

“Can God Love My Bod, If I Don’t?” Or “Love Needs a Face”

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Ecclesiastes 3; 1 Corinthians 12:14-18; John 1: 1-2; 3: 12

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I want to start with seven rules for being human. An American Psychologist, Dr. Cherie Carter-Scott, came up with them in her book, *"If Life is a Game, These are the Rules."*

1. You will receive a body. You may like it or hate it, but it's the only thing you are sure to keep for the rest of your life. Learn to respect it.
2. You will be taught lessons. You are enrolled in a school called “life.” There is no dropping out as long as you live. Every day you have the opportunity to learn from the lessons. You may like them or dislike them. They will still come.
3. Many of the lessons will be called ‘failures.’ These are the ones from which you can learn the most. A “failure” provides a better opportunity to learn than something that has come easily.
4. In life, lessons get repeated over and over until they are learned. They may return in different ways, but until they are learned, they will keep coming back.
5. Learning lessons never ends. It does not matter how old you are or how wise you think you are. There is no time in life that does not contain its lessons. If you are alive, there are lessons to be learned.
6. Other people are mirrors of yourself. You cannot love something about another person, or hate something about another person, unless it reflects something you love or hate about yourself. So, learn to love yourself.
7. What you make of life is up to you. You have all the tools and resources you need. Learn to trust in God’s love for you. He has placed the answers to life's questions within your heart. All you need to do is look and listen to what is in your heart.

Dr. Carter-Scott’s book contains more than just these seven rules, but I especially like number 1. *“You will receive a body. You may like it or hate it, but it's the only thing you are sure to keep for the rest of your life.”* I want you to listen to these thoughts about our bodies from an American Episcopal priest, and theologian – Dr. Barbara Brown Taylor. Her message is called “God Loves Our Bodies.” Here is part of it.

“Our bodies are like prophets. In the Bible the prophets were always pointing out things that were wrong. Things that were not the way God intended; not the way they should be. Our bodies are just like that. They know when things are out of whack and they tell us, although most of us welcome bad news from our body about as warmly as the prophets of old were

welcomed. Most of us try to ignore them (practice avoidance) rather than listening to what our bodies are trying to say. As Christians, this puts us in a rather odd position. We claim to be followers of the Word Made Flesh – the Spirit embodied – and yet we neglect our own selves and look at our bodies with shame and scorn.”

Dr. Taylor says she was very late in understanding that God loved all of her — not just her inner spirit (that we sometimes call the ‘real me’) but also her outward body. She was raised in the 1950’s, and like most young people then, grew up with more questions than answers and felt a lot of shame about her body.

It was many years later that she accepted by faith — not by reason, but by faith — that God loved all of her – even her ugly body. And at that point it occurred to her that God must love all bodies everywhere. God must love the bodies of hungry children and impoverished uneducated abused women as much or more as the athletes and models we see on magazine covers. Our bodies rarely look, or work, the way we would like them to. Yet it is our bodies that connect us to each other, and that we have most in common with one another. Love needs a face.

The title I gave my message is “Can God Love My Bod, Even If I Don’t - If I Hate It?” My alternate title is – “Love Needs a Face.”

The simple truth is that most of us really don’t like what we see when we look in the mirror. It’s actually kind of nice when the mirror is all steamed up after a shower or bath – you don’t have to see yourself. This battle to try and look better begins at a very early age. Even when quite young we notice others who look better than we do – taller, slimmer, nicer hair, more attractive. And so begins the human fixation with perfection, and a losing fight to be beautiful. At almost every age we say to ourselves, if only I could lose a few more pounds. If only I could smooth out these wrinkles. If only I was in better shape. If only I had nicer hair – with men – if only I had *some* hair! If only – if only. There is a vast multi-billion-dollar industry built around this. If you add the money spent on cosmetics and cosmetic surgery every year – it’s just phenomenal. The irony is no matter how much money we spend – it’s a losing battle. The simple truth is, physically, it’s all downhill after about age 25. (Some say age 18.)

A friend of mine, a Roman Catholic Priest, in St. Catharines where I used to live, told me this story back in the 1980’s. He and a large number of Roman Catholic clergy went to the big Cathedral in Toronto to meet and hear a senior Cardinal from Rome. For the life of me I can’t recall that Cardinal’s name. You see, it’s not just your body, but your memory that goes downhill – but I do remember he was well known. Only priests were at this event. After the Cardinal’s talk the floor was opened to a question and answer session. It

started to get boring until one priest, (he was probably in his fifties,) in a rather low and halting voice, asked the eminent Cardinal when he might expect to find some peace with the struggle with celibacy and sexual desire. How old do you have to be before it stops bothering you, before you stop thinking about sex? There was a collective gasp in that cathedral full of only male priests – and a sudden hush. You could have heard a pin drop. Every last person leaned forward to hear the answer, because sex and celibacy is the one common struggle that all Catholic priests have in common with each other; all the while pretending to be pure and innocent and to have no such thoughts. The Cardinal stood up and walked back and forth for a while. And then he said, “Well, I’m 88, and I just don’t know.” My friend said the answer brought the house down. Everyone hooted – but it didn’t solve the dilemma of a single person there.

Where did the Church get this fixation that the path to spiritual perfection lays in shutting down and denigrating the body? And it’s not just the Catholics who have this attitude. Anything to do with sex has always been a huge problem for the Christian Church. It still is – our current Provincial election provides a good example of what I’m talking about. Would-be premier Doug Ford has promised to remove sex education from public schools in Ontario. Why? Well conservative Christians (who support him) don’t want their children to learn about sex in school, and especially anything about gays being just like the rest of us. We didn’t learn about it in school in the 1950’s either. No — as kids we just pooled our utter ignorance.

So where did all this come from? The answer is, mostly from Greek Philosophy, which had a huge influence on early Christian thinking. Plato was the pre-eminent Greek philosopher. He held that body and soul were incompatible enemies; matter and spirit were at complete odds with one another. Many early Christians incorporated his thinking into their own.

The important thing to understand is that the Hebrews, who are our true spiritual ancestors, never shared that kind of thinking. From the beginning of the Old Testament in the Garden of Eden; (do you remember when Adam and Eve happily paraded about in the nude?) on down to the time of Jesus; you don’t find negative teachings about the body. Jesus never taught about a struggle between body and soul. In fact, it’s the opposite. At the very heart of the Christian message is the incarnation, in which body and spirit become one. Jesus was “Word made flesh.” This means that Jesus was as totally and fully human as you are, and yet still there was a spark of the divine within him that was unique and different.

What does this mean for you? It means love needs a face. The Spirit cannot operate in a vacuum. So often, Christians talk about love in a kind of surreal or imaginary way. People of all faiths tend to do this, but yet on a

practical level it's rarely put it into practice. Loving in the abstract does almost nothing. Love needs a face. Do we care about people enough to actually help them? You see, how we treat someone's body is the test of love. That includes your own body. It's beautiful. Be proud of it.

There is that beautiful line in Ecclesiastes: "*God makes all things and all people beautiful in their time*". And it's true. This morning we sang, "In His Time," by Diane Ball. God has created and formed each part of our body as he desired - each part unique and different and so very important.

I want to close with two stories. The first is an Abraham Lincoln story. At the height of the Civil War between north and south, the President summoned to the White House a medical surgeon in the Northern Army. He was a major from Ohio. The soldier was unnerved by the invitation. He had never met the President. Why would the great man want to see him? A very nervous soldier was shown into the President's office. Lincoln invited him to sit down and then asked the major about his mother. "She is doing fine," the major responded. "How do you know?" asked Lincoln. "When is the last time you've written home?" The Major couldn't quite remember. "Well," Lincoln said, "your mother has written me. She thinks that you're dead and she has asked that a special effort be made to return your body." At that, the Commander and Chief placed a pen in the young doctor's hand and shoved a sheet of paper in front of him, saying "Write a letter to your mother *now* and tell her that you are alive and well!" He did.

Love needs a face. A mother needed to hear from a son. A commander-in-chief found the time to tell him that. It's like that with us all. Love is not something abstract. It's found in small human touches – person to person.

My second story is a Paderewski story. Paderewski was a famous, much-loved Polish pianist in the first half of the last century. A mother had taken her 12-year-old son, who was studying piano, to a concert to hear the great master. Before the curtain went up the boy left his mother in search of a washroom. He was taking far too long. The mother went in search of him – and couldn't find him. She was worried. Where could he be? She ran back to her seat hoping to find him. He wasn't there. At this point the house lights dimmed, the curtain rose and spotlights focused on the glistening Steinway grand piano on the stage. The mother almost fainted.

To her horror, there was her son innocently sitting on the piano bench, playing "Silent Night." (Some say Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star!) Before she could even think of what to do, the great maestro himself walked onto the stage. He quickly moved to the piano, and whispered in the boy's ear, "Don't quit, keep on playing." Then, leaning over, Paderewski reached down with his left hand and began filling in a bass part. Then his right arm reached around to the other side of the child, and he added a running obbligato. Together, the

old master and the young novice transformed what could have been a hugely embarrassing moment into a wonderful experience. Those who were present that evening were so mesmerized by it that they afterwards it was all they could talk about. It was the highlight of the evening.

I believe that's the way it is with God. What we can accomplish on our own is not a lot. We try our best, but the results do not always fill the air with music. But, in the hands of the Master, what we do and who we are can be truly beautiful.

The next time you look into the mirror I want you to listen more carefully. When you do that, you may well hear a voice that whispers; "Don't quit. Keep going." You are a wonderful person. And you will feel loving arms around you. And when you know how much you are loved, you will find it far easier to love others. On this Pentecost Sunday, be aware that your body and Spirit are one and, in the hands of the master, the music of your life will always be beautiful. Amen