

Stewardship as Counterculture: Stewards of Our Bodies

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[0 : 00] Welcome to Church of the Advent. Welcome to our Brooklyn Parish. For those of you who are visiting, we're glad that you're here. This is an exciting day. We're going to celebrate a baptism, as is traditional, on All Saints Day when we talk about the church as a whole.

And actually, our focus tonight, or I'm sorry, this morning I wrote this at night, our focus right now is something that actually ties in with baptism.

And I hope by the end of this you'll see the connection. We've been doing a series for a couple of weeks now called Stewardship as Counterculture. And it's based on the idea that Christians believe God is the owner of all things.

Everything belongs to Him. And that we are stewards. That whatever we have in our lives, those are things that God has entrusted to us to hold in trust.

And we believe, as we've started to lay out, that the more we live like owners, the more dysfunction and damage and anxiety and harm result.

[1 : 12] Not only in our lives, but in our relationships. And conversely, the more we live like stewards, which is a radically countercultural way to live, the more we begin to heal and grow and flourish.

It liberates us. So this is the theme that we've been exploring. And last week we looked at what it means to be stewards of creation, the world around us. This week, things get much more personal.

Because we're talking about what it means to be stewards of our bodies. That our bodies themselves have been entrusted to us. So let me ask you by way of getting started, how do you think about your body?

What do you think about your body? How would you describe your relationship with your body? Do you have a healthy relationship with your body?

How would you know if you didn't? What do you feel when you look in the mirror? As you were getting ready this morning, what were you thinking as you checked your appearance?

[2 : 19] How do you think about your health? How often do you think about these things? I've mentioned more than a few times this year that I turned 40. And it feels more and more that I'm not getting along with my body as well as we used to get along.

We used to have a great friendship. And now my body seems to be against me. And I think that that's only going to continue. So we're going to talk about our relationship with our body. And what does it mean to be stewards of our physical bodies?

So we're going to look at all of the passages that we referenced. I've said, you know, normally we preach expository sermons. We look at one text and we go verse by verse. This series is more of a survey series.

We're doing something a little different. We're looking at a lot of texts because we're wanting to show how this is a theme that runs through the entirety of Scripture. So we're looking at all of the passages that David just read. And I want to show you four things about God and your body.

Four things about God and your body. Number one, God owns your body. God owns it. Number two, God loves it. Number three, God has a purpose for your body and my body.

[3 : 30] And fourthly, God will renew your body. He's the owner. He loves it. He has a purpose for it. And he will one day renew it. Let's pray as we get started.

Our Father, as we're gathered in this auditorium and we're coming from so many different places and there are so many potential distractions and, Lord, we know that there's this great miracle that takes place when your people gather around your word.

And that is that you, in some unfathomable way, speak to us. You speak through us. You use your word to bring us face to face with your living word, Jesus.

He is the one we have come to see. It is his voice we desire. So we pray for that, Lord, by your grace. In your son's name. Amen.

So God owns your body. Hopefully you feel an appropriate amount of shock and even offense hearing those words. We don't talk much about people owning other people's bodies.

[4 : 39] God owns our bodies. Luke 20 is a fascinating passage. I wish that we could just dive in verse by verse. Luke 20 is this encounter between the Pharisees and actually another gospel tells us the Herodians.

And they come and they try to trap Jesus by asking him this highly politicized question. A lot of debate among the Jews about this certain tax that was called a head tax.

It was a tribute paid simply for the pleasure of being under Caesar. And Jesus responds in an amazing way. They say, should we pay it or not? And either yes or no is going to land Jesus in hot water.

Jesus says something different. He says, show me a denarius, a coin, standard coin. Whose likeness and inscription does this denarius have? And if you look, there was a picture of Caesar's face on it.

He says, well, it has Caesar's image on it. Therefore, this denarius belongs to Caesar. And then he says, but render to God or unto God the things that belong to God.

[5 : 47] So what's he saying? Caesar's image is on the coin, so it belongs to Caesar. But God's image is on you. Therefore, you belong to God.

He's saying that you belong to God. And the point we want to see is that he's not just talking about your heart or your mind. He's talking about your body. And that's why Paul in Romans chapter 12 says, I appeal to you, therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

He specifically says bodies, which, by the way, would have majorly shocked his hearers. Worship God by giving him your body.

All of yourself. So all Christian worship, by the way, Romans 12 is one of the core passages on all Christian worship. So all of Christian worship begins by offering ourselves fully to God, starting with our bodies.

So I just want to reflect on that because that simple truth, God is the owner of our bodies. He's entitled to our bodies. That has massive implications for how we think and live in the world.

[7 : 02] And it's radically countercultural. Because in our culture, most people would say, on the right and the left, to some degree, my body, my choice.

I have a right, because I am the owner of my body, to do what I want with my body. And no one has a right to tell me any different. And the thing we need to understand is that for Christians, now you may be here and may not believe this, and may not be a Christian.

That's great. But if you're a Christian, things are not that simple. It's simply not that straightforward. We see God as the owner of our bodies, which means we don't get the final say on what we do with our bodies.

God does. I don't have the final word. So we don't say my body, my choice. We ultimately say God's body, God's choice. Right? So when you house sit, and some of you have house sit, maybe some of you are doing it right now, hopefully, when the owners leave, you take good care of their house.

And in the same way, when we see God as the owner of our bodies, we very much desire to take good care of God's property.

[8 : 19] Right? So this is why Christians think or should think about, for instance, the language that we use. Or what we watch on television. Or what content we expose ourselves to on computers.

Why we think about our health. Why we think about what we eat and put into our bodies. Right? This is not because we're prudes or because we're traditionalists. This is because we recognize that we're stewards and not owners.

We see our eyes and our ears and our tongues and our hands and our feet as God's property. Also controversial issues.

Right? Like euthanasia. Abortion. Sexuality. Gender reassignment. Prostitution. Capital punishment. We could just go on and on and on. It's amazing how all of these issues are connected around the concept of body.

And who owns and has the final say on my body and on other people's bodies. Right? So all Christian thinking needs to flow out of the recognition that God is the owner of our bodies.

[9 : 31] So if you find this hard to accept, and if you do, I don't fault you. This is something that runs against the very grain of our society.

If you find it hard to accept, the good news is God doesn't just own your body, but he deeply, passionately loves your body. In fact, way more than you do.

If you think about our relationship with our bodies, for all of our talk as a culture, about my body, my choice, we really don't seem to have a very high opinion of our bodies.

I mean, statistically, 91% of women are very dissatisfied with their bodies. 91%. So at least a few of you in this room. And by the way, statistics on men, research is showing that men are more and more and more comparable to women in their focus on and dissatisfaction with their body and their body type.

There are 8 million people with diagnosed eating disorders in our country alone, and that's just diagnosed. Who knows how many people are flying under the radar?

[10 : 40] This is women and men. One in four college women. I mean, that's a huge statistic. That shows that there are definitely probably at least a few people in this room for whom that is or has been a struggle.

Weight loss, the weight loss industry, is a \$55 billion industry. That is massive. And last year, Americans spent \$16 billion on cosmetic surgery, which is, by the way, the most we have ever spent.

So it's not getting better. Statistically, it's getting worse. We hate our bodies. More and more and more, the numbers show that. And, of course, advertising makes it much worse.

You can't go anywhere without seeing highly idealized, Photoshopped images of ideal body types. And if you look at ads with women's bodies, a lot of times they're cut up.

You don't even see the head or the face. You just see an isolated body part. And we're confronted with these ideal types. And we look at those images. And then we kind of look at ourselves.

[11 : 52] We look, you know. And they're designed to make us unhappy with our bodies so that we will buy whatever product is being sold. You know, I'll confess to you that growing up, one of my biggest bodily insecurities was my forehead.

I was so insecure that I had a tall forehead. And my younger brother, who's such a punk, knew this. So he would often say things like, you don't have a forehead, you have a five head.

You know? You know, we would go biking. And if ever it just so happened that a gnat or a bug would get stuck on my forehead, my brother would collapse in paroxysms of laughter.

You know? You know, about the white wall of death that just came through and killed all the bugs, you know? He would joke about that I could sell ad space. You know, like your ad here. And make a lot of money.

Such a punk. But I had such insecurity about my forehead, right? And I think that we all have insecurities about our bodies. Things that we would be too embarrassed ever to admit.

[12 : 54] But they gnaw at us. You know, the truth is, feeling shame and insecurity about our bodies is not a new thing. It's not just in the last 10 or 15 years that this has been an issue.

This really started at creation. I mean, this started in Genesis chapter 3. It says in verse 7, after they sin, Adam and Eve's eyes are opened.

And it says, they knew that they were naked and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. This is the beginning of the shift in our relationship where we are no longer blessedly self-forgetful.

But we feel shame. Instead of assurance, we feel shame about our bodies. Instead of loving our bodies the way God does, we use our bodies to get love and approval from other people.

That's simply the way it works now. And so if you look at Psalm 139, that drives home this powerful countercultural truth. That God loves your body.

[13 : 56] God loves your body. He loves it even if you don't. Even if you hate it. He loves it. Because the psalm says he formed you and knit you together in mysterious ways.

And that every fiber, every cell, every molecule, every strand of DNA, he placed perfectly, exactly as he would. So in God's eyes, every fold, every wrinkle, every blemish, dare I say every roll, God loves and cherishes.

Because he made it. Right? He sees these things as being as beautiful as the ocean at sunset, as the flowers in the field.

Because just like them, he made your body. So the implication of this is clear. God loves your body. So why don't you? Why don't I?

Why do I worry about my forehead and covering it up? Why? Why? Who cares? God loves it. Right?

[15 : 05] The God who sculpted the Alps and painted the sky and forged the stars considers you to be his masterpiece. Who are we to disagree? Right?

Why spend so much time trying to figure out what to wear or doing and redoing makeup or, for some of us, cramming our bodies into Spanx? Just so some guy or some girl might give you half a glance.

Why do we spend so much emotional energy on it? Right? If we spend even a fraction of the amount of time that we spend worrying about our bodies and what other people think, reflecting instead on God's love for our bodies, how much would that change us?

And what we care about and what we let bother us? I'm not necessarily saying that getting a tummy tuck is sinful. But what I'm saying is that if we loved our bodies the way God does, we wouldn't even want one.

It wouldn't even matter. So God owns our bodies, and good news, he loves our bodies. He loves the physicality of our bodies. The third point goes along with this.

[16 : 18] God not only loves your body, he has a purpose for your body. When he thought about putting human beings into existence, there was a specific reason he gave us the bodies that he gave us.

So God has a purpose for your body. By the way, you know in the Greco-Roman world, if you were to say to the average person, I think there's a divine purpose for my body, you would get laughed out of the room.

That idea was ludicrous in the Greco-Roman world. Plato, a dominant thinker in that time, you know what he said about your body? He said, your body is a tomb. Your body is a tomb.

And this is the way everybody thought in Jesus' day. Our real self, my soul, the substance of who I really am, is trapped inside this stinking corpse.

And my great hope is to escape this tomb, transcend the physical, and become one with the spiritual. This is the way Plato thought and taught.

[17 : 20] So the material world was seen as inferior, even evil, by comparison to the spiritual. And I dare say, not much has changed. I mean, fast forward a couple of thousand years, and we think basically the same way in our society.

And this isn't just a right-left thing. I think people on the right and the left would agree with Plato, for the most part. Right? If you look on the right, you have evangelicals who have, for decades, emphasized giving our hearts to God.

Give your heart to the Lord. The Lord is really interested in your heart. We've had this vision of heaven that's been popularized in our culture of being this spiritual place.

And one day I will shuffle off this mortal coil and go and be with the angels in heaven. And all these movies that get made about seeing and glimpsing the spiritual reality of heaven that completely deny the importance of the body.

Right? And because of the historically low regard for the material and the physical on the right among conservative Christians, there's historically been a very repressive, negative view of sexuality.

[18 : 34] So all those things go together on the right. The left also has a low opinion of the physical body. On the left, you hear people talking about gender identity and marriage as though our bodies are merely impediments.

They just get in the way. They're obstacles. My true self, which is inside my body, this tomb, as Plato would say, my true self has very little to do with my body.

And if my body gets in the way, I can rely on science and technology to alter it, to make it fit me better. So in short, most people, I think, if I had to summarize this in a word, on the right and the left, have a very dismembered view of human beings.

A dismembered view. In other words, we take the body and the self and we chop them in half. And here's the body and here's the self. And we separate them. It's dismembering human beings.

And you ask, okay, well, what's the big deal? Maybe Plato was right. Well, let me ask you this question. Do you know what trauma does to a person? Any of you familiar with especially psychological trauma, especially sexual trauma?

[19 : 46] Do you know what sexual trauma does to a person? It results in often some kind of dissociative disorder. And a dissociative disorder is by definition a separating of self and body.

And people who are struggling with dissociative disorders, their therapy involves reconnecting self and body.

So that instead of feeling as though they're floating outside of their body, passively watching things happen to it, they feel that they feel that they feel that they feel that they are in and part of and empowered to have agency in their body.

So I guess my question is, is it a disorder or not? Either separating self and body is a disorder and it's harmful and it's indicative of damage.

Or it's exactly what we should be doing. I don't know how it can be both. Right? So God offers a breathtakingly beautiful alternative as Paul lays out in 1 Corinthians 6.

[20 : 54] And just to summarize what he says here, a couple of major points that he makes that are radically countercultural. First thing he says is, your body doesn't just contain you. It is you.

It's not just your container. It's you. In verse 15, Paul says our bodies are members of Christ. He's not just saying your hearts are members of Christ.

Your spirits are members. Your soul is a member of Christ. He's saying your bodies themselves are members of Christ. So in Paul's world, you can't separate the bodily and the spiritual.

You are your body. And all of it, all of it is a member of Christ. The second thing he says, to summarize 1 Corinthians 6, he says Plato was wrong, essentially.

Your body is not a tomb. It's a temple. You see the radical difference in how you would live if you thought of your body as a temple rather than as a tomb?

[21 : 58] Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you? Why did God create bodies? Because God wanted a temple. And this is it.

And your body is a temple. Our bodies, in other words, Paul is saying, our bodies are inherently spiritual. And whatever we do with them is inherently spiritual.

So he's dealing with an issue of temple prostitution. Somebody maybe who has married and has kids is going down to the local temple, sleeping with a temple cult prostitute, and then coming back home to his wife and kids.

And might very well say, what's the problem with that? It's just my religious prerogative. Paul says, I'll tell you what's wrong with it. When you do that, because your body is a temple, and Christ and the presence of the Trinitarian God dwells within your body.

When you do that with your body, you're uniting Christ with that prostitute. It's unavoidable. You can't do it. So you may not agree, but I just want you to understand.

[23 : 03] I want to give one example. We can't talk about this without at least addressing some of the Christian thinking on sex and gender and marriage. And I know that this is very controversial.

And you may not agree. And that's fully your prerogative. That's totally fine. But I at least want you to understand Christian thinking on this. Because I want you to see that it's not just traditionalism or bigotry or ignorance.

There's actually a force of argument here if we believe that our bodies are inherently spiritual. If they are, in other words, sacramental.

You know what a sacrament is? A sacrament is something that is physical that points to a deeper spiritual reality. They're joined. And that's what Paul is essentially saying about our bodies.

They are sacramental objects. The body is a sacramental object. So it has everything to do, all of our thinking on sex and gender and all of those controversial issues, all of this is rooted in the idea of our bodies being sacramental.

[24 : 08] So we look at a man and a woman who are binary opposites. And when you see a man and a woman as binary opposites, others, coming together, being joined in sexual union within the covenant of marriage, that's about much more than desire or companionship or love or commitment or even childbearing.

I mean, those are good reasons. But below those, there is a sacramental reality that is unfolding. Marital sex is, in other words, a sacrament. And as I just said, it points to a deeper, greater, more central spiritual reality.

In fact, I think it's the greatest promise in Scripture. Marriage sacramentally points to the greatest promise in Scripture. And that is this, that one day, the heavens and the earth, the ultimate binary opposites, that have been separated since day two of creation, when God put a firmament between them.

By the way, it's the only day in creation that God doesn't pronounce good. Day two. Heavens and the earth, separate, not good. Because the goal is that one day they would come together.

And so all marriage points to this greater, deeper union. Ephesians 5, Paul says, when you look at a marriage, you're actually looking at a picture of Christ and his church.

[25 : 37] One day, Christ, the ultimate groom, the church, the ultimate bride, will come together. And do you know where their great wedding celebration will happen? It will happen in the new Jerusalem. And there will be finally the celebration of the great and true marriage, not between human beings, but between the heavens and the earth, that will come together as one.

No longer separate. No longer spread apart from one another. The spiritual and the physical, the heavenly and the earthly will all be one. That is the hope of the Christian faith in the new Jerusalem. So this is why, by the way, Jesus, when he's asked about marriage, says, there will no longer be marriage in the new creation.

In the new Jerusalem. Why? Because marriage was only here to point to that one great marriage. The only one that matters. The heavens and the earth coming together as one. So for Christians, if we believe that, and that's the central and great hope of the gospel, when we look at something like sex or marriage, if we want to have any consistency in our thinking, we can't get around the fact that any distortion of that, either redefining marriage or premarital sex or extramarital affairs or any of those things, those are actual distortions of a sacramental reality in our faith.

It would be as though I would take the bread and the wine and just pour them out on the ground. And it's deeply painful. It has nothing to do with being traditionalist.

Having traditional family values. Traditional family values. A lot of things about Christianity that fly in the face of those. As I said last week, we're not... If you were here last week, you would think that we were a left-leaning church.

[27 : 14] We talk about environmental care. If you're here and this is your first time in Advent, you may think, oh, this is a conservative church. But what we said last week is that we follow Jesus, and that takes us across all kinds of political divides.

Jesus does not make a good Republican or Democrat. He doesn't fit our categories. So God has a purpose for your body. I hope you understand the beauty of that, even if the politics of it are challenging.

That God created you to be a sacramental temple of his presence in the world. You couldn't get further from a tomb if you tried. So God owns your body.

He loves your body. He has a purpose in mind for your body. And lastly, God will renew your body. God will renew this body that is sitting in this chair right now.

God's going to renew that body. He's going to make it all new. Life in a fallen world is hard on our bodies. It's hard on our bodies.

[28 : 13] First, there's the reality of entropy and decay. You know, as I said, as I get older, the more I feel that my body is turning against me.

It doesn't do what I want it to do. It doesn't act the way I want it to act. It doesn't feel the way I want it to feel. We don't get along that well. And along with decay and age, you have to face the reality of sickness and death and disabilities and disorders where either our body or parts of our body don't work the way they should.

They stop working. They don't function the way they should. That's one category. Then there's also the things that we do to our bodies. Right? Some of you know that I have a tattoo on my lower back, right above my belt line.

I'm not going to show it to you. Only members get to see the tattoo. It's like a benefit. No. It's not true. I'm not going to show it to you. Safe to say I regret it.

For many, many reasons. And I hope that when my body is renewed, that tattoo removal process will be cheaper than it is here.

[29 : 32] And it will be more permanent and lasting as though it never happened. All joking aside, there are lots of things that we do to our bodies. There are choices that we make that we later regret.

Things that we do to our bodies that we would give anything to be able to undo. And yet they're realities that we have to live with. Third category, the most painful things that have been done to our bodies.

Things that we have experienced and endured. You know? Physical trauma. Sexual trauma. Some memories don't just reside in the mind.

Some memories are actually stored in our bodies. You feel them. You feel the reality. The ongoing presence of trauma in you.

You know, the mind and the body, again, are much more connected than we in the West like to think. Actually, Eastern thinkers are a little closer to the truth than many of us are on this point.

[30 : 34] And I think we can carry scars, and many of them invisible, for years and years and years and years and years. Decades. These invisible wounds that we carry around. These felt bodily memories.

So it makes you wonder, what hope is there in the face of decay and all that's been done to our bodies? What hope is there for our bodies? Well, science and technology and medicine, those can alleviate some of the suffering.

But for many of the things that I just listed, there are no cures. You can get a tattoo removed, but some of these invisible scars you can't get removed. They're just with you. Other religions?

Other philosophies? They say that our bodies are merely impediments. Maybe even that our bodies are evil. That we need to escape our bodies through meditation or spiritual salvation.

So no hope for our bodies in those traditions. Only the Christian faith. As far as I've found, only the Christian faith offers real tangible hope for our bodies.

[31 : 42] Because only the Christian faith says what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6.14. He says, God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power.

So he's saying Jesus didn't just come to save your soul. He came actually to save your body. He came to save your body and to renew it. And you see this in Jesus' entire ministry.

Jesus took on flesh and bone. He took on a physical body. And when he was crucified, he suffered in his physical body. And then when he rose from death, he rose in his physical body.

And Paul is saying the same thing that happened to him in his physical body will happen to us. We will be resurrected in our physical bodies. God will raise us up by his power. Only then our bodies will be perfect.

No more decay. No more disease. No more invisible scars haunting us. Right? Whatever wounds we carry. Whatever pain. Whatever trauma.

[32 : 42] Whatever we've endured. The Bible says that every tear will be wiped away. All of that will be completely cleansed. And you and I will be completely renewed.

We will be pristine. We will be whole in a way that we can't taste here. So God loves your body more than you do. God has a purpose for your body.

It is greater than anything that you'll hear here. And God will one day renew your body and make it perfect and whole. So in light of these truths, you can trust God to be the owner of your body.

And to love it more and to treat it better than you ever could. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Lord, we pray that as we talk about very intimate, maybe even painful realities, even as memories may surface at this prompting, that the comfort of you as the redeemer and as the healer of our physical selves, that you would give us this comfort now.

That as we partake in the physical sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, so you would minister physically to us and give us a bodily sense of your comforting presence. We pray this in your Son's holy name.

[34 : 05] Amen.