

“The Art of Jesus: He is Stripped”

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It finally dawned on me this week after wasting half a day trying to write a sermon that it was going nowhere fast, that what I really wanted to do this morning was to preach a sermon about nakedness. I've never preached a sermon about nakedness, nor has it really occurred to me to do so until this week. But that's what this morning is about. It's a sermon about nakedness, and to get there I have a bunch of obscure thoughts that I would like to string together, and I think if you will hang in there with me today, you'll see what I'm trying to do. Here goes . . .

I.

Thought . . . We have been slowly building our art collection at First Church. Some of it is in Shatto Chapel and some of it hangs in the gallery between the sanctuary and the chapel. A few years ago a donor made it possible for us to purchase four photographs by Andy Romanoff. One of them is a crucifixion photograph. You see the face of Jesus. You see the agony. The crown of thorns. You see his wounds. Oddly enough, his face looks as if it is simultaneously calm and in pain. I'm not sure how that can be, but that's the work of an artist.

I personally selected that photograph, and frankly, over the past few years I've taken some heat for it. Partly because in the Protestant tradition we might display crosses, but we're not really into displaying crucifixions with the body of Jesus. We leave that to the Catholic Church. I've had a number of people say to me, "That's a little depressing. That's a little dark." And I don't disagree. But I wanted to include it, not because I like looking at the blood and gore of Jesus, but because suffering is part of the human equation.

I don't need to think about it every day. But no one is exempt from suffering. Not Jesus. Not Gandhi. Not Dr. King. Not my mother. Not your husband. Not your child. No one is exempt! Yet, while I would never want anyone to suffer, I also know that suffering is essential to the spiritual life. It deepens us. It shapes us. And yes, it strips us, taking us down to what is important in our souls.

Suffering distills us until we touch something essential. Something deep inside us. C.S. Lewis once said that, "In our joy God whispers to us, but in our pain God shouts." That's not the same as saying that God causes us to suffer. It's simply a way of saying that when suffering comes our way something important is trying to be revealed. This is nakedness. This is life without pretense. This is life, not as we wish, but as it is, and to embrace life as it comes to us goes to the heart of the spiritual journey. That's what I mean by nakedness.

II.

Thought . . . when I was in my early thirties I was living in Indianapolis and belonged to the Indianapolis Athletic Club. It was an old downtown club. Definitely an “old school” club. Beautiful old building. A great place for lunch and dinner. But I would often go down to the club and work out, and then sit in the steam room, and then get a shower and have lunch. I was a young guy then. I was thin and strong and thought I would live forever.

But there was something oddly educative hanging out with old men, men soaking wet and wrapped in white towels. Their bodies are a little heavy, and their skin isn't beautiful like when you're young, and everything sags and everything is wrinkled and everything is pitted with the passing of time. You see mortality in front of you. It's there. And now I realize that – those old guys at that club years ago – I'm now one of them!

These bodies that we have carry us through life, but they also diminish and fail. It's the lesson of nakedness, nakedness over time, and it's a reminder that we better find something lasting, something beyond the body like love and compassion and generosity of spirit. It's why Jesus said to focus on the treasures of heaven and not on earth.

Every year on Ash Wednesday I begin with putting ashes on the foreheads of people and saying the words, “From dust you came and to dust you must go.” When my kids were small, they would attend an Ash Wednesday with me, and it always choked me up when I would put ashes on them and say those words. “To dust you must go.” My own children. I love them more than my own life. To dust they must go. It's a kind of nakedness to recognize that our bodies – as glorious as they might be – eventually fail us. Nakedness.

III.

Thought . . . I love this work by William Congdon that is on the cover of your Worship Program this morning. Congdon was a New York artist in the 1940 and 50s. He was part of that great modern art movement of Abstract Expressionism. He had moved away from figurative painting to abstraction, or maybe better said, expressionistic distillation. He doesn't want you to see the literal Jesus, but it's the Jesus energy that he lays bare for us to see.

It's not a naked Jesus. But it's a Jesus that has been sheared down, splintered down into streaks of wild compassionate energy. It's a reminder that the life of Jesus, including his death and resurrection, cannot be, should not be literalized by people of faith. In the man Jesus a lightning bolt of divine energy hit the earth. It was the energy of love and compassion. The energy of grace and forgiveness. The energy of creative love and transformation.

Congdon captures this beautifully, and well he should, because unlike so many of his contemporaries who went down a road of self-destruction, Congdon moved to Italy and eventually had a profound conversion experience to Christianity. He painted several crucifixions, trying again and again to get to the naked energy of divine love. In some

ways, I think all religious experience / conversion experience / faith experience moves people to a place of nakedness. It's an awakening to what is most important. I see that in this painting. You don't see a literal Jesus, but a Jesus that is creative, transforming energy. Again, it's nakedness.

IV.

Thought . . . Sometimes joy takes us to our essence. Suffering distills us. We see that in the life of Jesus. But every now and then moments of profound joy can help us discover the essence of God. The essence of life. It can be a simple day. A quiet moment. It can be a private moment. But when we feel ourselves touched with joy it almost always feels miraculous.

Some days we look for joy. But other days' joy finds us. It's like a small star landing on our head. And we think: "I'm happy / I'm grateful / I'm connected to the Universe / I am content!" And so one of my favorite naked poems is by William Carlos Williams. Williams was a family physician during the day and worked very long hours and then he would come home and write poetry at night. But you get a glimpse into his private life here. It's titled "Danse Russe." And it goes like this:

*If when my wife is sleeping
and the baby and Kathleen
are sleeping
and the sun is a flame-white disc
in silken mists
above shining trees, -
if I in my north room
dance naked, grotesquely
before my mirror
waving my shirt round my head
and singing softly to myself:
"I am lonely, lonely.
I was born to be lonely,
I am best so!"
If I admire my arms, my face,
my shoulders, flanks, buttocks
against the yellow drawn shades, -*

*Who shall say I am not
the happy genius of my household?*

Now, maybe your thing is not dancing in the bedroom. Maybe your thing is singing in the shower. Or maybe your thing is listening to music. Or maybe your thing is going to a yoga class. Or maybe your thing is taking a walk in the evening. Or maybe your thing is sitting in this sanctuary on a Sunday morning and enjoying God's peace that passes all understanding. But when joy finds us it is like discovering our essence, if only for a few minutes, it is like discovering our essential humanity. Nakedness. Nakedness.

Friends . . . this is the first and probably last sermon I'll ever preach about nakedness. But as we move through this next week of Lent let me remind you . . . one of the traditional stations of the cross used in the Catholic Church for prayer and meditation asks us to pause and consider that Jesus was stripped naked. But through his nakedness, vulnerability and openness . . . something of God flowed from him to us.

And I think the same is true for us too. It's only when we risk becoming naked that something flows through us and to us. We risk showing our thoughts and feelings. We risk sharing our creativity and love. And so take some risks with yourself this week. Spend some time in prayer. Open yourself to joy. Embrace a long-delayed grief. Tell a friend what they mean to you. Help a stranger. Reach out for some help in your life. Yes, there's a little risk to it . . . and it might feel like being naked . . . but sometimes nakedness is the very thing we're called to experience.

Let me end with this . . . in the book of Job you find this wonderful passage that says- "Naked I was born and naked I shall die." And I would say sometimes in between, we have to find the courage to be naked, too. (And just to make sure I'm not misunderstood this morning . . . you don't have to take your clothes off to be naked!) I love you all. Let's risk loving one another this week. Amen.