't it be great if we could be free enough to dance in worship and not worry who sees us? In 2 Samuel 6, it says David danced before the Lord with all his might and when a friend criticized his less than royal comportment, King David said "I will become even more undignified than this in my praise!

Yolanda Pierce writes "In My Grandmother's House: Black Women, Faith and the Stories We Inherit. *To be present in worship is to bring our full selves into the process, to be open... (open minds to hear the word from the preacher and from the wisdom of*

the congregation). As a womanist theologian, I affirm that worship involves our physical bodies being fully present: the lifting of the hands, the tapping of the feet, the standing in affirmation, the shaking of the head, and even the running around the sanctuary. Worship is the joyful acknowledgment that this broken vessel of a body is yet wonderfully and fearfully made in the image of God. When we are fully present in worship, we focus our attention on the One who has made us, the One who sustains us.

Sometimes when I used to water ski, as dusk made the water smooth as glass and the sky danced in pink and yellow light, it was so glorious. One time when I got back to the boat, my friends asked, what were you doing...you were talking the whole time? I only then realized I had been singing the Doxology while cutting across the wake as the fading light engulfed us. I was praising God for the sunset, the water, my friends, our boat, fun, athleticism and God's creation!

There is a deep release, a freedom, when we are fully present, when we realize we are beloved, created in the image of God, beautiful, and God-breathed: holding with us the very breath of God!

Look at your hands. Praise God for the miracle of sight! Look at the scars and remember the miracle of healing. Marvel at the power of grip, of touch, of push and of snap. We can extend a hand, offer a hand, and hold a hand. We can smell something cooking. We can hear change coming. We can see a new day. We can taste and see that the Lord is good. .

The Psalmist is inviting us from our deepest breath to offer praise to the creator. Psalm 150 invites us into a wider world of praise where we can see God all around us. We can touch God's presence as we tend a garden or scratch behind a cat's ear. We can hear God in the sound of children laughing or our favorite song. We can hold God as we embrace someone's hand who is dying. We can prepare a holy meal when we feed someone who is hungry. We can give to God by giving our best to our work. We can dance, sing, clap, hum, snap and embody praise.

Sometimes these physical movements, this embodiment of praise releases something within us that we deeply need, a reminder of the God-breathed goodness all around us and within us. Praising can sometimes change everything.

Let everything that has breath praise God and may our every breath become a song of praise. This week maybe take a few minutes praising God with your body... take a prayer walk or run, sit and listen to the Creator's unrehearsed sonatas offered by the birds and bugs. Eat a meal with mindful gratitude for all the tastes in God's good earth and God-given creativity in the kitchen. Nod your head along as you sing along with the music, thanking God for highest hallelujahs and grooviest funky beat. God made all that. Be present. Be open. Be Mindful. Worship. Remember you hold with the very breath of God. Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Let every breath offer praise to God.