

In an essay about the nature and aim of fiction, Flannery O'Connor writes, “*the beginning of human knowledge is through the senses, and the fiction writer begins where human perception begins. He appeals through the senses and you cannot appeal to the senses through abstractions.*” O'Connor goes on to say that writers are interested in ideas, but that ideas have no meaning unless they are grounded in the regular, material world. “*Fiction is about everything human and we are made out of dust, and if you scorn yourself getting dusty, you shouldn't try to write fiction.*”

The same is true for theology, or more particularly, the message of the gospel. For the message of the gospel to have any impact on our actual lives, it's got to hit us where we live. This morning, the gospel according to Psalm 139 hits us where we live – literally. By that, I mean our bodies. The message of the gospel according to Psalm 139 is this: *God loves your body.*

It's a good thing that God loves your body, because it's likely that you don't. That's why weight loss is the number one New Year's resolution. You've probably heard the figures. It is estimated that 40 to 50% of American women are trying to lose weight at any point in time.

Americans spend more than 40 billion dollars a year on dieting and diet-related products – that's roughly equivalent to the amount the U.S. Federal Government spends on education each year! In 2007, there were about 11.7 million cosmetic procedures performed in the U.S. Ninety one percent of these were performed on women. A study found that 53% of thirteen-year-old American girls are unhappy with their bodies. This number grows to 78% by the time girls reach seventeen. It is estimated that 1 out of 4 college women struggle with an eating disorder.

A new study out of England focused on how men feel about their bodies. According to their research, more men worry about their body shape and appearance – beer bellies or going bald – than women do about how they look.

More than four in five men (80.7%) talk in ways that promote anxiety about their body image by referring to perceived flaws and imperfections, compared with 75% of women. Similarly, 38% of men would sacrifice at least a year of their life in exchange for a perfect body – again, a higher proportion than women. 1 out of every 3 men thought about their appearance at least 5 times a day.

Well, although you may not love your body, God does. It's a good thing too, because you think about your body way more than 5 times a day. Not just your appearance, but everything related to your body. Your health, for instance. Older people feel that their lives are strung together by doctor's visits. When I hurt my back putting on my socks a few months ago, I realized I had officially entered middle age! And the older you get, the more aware you are of impending day you will have to “*shuffle off your mortal coil.*”

When you are young and your hormones are raging you are thinking about bodies not 5 times a day, but 5 times a second. Our high school soccer team had a code name for the Adidas cleats we wore: Adidas: "All Day I Dream About Sex". I've heard people say that this preoccupation with sex doesn't actually stop after high school. You may have heard that this past week Dick Van Dyke, now 86, just got engaged to a woman in her 30s. Go figure.

Well, we live in our bodies, obviously. Let me say that I'm all for exercising and eating right and feeling good. By all means, keep running up and down Rugby Road. When the sun's out, put your guns out. But I also think it's safe to say that most of us use our bodies in the ongoing battle of self-justification or appeal for approval. We even try to justify this with religion. There was a plastic surgery firm in Alabama whose slogan was "*perfecting the beautiful body God intended for you.*"

Dave Zahl preached the excellent sermon last week about the question we ask of our parents and of life in general: Do you love me? Do you like me? Am I lovable? Most of us try to answer these questions with our bodies. Certainly the advertising machine believes that we try to answer this question with our bodies.

This past week I was looking at 2 televisions at once. One had a show for plus size women, the other had an ad for ripped abs. I was on the treadmill at my gym while I was watching them, trying to reach that 300 calories burned mark.

This is not a sermon about bodies being bad or how we should focus on spiritual things. In fact, that is not Christianity at all. That is a heresy called "Manicheanism." They separated spirit and matter and considered matter evil. They tried to approach God purely through spirit.

All kinds of versions of this heresy exist today. Anytime you hear someone say they want to focus on their "spirituality" you are veering toward Manicheanism and away from real Christianity. So, this sermon is a sermon about the God who loves your body and about how this message just might give you some sense of freedom and peace.

What does God think about your body? In Psalm 139, we read, "*For you yourself created my inmost parts; *you knit me together in my mother's womb. I will thank you because I am marvelously made; * your works are wonderful, and I know it well. My body was not hidden from you, * while I was being made in secret and woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my limbs, yet unfinished in the womb; all of them were written in your book; *they were fashioned day by day, when as yet there was none of them.*"

You are marvelously made, every limb of you. As a work of God, you are wonderful. That is God's message to you where you live. God loves your body. I wish that message were enough to stop girls from starving themselves and satisfy everybody's desire to be loved as they actually are. And, I hope we will hear God's word that we are marvelously

made in the cacophonous din of the world's body image demands. But I know, that God's words are so easy to forget.

God knows that too. So God embodied the message, literally. He did not stay an abstraction. He became a body. The Word became fleshed and dwelled among us. He got dusty. He came to be with us where we live.

Everybody else is talking about Tim Tebow, so I might as well too. No matter what you think about his quarterback skills or his public prayer or his post game interviews, you've got to love the way he cares for people and their material needs.

As Rick Reilly of SI writes, *"every week, Tebow picks out someone who is suffering, or who is dying, or who is injured. He flies these people and their families to the Broncos game, rents them a car, puts them up in a nice hotel, buys them dinner, gets them and their families pregame passes, visits with them just before kickoff (!), gets them 30-yard-line tickets down low, visits with them after the game (sometimes for an hour), has them walk him to his car, and sends them off with a basket of gifts."* That's a picture of how God cares for people where we live.

As we've said, the gospel has got to hit us where we live. And yet, that really isn't enough. As long as we live we will struggle with the sin of wanting to justify ourselves, compare ourselves, perfect ourselves. And as long as we live, we will suffer the effects of that sin in our bodies. And we will all suffer the effects of disease and corruption and eventually death. In the end, isn't it just a little silly to use your body to try to answer the question: am I lovable? Because in the end we will all go the way of the flesh, so to speak.

So, the gospel not only has to hit us where we live, it's got to hit us where we die. When Christ came in a human body, not only did he get dusty, He got bloody. His body died. And when he died, he answered once and for all the question: do you love me? And He did it with his body. As we read in the bible, *"He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed."*

God loves your body. And even in death, we won't become "no-bodies." In heaven, we won't be disembodied spirits floating around on clouds. God is so interested in bodies that He will give us new bodies, what he calls resurrection bodies. But for now, He loves you where you live and He loves you where you die.

Amen.