

2023-03-26 It Is What's Inside That Counts

Darci Strutt McQuiston

Based on Ezekiel 37:1-14, Romans 8:6-11, and portions of John 11

Hymns: Be Still, My Soul, This is Amazing Grace, Do Lord

Children's Sermon:

Have you ever seen cars on a racetrack? They go around and around until the white flag tells them it is the last lap and after that the first car to cross the finish line wins. Sometimes they need to pull into a place they call the "pit" and get more gas or put on new tires. It's important to take good care of the car so the driver can do well in the race. Do you think you could be in that race without a car. I'd say not! The whole event is based on everyone being inside a car.

Is the driver the same as the car or separate? When the race is over can they get out of the car and go home? Of course, they do! The car is just what they use to be part of the race. The car is important to the driver and keeping it in good shape helps it race better, but the driver and the car are two separate things.

The Bible readings we're studying today are reminding us that our body and our spirit are two separate things. Our body is important because that is how we do what we are called to do on earth, just like the car is important to the race car driver. It isn't all we are though. Just like the driver gets out of their car at the end of the race, there is a time when we leave this shell behind.

Dear God, help us remember to take good care of our bodies while we are here on earth. Help us also remember that we are more than our bodies. Thank you for loving us and giving us a place in heaven to come home to. We love you. In Jesus name we pray.

Hello my church family! I am Darci Strutt McQuiston, a Lay Speaker within this congregation. It is my joy to be invited into the pulpit this morning. I'm going to lean into three of the scriptures assigned for today. You've heard Ezekiel and Romans read aloud already. I'm also going to pull in thoughts from the Gospel reading for today which is John 11:1-45. I'm not going to read all 45 verses, but it is a great passage to read. Consider it as homework!

The theme for Lent this year is “inside out”. My “inside out” for this Sunday is to turn around how we see ourselves. We often see our bodies as being who we are. We are humans, or down a level, we are mammals. When we experience something, we see it through our physical senses most of the time. Yet, we are also spiritual beings. The “inside out phrasing could go something like this.

"We are not human beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a human experience." - Pierre Teilhard de Chardin or Wayne W. Dyer. The internet argues about who said this quote.

Our body is a shell made from food that we use as transportation and a means to communicate with each other while we are on earth. The body is important because I believe we each have a purpose to fulfill here on earth. We need our shell to stay in good shape to enable us to complete this work. Just like a race car driver needs to take good care of their car if they are in a race, but the car is not the most important piece of the partnership. It is what's inside the car that counts.

The lessons today bring out the theme of the physical and spiritual being separated. The valley of dry bones is an example of reviving community. John 11, which I'll read during this message, is an example of reviving someone we love. Paul's letter to the Romans reminds us that we are a mix of spiritual and physical and where we place our focus results in our life experience.

In Ezekiel's vision, the dry bones came alive in two steps. First the body was restored but had no life. Next Ezekiel was to call upon the breath to come from the four winds and fill them. It was then they lived. I also find it instructive that God didn't do this work without Ezekiel. He instructed Ezekiel how to prophesy to the bones and the wind. A human was God's servant to bring about the desired change.

This vision was a message for the people of Israel.

Ezekiel 37:11-14 (CEB)

11 He said to me, “Human one, these bones are the entire house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope has perished. We are completely finished.’ 12 So now,

prophesy and say to them, The Lord God proclaims: I'm opening your graves! I will raise you up from your graves, my people, and I will bring you to Israel's fertile land. 13 You will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and raise you up from your graves, my people. 14 I will put my breath in you, and you will live. I will plant you on your fertile land, and you will know that I am the Lord. I've spoken, and I will do it. This is what the Lord says."

The Israelites are in exile and the temple in Jerusalem has been destroyed. They feel they have been abandoned by God because of their sin. They have lost hope. Ezekiel's message to them was to have faith that even though they feel dead, God has not abandoned them. God can take long dead bones and bring them to life.

I believe this passage is also a message of hope for our communities of faith. Humans have muddled Christ's message of love. People label themselves as Christian yet spend more time hating others than loving others. Our own denomination is in turmoil. The United Methodist Church doesn't feel very united. Outsiders look at the behavior of Christians and have no interest in associating with the label. It is easy to feel discouraged. The command to "go make of all disciples" has no hope if the image of a disciple is one that is distasteful.

It has no hope without the spirit of God intervening. There can be revival. We are Gods people. We can claim God's promise in verse 14 "I will put my breath in you, and you will live."

Ezekiel was dealing with a community feeling like they were dead. John 11 is dealing with the death of one man, Lazarus.

In verses 1 through 19, Jesus is told that Lazarus, a good friend, is ill, but doesn't go to him until after Lazarus has been dead and in the tomb for four days. I'm going to read verses 20 through 27.

John 11:20-27

20 When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him, while Mary remained in the house. 21 Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died. 22 Even now I know that whatever you ask God, God will give you."

23 Jesus told her, "Your brother will rise again."

24 Martha replied, "I know that he will rise in the resurrection on the last day."

25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die. 26 Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

27 She replied, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, God's Son, the one who is coming into the world."

After this conversation Martha calls her sister Mary to come to Jesus. Together they go to the place Lazarus was laid. Jesus weeps with Mary.

Here is John 11 starting with the 38th verse.

38 Jesus was deeply disturbed again when he came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone covered the entrance. 39 Jesus said, "Remove the stone."

Martha, the sister of the dead man, said, "Lord, the smell will be awful! He's been dead four days."

40 Jesus replied, "Didn't I tell you that if you believe, you will see God's glory?" 41 So they removed the stone. Jesus looked up and said, "Father, thank you for hearing me. 42 I know you always hear me. I say this for the benefit of the crowd standing here so that they will believe that you sent me." 43 Having said this, Jesus shouted with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" 44 The dead man came out, his feet bound and his hands tied, and his face covered with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Untie him and let him go."

It makes me wonder if Lazarus floated out, or hopped out like he was in a gunny sack race.

The conversation with Martha was spiritual and theoretical until it became real. She had faith that death was not the end of the story. Jesus brought her experience from one of hope for a future time to one of rejoicing in the present moment. The Bible reading gives us a taste of the reality of that future for those we love.

I am an orphan. Both my parents died in 2020. It is not unusual to be an orphan when you are in your 60's. We expect our parents will die before we do. My husband has been receiving

hospice care since July of 2020. Such events make me very aware of the mortality of our human body. These scriptures give me great comfort.

The scriptures tell me in many places that death is not the end of the journey. Jesus words to Martha remind us that physical death does not kill the spirit of the believer. His calling Lazarus out of the tomb took that out of the realm of faith and into the realm of experience. It moved from “hope” to “knowing” Jesus had the power to defeat death.

Another part of this passage that gives me comfort is verse 35, “Jesus began to weep.” I learned that verse as being the shortest in the Bible, “Jesus wept.” Martha and Mary had their brother restored, yet before that happened, they grieved for him. Jesus joined them in their grief. Their grief didn’t mean their faith was weak. It meant their love for Lazarus was strong.

I grieve for people that have transitioned from this world. That doesn’t mean I lack faith their spirit is in God’s hands. It means I feel loss at them no longer being on earth with me. Jesus sees that grief. We are not alone in feeling our grief. It is not a sign of a lack of faith.

I believe Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones was a vision to give an example to the people of Israel. I believe Lazarus was a real man that was dead for four days and then brought back to life. If you read further on in the chapter, this is the event that brought the leaders to the decision that Jesus must be killed.

John 11:49-53

49 One of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, told them, “You don’t know anything! 50 You don’t see that it is better for you that one man die for the people rather than the whole nation be destroyed.” 51 He didn’t say this on his own. As high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus would soon die for the nation— 52 and not only for the nation. Jesus would also die so that God’s children scattered everywhere would be gathered together as one. 53 From that day on they plotted to kill him.

Ezekiel spoke of community. John spoke of those we love. Paul’s letter to the Romans makes this idea very personal and in the present.

Not only will death not be the end of us, but our body is not the whole of us right now. The passage from Roman’s is short so I’m going to reread it to refresh our memories.

Romans 8:6-11

6 The attitude that comes from selfishness leads to death, but the attitude that comes from the Spirit leads to life and peace. 7 So the attitude that comes from selfishness is hostile to God. It doesn't submit to God's Law, because it can't. 8 People who are self-centered aren't able to please God.

9 But you aren't self-centered. Instead, you are in the Spirit, if in fact God's Spirit lives in you. If anyone doesn't have the Spirit of Christ, they don't belong to him. 10 If Christ is in you, the Spirit is your life because of God's righteousness, but the body is dead because of sin. 11 If the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead lives in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your human bodies also, through his Spirit that lives in you.

I said at the beginning of this message that I think of the physical body as a shell made out of food. Its purpose is transportation and communication while we're on earth.

Think about what it means to focus only on the body. Selfishness is self-preservation. If you are focused on the physical, then it is a dog-eat-dog world. Sharing food with those that are poor would be foolish. Caring for those that are sick is unthinkable. The weak should be abandoned. Maybe you'd protect your spouse for as long as it took to have a child but then it would be back to everyone for themselves. Love your neighbor as yourself makes no sense if we identify only with this shell made of food.

That is not the way God created us. From the very beginning, God put his spirit within us. Genesis 2: 7 "the Lord God formed the human from the topsoil of the fertile land and blew life's breath into his nostrils. The human came to life."

The Hebrew word behind wind, breath, and spirit is the same. Translators use whichever word seems most fitting in the text but understand the base word is the same. God created the shell, then brought it to life with his breath/spirit. That is the part of us that doesn't come from the earth. It comes from God.

Jesus gave us the gift of the Holy Spirit to dwell within us after his death and resurrection on Easter. Christ's breath is in us because of his sacrifice.

Our body will die. If our focus is only on this shell, then we live in fear of death. That fear disappears when you identify with the spirit. Death is not an end. Death is a transition.

From my children's message, death means the race is done and you can get out of the car.

I am not belittling the body. Hear me in this. I feel more convicted at how poorly I've been treating my own body as I worked on this message.

1 Corinthians 6:19-20

19 Or don't you know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you? Don't you know that you have the Holy Spirit from God, and you don't belong to yourselves? 20 You have been bought and paid for, so honor God with your body.

I've been known to get my car close to empty and I have sadly hit empty a few times with my body. Thinking about my body as a transportation and communication tool makes me want to take better care of it. A race car driver takes very good care of their car if they want to complete the race in a good time. I believe we each have a purpose, a race to run, and it honors God's spirit within us to care for this shell we share.

Paul reminds us in verse 9, "But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you." We need to alter our focus from the flesh to what's inside. It is what's inside that counts.

If you are reading this in print form, watching YouTube, or listening during a Sunday service then you are hearing the Bible read. That is caring for your spirit. If you are supporting those in need and sharing God's love for others, that is caring for your spirit. Many of you have added extra meditation readings during lent or given up something to bring your focus on God more often and that is caring for your spirit. Choosing to focus on things of the spirit brings us life and peace.

We have seven more days before we experience the retelling of Holy Week and the end of Jesus time in his earthly shell. You may not be familiar with our final song, "This is Amazing Grace" but I hope you will let the words sink in. Easter is a story of amazing grace. Jesus

breaks the power of sin. Jesus' sacrifice changes us from orphans to children of God. I pray the retelling will feed your spirit.

In this time of lent and our theme of "Inside Out" I hope you will remember it is what's on the inside that counts.

Amen.