

Living Well: Christian Practices for Everyday Life

Small Group Guide: “Caring for the Body”

(LifelongFaith Associates)

Preparation

1. Materials

- The following handouts are included with this session:
 1. *Society’s View of the Body* (2 copies for each person)
 2. *Your View of the Body*
- Each person will need a Bible, paper, and pen.
- Collect a variety of magazines with advertising that targets the body, especially fashion magazines, and “lifestyle” magazines focused on men, women, teens, and even children. These types of magazines typically have lots of “body product” ads. Place a variety of magazines on each table prior to the session.
- Record TV commercials that are targeting the body and/or selling “body” products. Try to record up to 10 commercials so that you get a good selection, targeted to different audiences. Since most commercials are 30 seconds or less, this will only be 5 minutes of viewing. Remember that some commercials send positive messages about the body, such as Dove’s Campaign for Real Beauty. Create a PowerPoint presentation with the name of each commercial so that people will be able to recall what they have seen.

Small Group Plan

Part 1. *Yearning*: Stories of Caring for the Body

Begin the session by reading or presenting the opening stories about caring for the body on pages 1.2–1.4 in *Living Well*: “Anne’s ‘Heart Attack,’” “A Married Couple’s Touch,” and “Mom’s Last Bath.” Use a different reader for each story.

How do these stories reflect your experiences with caring for the body? Share your reflections with your small group.

Part 2. *Reflecting*: Views of the Body

Society’s View of the Body

What messages do we receive from advertising about the body? Examine several TV commercials and magazine advertisements to identify the messages that are being sent to us daily about our bodies.

1. View the TV commercials. As a group analyze the media messages about the body using the worksheet, *Society's View of the Body*. Each person should lead the discussion on one commercial and write the group's answers on a worksheet. Be sure to answer the last question summarizing the messages you identified in the TV commercial.
2. Select a magazine to review and find up to 5 ads focused on the body: "beauty products," "body care products," etc. Use a new copy of the worksheet, *Society's View of the Body* to summarize your impressions of the ads.
3. Share your reflections on the magazine ads and the messages about the body that were being communicated with your group.
4. Summarize your group's analysis of the advertisements and commercials by identifying 10 messages society communicates through advertisement about the body.
5. Conclude by sharing one or two insights about society's view of the body that you discovered in the advertisements.

Your View of the Body

Review the handout, *Your View of the Body* and complete the questions about your personal views of the body. The questions are also found on page 1.6 in *Living Well*.

After everyone has completed the workshop, share several reflections and insights with your group.

Part 3. Exploring: The Christian Practice of Caring for the Body

The Exploring section of the "Caring the Body" chapter on pages 1.7–1.11 in *Living Well* presents examples of the Biblical teaching on honoring or caring for the body.

Begin by reading the following quotes that introduce the Christian practice of Caring for the Body.

"In Christian teaching, followers of Jesus are called to honor the bodies of our neighbors as we honor our own. In his expanded teaching by example, this includes leper bodies, possessed bodies, widow and orphan bodies, as well as foreign bodies and hostile bodies – none of which he shied away from. Read from the perspective of the body, his ministry was about encountering those whose flesh was discounted by the world in which they lived. (p. 42)

"The daily practice of incarnation – of being in the body with full confidence that God speaks the language of flesh – is to discover a pedagogy that is as old as the gospels. Why else did Jesus spend his last night on earth teaching his disciples to wash feet and share supper? With all the conceptual truths in the universe at his disposal, he did not give them something to think about together when he was gone. Instead, he gave them concrete things to do – specific ways of being together in their bodies – that would go on teaching them what they need to know when he was no longer around to teach them himself." (p. 43)
(Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World*)

"The Christian practice of honoring the body is born of the confidence that our bodies are made in the image of God's own goodness. "Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you," Paul wrote to the church at Corinth (1 Corinthians 6:19). As the place where the divine presence

dwells, our bodies are worthy of care and blessing and ought never to be degraded or exploited. It is through our bodies that we participate in God’s activity in the world....And it is through daily bodily acts – bathing, dressing, touching – that we might live more fully into the sacredness of our bodies and the bodies of others.”
 (Stephanie Paulsell, *Practicing Our Faith*)

Jesus Affirms the Body

The Exploring section presents Gospel stories and commentary on Jesus cares for the body, organized in the following four themes:

1. Jesus affirms the body by healing people.
2. Jesus affirms the body by consoling people.
3. Jesus affirms the body by feeding people.
4. Jesus affirms the body by suffering and rising from the dead.

Divide your group into four teams, one for each of the four themes. Assign one of the four themes to each team. Each team is going to create a dramatic presentation of their theme using one of the Gospel stories listed below.

Begin your work as a team by reading “Jesus Affirms the Body” on page 1.9 in *Living Well* and then read about your theme on pages 1.9 or 1.10 or 1.10 in *Living Well*.

The Gospels are filled with stories of Jesus’ care for the body. Select one story on your theme for your dramatic presentation from the following list.

1. Jesus affirms the body by healing people.

Actions of Jesus	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Healed a leper	8:2-4	1:40-45	5:12-16	
Healed a centurion’s servant	8:5-13		7:1-10	
Healed a paralytic	9:1-8	2:1-12	5:18-26	
Healed a woman hemorrhaging	9:20-22	5:25-34	8:43-48	
Healed two blind men	9:27-31			
Healed a man with a withered hand	12:9-14	3:1-6	6:6-11	
Healed the Syro-Phoenician woman’s daughter	15:21-28	7:24-30		
Healed an epileptic boy	17:14-18	9:17-27	9:38-42	
Healed two blind men near Jericho	20:29-34			
Healed the Gerasene demoniac			8:26-33	
Healed a deaf mute		7:31-37		
Healed the blind man at Bethsaida		8:22-26		
Healed blind Bartimaeus		10:46-52	18:35-43	
Healed an infirm, bent woman			13:11-13	
Cured the crippled woman			13:10-17	
Healed a man with dropsy			14:1-6	
Healed ten lepers			17:11-19	
Healed a nobleman’s son				4:46-54
Healed an infirm man at Bethsaida				5:1-15
Healed a man born blind				9:1-41

2. Jesus affirms the body by consoling people.

Actions of Jesus	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Raised Jairus' daughter	9:18-19, 23-26	5:22-24, 35-43	8:40-42, 49-56	
Raised a widow's son at Nain			7:11-17	

3. Jesus affirms the body by feeding people.

Actions of Jesus	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Feeding more than 5,000 people	14:13-21	6:30-44	9:10-17	6:1-14
The Feeding of the Four Thousand	15:32-39	8:1-9		

4. Jesus affirms the body by suffering and rising from the dead.

Actions of Jesus	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Jesus appears to his disciples			24:36-49	
Jesus and Thomas				20:24-29

Prepare your dramatic presentation in the following way:

1. Have someone in the group read the story aloud.
2. Work together as a group to develop a drama that will act-out the story. Assign each character in the story to one person in the group. Assign a narrator to read the Gospel story while the actors dramatize the reading. Give everyone a specific role (even if it is part of the crowd). Feel free to use other group members as "extras" or the "crowd." Everyone can be involved in giving form to the story through movement, touch, facial expressions, etc. For example, a drama may include more than one person to be healed by Jesus
3. Create or find any props that would be helpful to the drama.
4. Rehearse the actions as a group.
5. Present the drama. Remind the narrator to read the story slowly and with emotion.

During the dramatic presentations take notes on what you are experiencing.

After the dramatic presentations, discuss the following questions as a group. Give each person an opportunity to think about the questions and then invite share your responses.

- What were you feeling as you experienced the dramas? Which drama was the most meaningful for you?
- How would have felt if you were the person experiencing Jesus' care for the body (e.g., being healing, being fed, being freed of demons)?
- Why do you think Jesus cared for people's bodies?
- What do you think Jesus is teaching us about the body through these stories?
- How do you see God at work through these stories of caring for the body? How do people experience God by caring for the body?

Conclude your activity and discussion with this quote from Stephanie Paulsell (on page 1.11).

"These are the touchstones for a contemporary Christian practice of honoring the body. That God created our bodies good. That God dwelled fully in a vulnerable human body. That in death God gathers us up, body and all. That through our bodies we participate in God's activity in the world." (Stephanie Paulsell, *Practicing Our Faith*)

Part 4. *Living*: Application of the Christian Practice of Caring for the Body to Daily Life

1. Caring for Your Body

Pages 1.12–1.13 in *Living Well* contain 5 activities to help people care for their own bodies.

1. Change your mindset.
2. Take a body inventory.
3. Listen to your body.
4. Examine “body habits” and develop a plan to care for your body.
5. Take delight in your sense of taste.

Review all 5 activities and select one activity you want to do as an individual. Complete the activity.

After everyone in the group has completed one activity, have each person describe the activity and why he or she chose the activity, and then share insights and reflections about what he or she learned about caring for one’s body.

2. Caring for the Body of Others

Pages 1.13–1.15 in *Living Well* contain 7 activities to help people care for the bodies of others.

1. Be awestruck by eye contact.
2. Reach out to an ailing body.
3. Care for the Body of Christ
4. Enjoy the bodies with whom you share your meals.
5. Clothe your body with an awareness of others.
6. Connect family and church.
7. Work to free people who are enslaved.

Review all 7 activities and select one or more ideas you want to put into practice in your life.

3. Integrating the Christian Practice of Caring for the Body into Your Daily Life

Using the ideas presented in the *Living Well* book and your own ideas, create an action plan for yourself to move from idea to action. Use the following process:

1. List 2-3 actions you would like to take to live the Christian practice of Caring for the Body by focusing on *caring for your own body*.
2. Describe what you will do to put each action into practice, and the steps you will take to ensure that it will happen.
3. List 2-3 actions you would like to take to *care for the bodies of others*.
4. Describe what you will do to put each action into practice, and the steps you will take to ensure that it will happen.

Share at least one action plan with your group.

Part 5. *Praying: Prayer for the Practice*

Consider adding a ritual action from the ideas suggested after the prayer service.

Scripture Reading: Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

Prayer:

God, who knit us together in a mother's womb,
help us honor what you have made.
Let us touch this masterpiece gently,
with reverence,
with delight,
blessing what you have blessed.

(Worshippers may touch named body parts as they are blessed.)

The face

For the housing of our thoughts,
For the muscles of our emotion.

The arms,

For embracing what is sacred,
For grasping, then releasing, your gifts.

The belly

For taking in nourishment,
And, in some, for the nurture of new life.

The thighs

For carrying another's burden,
For pushing off from the ground.

The feet

For walking your paths of peace,
For standing on holy ground.

God, who formed these inward and outward parts,
Fill us with wonder at such knowledge,
knowledge that we are wonderfully made. Amen.

Closing Prayer:

Blessed God, you created us in your image; making each of us an unrepeatable miracle.
Help us see how valuable and vulnerable every body is. Teach us to care for, honor, and
cherish our bodies even as you cherish and care for us, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Additional Ritual Actions

Water

Place a pitcher of water, basin, and towel on a small table in the center of the room. Invite participants to come forward as pairs and wash each other's hands, using a blessing such as:

"In the name of God: Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit. Amen."

"In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

"Bless these hands to your service, O God."

Oil

Pour oil into a small bowl. Then move from person to person and “anoint” the palm of their hands with oil. Explain that oil is one of the symbols used in Baptism. Ask participants to close their eyes and slowly and silently massage their hands with the oil. Ask them to think about what the oil does to their skin, and how it feels as they continue to gently massage their hands.

Signing of the Senses

(Adapted from the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*)

Each person will make the sign of the cross several times – on their foreheads, ears, eyes, lips, heart, shoulders, hands, and feet. As you read each signing ask people to make the sign of the cross on that particular part of their body and respond: Lord Jesus, we will be a sign of your love.

Receive the sign of the cross on your forehead. It is Christ himself who now strengthens you with this sign of his love.

Response: Lord Jesus, we will be a sign of your love.

Receive the sign of the cross on your ears, that you may hear the voice of the Lord.

Response: Lord Jesus, we will be a sign of your love.

Receive the sign of the cross on your eyes, that you may see the glory of God.

Response: Lord Jesus, we will be a sign of your love.

Receive the sign of the cross on your lips, that you may respond to the word of God.

Response: Lord Jesus, we will be a sign of your love.

Receive the sign of the cross over your heart, that Christ may dwell there by faith.

Response: Lord Jesus, we will be a sign of your love.

Receive the sign of the cross on your shoulders, that you may bear the gentle yoke of Christ.

Response: Lord Jesus, we will be a sign of your love.

Receive the sign of the cross on your hands, that Christ may be known in the work which you do.

Response: Lord Jesus, we will be a sign of your love.

Receive the sign of the cross on your feet, that you may walk in the way of Christ.

Response: Lord Jesus, we will be a sign of your love.

I sign you with the sign of eternal life in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Response: Amen.

Being Real: The Practices of the Body of Christ

Melanie L. Dobson Hughes

Divinity Online Edition, Winter 2004, Duke University Divinity School

At a stone picnic table on the campus of a large, suburban Phoenix high school, I break bread with a dozen of my church's youth. In the midst of their frenetic schedules, we pause to offer thanks to God for the food, which I brought for them from a nearby restaurant. In the blessing of the meal and the sharing of our lives at the table, we stand out as an odd oasis of thanksgiving and peace in the chaos of 3,000 adolescents' lunch period.

A recent, discouraging report on the status of women at Duke University serves as the "meat" of our table talk on this pleasant sunny day in Arizona. I ask these college-bound teenagers if they have experienced the intense pressure Duke undergraduate women describe as "effortless perfection: the expectation that one would be smart, accomplished, fit, beautiful, and popular ... without visible effort."

I ask the girls in particular if they feel a need "to hide their intelligence in order to succeed with male peers," if "being cute trumps being smart?"

One student admits, "I felt the pressure intensely in middle school to look a certain way; now I've realized I don't want to be a skinny little girl who labors for hours on my makeup and hair. I'm too busy with school and activities for that stuff; at some point you just give up."

Others remark that the degree of pressure depends upon one's group of friends—the more popular groups feel more intense pressure to be "perfect," while the smarter youth feel pressure to pretend they don't study all of the time.

These youth feel that girls and boys receive equal attention in the classroom (contrary to the experience of Duke female undergraduates), but all acknowledge that, in one way or another, appearances matter.

In a consumption-based society, bodies—particularly women's bodies—become recalcitrant projects that require ceaseless work and the purchase of innumerable products. Physical deficiencies, such as excess weight or flawed skin, are increasingly viewed as evidence of moral weakness or lack of character. Thus, bright, talented young women at Duke University in 2003, though cognizant of media-derived pressure, nonetheless feel valued more for appearance rather than intelligence.

Does the church, I ask the youth, serve as a place that relieves, or intensifies, pressures to look and be "perfect?"

My survey certainly wasn't scientific or comprehensive, yet my heart leapt with hope as the youth described those at church as kind and accepting. One student said she isn't as conscious of body image at church; another said, "We go there to worship God, not to compare appearances."

"At church, we're not scared to be ourselves," added a girl. "We can be real."

Becoming Real

Being real in the church involves a rich set of Christian practices, which are given their foundation in Scripture and theology, and are lived out in a community known as the Body of Christ.

In Scripture, we encounter a God who made creation in God's image and called it good. We meet a savior who became flesh, washed in the waters of baptism, celebrated food and drink in his table life with the world's outcasts, suffered crucifixion, and bodily rose again.

One youth in my congregation who struggles with body image (and who doesn't?) learned that God made her good. Now, whenever a teen magazine or a cruel comment makes her feel less than beautiful, she repeats to herself her one Hebrew word, "I'm tov, I'm tov. . .", and the doctrine of imago dei nurtures her body and soul.

Stephanie Pausell, in her book *Honoring the Body*, writes "Our fragile bodies require communal attention, and so honoring the body is a shared practice, one for which we need each other in profound ways ... bodily vulnerability is something we all share."

As a community, we share in the practices that honor the body when we wash one another's feet, hold hands while praying over a suffering loved one in the hospital, or break bread together at a fellowship potluck. Worship offers innumerable practices to honor the body in its vulnerability – baptism, Eucharist, a liturgical year of feasting and fasting, singing, and Sabbath rest to name a few.

At our breaking of bread on the high school picnic table, one student remarked about our church's practice of table. "You know," she said softly, "I love coming forward for our Lord's Supper. The bread of Jesus tastes so good." The body's sense of taste becomes an avenue for celebrating God's grace within us. Alleluia.

Other practices of the Body of Christ that celebrate the body include retreats and mission trips.

After a trip to the border town of Agua Prieta, Mexico, an astute freshman at the University of Arizona (who very much identified with the findings in the Duke report) said, "People in this town (Agua Prieta) struggle just to feed their bodies and house their children – they don't have the luxury of trying to be perfect."

By touching and experiencing the lives of the poor as a practice of the church, we learn that the practice of honoring the body necessarily involves nourishing the hungry.

Being Real

By honoring the body through Christian practices based in our scriptural tradition, the church mentors its young into a way of life that understands embodiment as a gift. In living together as the Body of Christ, we are a people who allow youth and young adults to be and to celebrate their bodies. We follow the advice of Toni Morrison's character Baby Suggs.

"Here," she said, "in this place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard."

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Society's View of the Body

The following questions help us to evaluate the messages we receive from commercial advertising about our bodies. Use as many of the questions that are helpful for the ad you are evaluating.

Advertisement/Commercial: _____

- ✓ **What do you see and/or hear? Which images, sounds or characters really caught your eye or ear?**

- ✓ **How does this ad make you feel?**

- ✓ **What did you like or dislike about this advertisement?**

- ✓ **What do you think this advertisement is telling you? What's its message?**

- ✓ **What isn't this advertisement telling you? What's being left out?**

- ✓ **What did this commercial try to convince you that you personally need? Did it say anything about what our family might need? Do you or do we really need this?**

- ✓ **What does this advertisement want you to do? How does it want you to behave?**

- ✓ **Who created this advertisement? What is the producer's purpose? Who is the target audience?**

- ✓ **How would summarize this advertisement's message about the body?**

Your View of the Body

Complete this reflection as an individual or as a whole family.

- 1. How do you honor and care for your body?**

- 2. How do you dishonor or abuse your body?**

- 3. What do you see when you look in the mirror? Do you focus on what is beautiful, or do you obsess over perceived flaws?**

- 4. How has media advertising influenced your view of your body? How does it effect what you wear, what you eat, which products you use to care for your body or make you look good, and so on?**

- 5. The best thing about my body is:**

because:

Resources for Developing the Christian Practice of Caring for the Body

An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith. Barbara Brown Taylor. San Francisco: Harper One, 2009.
(See especially Chapter 3: The Practice of Wearing Skin)

From simple practices such as walking, working, and getting lost to deep meditations on topics like prayer and pronouncing blessings, Taylor reveals concrete ways to discover the sacred in the small things we do and see. Something as ordinary as hanging clothes on a clothesline becomes an act of devotion if we pay attention to what we are doing and take time to attend to the sights, smells, and sounds around us. Making eye contact with the cashier at the grocery store becomes a moment of true human connection. Allowing yourself to get lost leads to new discoveries. Under Taylor's expert guidance, we come to question conventional distinctions between the sacred and the secular, learning that no physical act is too earthbound or too humble to become a path to the divine. As we incorporate these practices into our daily lives, we begin to discover altars everywhere we go, in nearly everything we do.

“Honoring the Body.” Stephanie Paulsell. *Practicing Our Faith.* Dorothy C. Bass, editor. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997.

Honoring the Body: Meditations on a Christian Practice. Stephanie Paulsell. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003.

Stephanie Paulsell offers readers a much-needed guide for cherishing the human body and countering the corrosive cultural messages that prevent us from knowing that we are children of God in our bodies as in our spirits. Honoring the Body does more than help us cope with issues such as weight gain and loss, body image, illness, birth and death, it helps us enrich our practice of faith. Paulsell draws on resources from the Christian tradition to show how we can learn to celebrate the body's pleasures, protect the body's vulnerabilities, and develop the practices that will ultimately transform our troubled relationship with our bodies to one of honor and joy. From Paulsell, we can learn how to regain a sense of awe and wonder about our bodies and to cultivate the healing practices that lead to joyful and embodied living.