

Breaking down the Pretty/Ugly Altars

A sermon preached at
Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church,
Edmonton, Alberta

May 31, 2015

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Texts: Psalm 139:13-16; Romans 12:1-2; 1 Samuel 16:7; 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, 11:23-24

Today I want us to think about our bodies. Every body has brought their bodies to worship this morning. We are embodied; God made us this way. But our bodies are not something we talk about very often in church, except in “Prayers of the People” when we ask God to heal our sick bodies. We use our bodies all the time but they tend to be the medium not the message of our lives. I think there is a good news message in our bodies, in our embodied bodies, if only we have ears to hear. What is that good news?

Let’s start by thinking about bodies. Let’s start by thinking about Jesus’ body. If I asked you to imagine Jesus’ tiny baby body wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger, or Jesus walking as a 12 year old on the road to Jerusalem, or Jesus eating and drinking with his friends at a party in Cana, or Jesus reaching out and touching a person with leprosy, or Jesus holding a child on his lap, or Jesus kneeling and praying, or Jesus breaking bread on hillside, or Jesus begin whipped, or Jesus on a cross, bleeding; if I asked you to imagine any of these things, I am pretty sure you can do that no problem. Jesus takes on flesh in our imagination, because many of us are familiar with these stories from the gospels. The four gospels tell us about Jesus, God incarnate. God “in the flesh”. God with skin on.

Since Jesus had a body, I invite you to use your imagination then to think about that body. If you want to, you can close your eyes. In your mind’s eye, imagine what Jesus looked like. Picture him. Does he have dark hair? Does he weigh 300 pounds? Is Jesus very tall? Does he walk with a limp because one leg is shorter than the other? Does he have beautiful eyes? Does he have a birthmark covering half his cheek? Is he just under five feet tall? Is he missing one of his front teeth? Is he strong and muscular?

ok, you can open your eyes. Well, that was probably a bit weird. We know a lot about Jesus’ body and what he did with that body, but there are zero verses that tell us what Jesus looked like. Any of those things I asked you to picture *could* have been true. I wonder if you’ve ever thought of this before, that even though we know so much about what Jesus’ body did, we know nothing about what Jesus looked like. The gospels do not say one word about Jesus’ physical appearance. It’s remarkable really, and I think it’s striking for us because we live in a culture that worships at the altar of physical appearance.

In the Old Testament the prophets often talk about Israel worshipping false gods. When I was in Jerusalem, I went to the Israel Museum and saw a Canaanite statue of a golden cow; it was a god that people worshipped, that they made with their own imagination, their own hands. They lived their lives trying to make that golden cow happy. The prophets pointed out how destructive this false worship was.

I think that in our society, from the time we are young to the time we are old, we are taught to worship at the altar of physical appearance. We are taught to be loyal to a false god that would tell us there are two types of people...beautiful people and ugly people, and that beautiful people are good and ugly people are bad. Our culture, through TV, movies, videos, advertising, everything...promotes concepts of what is beautiful and what is ugly. Television programs show us beautiful people, billboards show us beautiful people, and when we open a magazine, there are more beautiful people.

What does it mean to be beautiful in our culture? According to the pictures held up for us everywhere, beautiful is to be young. To have smooth skin. To have smooth, white skin. To have perfect teeth. To have thick hair. To have even features. To have a thin body. For women, to have a thin body and an hourglass figure, for men, to have broad shoulders and a muscular body. And even with all those things going for you it's still a toss-up. As every beauty pageant shows...there's beautiful and then there's beautiful. The god of the pretty/ugly altar is very difficult to please!

Our culture equates beauty with goodness. From the earliest stories, the heroes of the fairytale were always beautiful and handsome while the stepmother and the witch were ugly. This stereotyping is present in almost every show or movie we watch. Whether it's a mystery, or a sit-com, the villain is often ugly, the main characters are usually beautiful. In a movie like "Lord of the Rings", for example, the bad characters are anyone who limps, who has bad teeth or an irregular face, while the good people are all even featured. Our culture tells us that how you look on the outside is the most important thing. It's the altar you should worship at.

And yet as Christians we worship a Saviour whose appearance is a mystery! The gospels are a direct challenge to all who worship at the altar of physical appearance. We know nothing about what Jesus' body looked like because *it did not matter*. It simply did not matter what Jesus looked like. Jesus was our Saviour, and whether he had brown hair or blond hair, brown skin or white skin, whether he was short or tall, heavy or thin, whether he had a body without disabilities, or a body with disabilities, it did not matter at all.

But that has not stopped people from being curious about what Jesus looked like. Early church theologians like Justin Martyr and Tertullian suggested that Jesus was probably not attractive. They didn't have any New Testament descriptions to go on, but they based it on a prophecy from Isaiah 53 which says of the Messiah, "he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him." (Isaiah 53:2). But another early church theologian named Jerome speculated that Jesus must have been attractive in face and body, just as he was in spirit and mind. Augustine said of Jesus, "beautiful as a child, beautiful on earth, beautiful in heaven."

As artwork became more a part of the Christian tradition, artists had to use their imagination to picture Jesus. And interestingly artists almost always went with Jerome and Augustine, guessing that Jesus must have been handsome. Have you ever seen a picture of a very heavy Jesus, or of a balding Jesus, or a Jesus missing teeth? When I asked you to picture a saviour who was not physically perfect or attractive, it might have been startling or seemed almost sacrilegious. Jesus was God, so we think he had to be perfect, he had to be handsome.

Mennonites historically have had a tradition of not displaying artwork in church. Many of you know that I find Christian art fascinating. But one of the good things about not having pictures of Jesus in most Mennonite sanctuaries has been that at least in our public worship space, we aren't told what Jesus looked like. We aren't tempted to equate handsomeness with holiness. Mind you, many of you who went to Sunday school saw plenty of pictures, or you had a bible that had pictures in it. And Jesus always ends up looking pretty clean-cut and handsome.

This in spite of the fact that the gospels don't tell us a thing about Jesus' appearance. The gospels break down the pretty/ugly altar by ignoring it completely.

This is somewhat different than some of the stories in the Old Testament. I did a study where I read every verse in the bible, both Old and New Testaments that had the words "body," or "beautiful" or "handsome" in it. I found that in the Old Testament we do hear about the appearance of people's bodies. Sarah was beautiful, Leah's eyes were lovely, and Rachel was graceful and beautiful. Joseph was handsome, Saul was handsome, David was handsome and had beautiful eyes. Bathsheba was very beautiful, Tamar was beautiful, and Esther was fair and beautiful.

But when we get to the New Testament, descriptions about people's bodies are strangely absent. There is no verse describing what Mary, or Elizabeth, or Peter, or John, or Paul looked like. There is no verse that says, "God chose Mary because she was the most beautiful girl in Israel." No verse that says, "Jesus took the cutest child and set it among them and said, 'Be like this child'." There is no verse, "Jesus gathered the tallest, most handsome men to be his disciples," or "Jesus reached out and touched the most attractive person with leprosy and healed him."

This lack of physical description in the New Testament is not a simple oversight. Jesus broke down the pretty/ugly altars of physical appearance because he saw people for who they were. He saw them as precious and loved in the sight of God: each person a gift, each body beautiful, each body a temple of the Holy Spirit. And this wasn't a totally new idea with Jesus: we see hints of this in the Old Testament. The prophet Samuel warns against Saul by saying, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." (1 Samuel 16:7)

The way God sees is very different than the world sees. And that's the challenge. It's hard to live in a world where everyone is worshipping at the pretty/ugly altar without being influenced by it. It's hard for young people particularly. We form our identity as young people, and we wonder, "How do people see me?" And standing in front of the pretty/ugly altar we ask, "Am I one of the beautiful people or one of the ugly people?"

When I was a teenager, I was part of a youth group in our church. And on a fine summer day, we were having a car wash to raise some money. A boy, a boy I really liked, said to me, in a tone of voice loud enough for a dozen other young people to hear, "Your toes are really ugly." And he pointed to my feet, just in case people didn't know what he was talking about. A dozen people turned their heads and looked down at my toes.

As a teenager I was worried about a lot of things. I was worried about my hair, I was worried about my face, I was worried about my skin, I was worried about my fingernails, I was worried about my body shape and size...I was worried about practically every part of my body! But up until that moment, I had never, not once, worried about whether my toes were beautiful or ugly. And now suddenly I was faced with the claim that there were categories for toes...and my toes were apparently in the ugly category. After that truly mortifying experience at my youth group car wash, I remember often staring intently at my toes. "Are they ugly?" I would ask myself. I started to look at other girl's toes. "Are those toes beautiful?" And of course the bottom line is, what can you possibly do about what your toes look like? I did the one thing I could do: I never wore sandals to youth group again!

If I was a betting person, I would bet that everyone here can remember something hurtful that someone has said about your physical appearance. We remember the comments that make us feel that we are in the ugly camp, because more than almost anything, we want to be in the beautiful camp. We want to be there because those people have more fun...and are more successful. Everyone loves beautiful people, it seems.

And did you know that tall people make more money? Studies show that if you control for education and experience, for every inch of height, you earn \$1000 more per year. Someone who is 5' 6" will make \$6,000 less than someone who is 6 feet tall. This is true for men and women...tall is beautiful, tall is successful!

The pretty/ugly altar is not something that tempts just young people. As older people, we are challenged too, because by simply growing old, in the world's eyes, we migrate year by year into the ugly camp, as we get wrinkles and our bodies sag and change. We live in a culture that has normalized plastic surgery, the word "Botox" is common enough that it is in our vocabulary, and we spend the equivalent of the gross national product of a small African country on beauty products that promise to reverse the signs of aging.

So when we hear the verse today that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, it is a challenge to us. The altar of physical appearance is one we are called to cast down. God gives us vision to see deeper than the skin, and to see into people's hearts, just as Jesus did. Jesus was willing to break the taboos of his society. Leprosy was a disease that disfigured people, that made them unclean, untouchable, they were cast into the ugly camp, never to return. Jesus talked to these people, he reached out and touched them.

Now I think we do sometimes transcend the pretty/ugly altar. I wonder whether you have ever had this experience. You meet someone and you think, “They are gorgeous...strikingly so!” But as you get to know them, you realize that they are not a nice person. In fact they are mean, they are dishonest and untrustworthy. You get to know their character over a long period of time and it is not pretty!

And a year or two later if you hear someone refer to that person as pretty or handsome, you will be startled, because you realize that you don’t see them that way at all. Their actions have influenced how you view them. In the same way you might meet someone and initially think that they are quite ugly but as you get to know them and you see how kind and truly good they are...you’ll look back and wonder, “Why did I think they were unattractive?”

I saw an old movie once that challenged this stereotype that pretty or handsome people are good and ugly people are bad. The movie was made in 1932, and it was called “Freaks”. It was set in a circus. Actually the director of the show used actual circus performers for the movie. In that time period, circuses weren’t like our current Cirque du Soleil, but included people who looked different. People with birth defects and genetic conditions worked in the circus. These people were called freaks, and this was the freak show part of the circus.

In the movie there are two people who are beautiful in every cultural way. She is young, slim, with blond hair and regular features and nice teeth. He is tall, dark and handsome and very muscular. Their appearance fits every stereotype of beauty. The rest of the cast is an amazing assortment of people with unusual features, incredibly small bodies, or large heads, people lacking limbs...you get the picture.

The startling thing about the movie is that the people who are different and would not be culturally considered beautiful, are the ones who keep showing hospitality, love and kindness. The “normal” people turn out to be traitors filled with meanness and hatred. The movie is called Freaks because it challenges your categories, “What makes a person a freak?” It challenges you to look deeper than skin deep and to look at people’s hearts. In a way it’s a challenge to all who worship at the pretty/ugly altar. (Now I don’t want to necessarily recommend that movie because it has a horrible ending: it is a horror picture.)

As Christians we reject that pretty/ugly altar. It’s not that we ignore the body, and say, “Don’t even think about the body!” There are parts of the Christian church that have done that, who have tried to negate the body, and say that only our minds and spirits are good. No. We believe that God created our bodies, we are embodied people, and our bodies are good. The body we are given is the body we are given – and it’s a gift from God. You could have been born into a body that had no arms, or into a body with skin that is unusual, or you could have been born with a body like Angelina Jolie or Brad Pitt. No matter, your body is still beautiful.

A dear friend of mine was dying in Ontario not long ago; she was 98 years old. My friends sent me a picture of themselves by her bedside. As I looked at the picture, I was struck by how beautiful this woman was. She was so wrinkled and so old, and so beautiful. A dear sister in faith, she earned every wrinkle, her body had served her well. And I could see the love my friends had for her on their faces too. At that moment it was so clear that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus Christ himself, showed us that even wounded bodies can be beautiful. Nothing they could do to his body could change the beauty that Jesus had, a beauty that allowed him to give his life for us, "My body broken for you."

I have an assignment for you this week...I want you to unmask the pretty/ugly altars all around you. This week, as a follower of Jesus, refuse to judge people by their appearance. Christians don't make negative comments about people's appearance...their body size or shape, their facial features. Catch yourself if you make judgements about appearance and say to yourself, "I refuse to worship at the pretty/ugly altar."

Where else do we find the pretty/ugly altar? Too often it is often found in the mirror in our own house. I challenge you this week to look in a full-length mirror and say, "My body is a gift from God...thank you God for this body." Maybe you will see someone you love looking in the mirror in a doubtful way. You can tell them, "I think you're beautiful just the way God made you." It's our challenge as a church, to empower every child here to grow up loving their bodies, and knowing that they are beautiful just the way God made them.

And so that's the good news: we live in bodies, bodies created by a God who loves us, just the way we are. We are bodies capable of being filled with the Holy Spirit. It is that Spirit which gives us the power to reject the tyranny of the pretty/ugly altars of this world. It's that Spirit that causes us to be a welcoming community to every body that walks in our door, regardless of their appearance. It's the Spirit that creates our community, a community where we look around and we see only beautiful people, everywhere we look. Let's pray:

Creator God,
thank you for our bodies
for new baby bodies,
for young bodies,
for middle-aged bodies,
for old bodies,
all beautiful, all created by you.
Thank you that we are somebody in your sight.
Thank you for your Spirit,
embodied in our church body here today.
Bless us now as we remember
the body of Jesus,
broken for us, raised for your glory.
Amen.