

¹² So then, brothers and sisters, ^awe are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—
¹³ for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds
of the body, you will live. ¹⁴ For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ¹⁵ For you
did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption.
When we cry, “Abba!^[b] Father!” ¹⁶ it is that very Spirit bearing witness^[c] with our spirit that we
are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in
fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. ¹⁸ I consider that the
sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to
us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰ for the
creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it,
in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the
freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²² We know that the whole creation has been
groaning in labor pains until now; ²³ and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the
first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our
bodies. ²⁴ For in^[d] hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes^[e] for
what is seen? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

There is so much physical, spiritual and psychic pain and uncertainty in our world and in our country right now. Many of us have our own share of illness or know others whose bodies have been ravaged by cancer, addiction, or COVID-19. People are dealing with heightened anxiety and tension as the pandemic seems far from over. When I was reading through the lectionary for today, I was struck by how much the apostle Paul was aware of the interconnection between physical, spiritual and mental suffering in the world. He knew it in his own body for starters. He mentions a physical illness in one of his letters that kept him from traveling and speaks of having “a thorn in the flesh.”¹ Paul knew something about frailty and mortality. In his letter to the persecuted Christians in Rome, Paul also articulated that some of the suffering came (and still comes) from how we treat each other when we are living according to our own ego agendas driven by fear, envy, greed, instant gratification, and domination of others. These are constricting habits of what Paul referred to as the *flesh* (*sarx* in Greek). These also affect our bodies (*soma* in Greek), individually and collectively.

¹ Galatians 4:13-15 and in 2 Corinthians 12:6-7, respectively.

Paul was not rejecting the created world or simply equating what we might call sin with physical pleasures when he uses the term “flesh” (*sarx*). Paul wanted the suffering we experience and engender to end. The very fact that God became human is both an affirmation of the created world and a sign that God is not finished with God’s divine work. For Paul, God in Christ was not afraid to experience physical and spiritual pain as part of the process of our needed healing. On the cross, Christ joined all who suffer violence and hardship. The resurrection is a witness to God’s power to overcome it.

Paul found himself living in a liminal sense of time, already sensing the groaning of all creation to grow and blossom into its own deeper identity (Romans 8:22). As Paul struggled to articulate this new way of evolving, he used the language of liberation and rebirth, of living beyond fear and subjugation and into greater compassion and love. He called this the “life of the Spirit,” in which we are transformed to believe and enact that we are God’s beloved children and heirs of God’s promises. Nothing else will do. We are on the way but we are not yet there. For Paul, the risen Christ already exemplified the transformation of creation waiting to be birthed. Paul wanted his fellow Christians to have hope that they will join Christ in this new life. As is true of all hope, it would require patience and faith at a time when it cannot yet be seen. “For who hopes for what is seen?” he wrote. For Paul, this new experience would not only be a life of “spirit” but also involve the redemption of our “bodies” (Romans 8:23), the flourishing of our shared life woven into creation itself.²

The painful legacy of slavery and other forms of oppression toward people of color has left its lasting marks on their bodies especially, physically and psychically. Slaves were denied the affirmation of being children of God, true heirs of God’s promises. As a result, their bodies have borne great pain from generation to generation. The shackles of slavery have become subtler. We now speak of “weathering” to describe how the bodies of people of color have embodied the consequences of oppression, measured by their developing physical illnesses in greater proportion than people born in white bodies. Scientific data bears this out. This happens even

² I don’t pretend to know all that phrase may have meant for Paul in his time but he himself would be murdered in Rome for his faith. His very body would join Christ in his suffering (Romans 8:17), quite literally.

at a young age from developing high blood pressure to chromosomal changes usually associated with older age.³

Trauma therapist Resmaa Menakem became aware of how trauma is stored in the body through his grandmother.⁴ He describes her as a skinny and stout woman who loved to hum. She also often verbalized pain in her hands, complaining of arthritis. His grandmother was in a habit of stretching her legs out over the laps of her grandchildren who were sharing the couch with her while watching TV. Menakem's grandmother loved to watch the NBA's Milwaukee Bucks play basketball. While watching, the grandkids would often rub her hands. One such time, he half-jokingly asked her: "Grandma, why are your hands so fat?" Without looking at him, she immediately answered, "Oh, boy, that is from picking cotton." She could tell that he did not know what she meant or what a cotton plant was like. Then she described how she had to start picking cotton at age four and had her hands ripped up and bloodied over and over again. After her matter of fact explanation, she went back to watching TV.

As he reflects now, his grandmother had related to the cotton picking but not the discrimination that led to her doing the work at age 4. While her very hands had become shaped around the constriction of the wounds from picking cotton, time had also decontextualized the larger associated trauma from its historical, institutional, and intergenerational context. He writes, "Trauma decontextualized in a person looks like personality. Trauma decontextualized in a family looks like family traits. Trauma in a people looks like culture." In other words, if we do not address the context in which suffering happens, we misinterpret, falsely label and create lasting embedded practices and assumptions that leave many people hurting. Think of all the African American men in jail who make up a disproportionate share of the US prison population (5.6 times higher than whites). We might

³ See report on the *PBS News Hour* on July 16, 2020).

⁴ *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*. I am drawing from two interviews featured recently on *On Being*, hosted by Krista Tippett.

<https://onbeing.org/programs/resmaa-menakem-notice-the-rage-notice-the-silence/>

<https://onbeing.org/programs/robin-diangelo-and-resmaa-menakem-in-conversation/>

be tempted to say that someone has a criminal personality or comes from a family that doesn't have values or just doesn't try hard enough. All the while, we may overlook the unspoken and structural inequalities as well as the "weathering" effects on generations of oppression among a people who have been asked to navigate a world in which they do not fit the norm. It starts with their bodies. Whiteness and white culture are the privileged norm in this country. This makes it hard to see for those who fit the norm.

As a therapist, Menakem has long noticed a consistent kind of bracing and heightened nervous system response shared by people whose bodies are not regarded as the norm.⁵ He writes that because the white body became the official and supreme standard of a human body, those not identified as white have experienced a sense of being "defective." When he as a therapist says to a client: "You are not defective", tears often well up in their eyes. Actress Viola Davis (*The Help*⁶; *Troop Zero*) recently gave an interview in which she reflected on how long it took her to get a sense that she was beautiful and worthy of using her voice.⁷ "Who's telling a dark-skinned girl that she's pretty? Nobody says it. I'm telling you, [Sonia], nobody says it. The dark-skinned Black woman's voice is so steeped in slavery and our history. If we did speak up, it would cost us our lives. Somewhere in my cellular memory was still that feeling—that I do not have the right to speak up about how I'm being treated, that somehow I deserve it." She pauses. "I did not find my worth on my own."⁸

Menakem has begun to speak of his own body as a *body of culture* to say that he is a human being shaped by culture, a culture that makes whiteness the norm and inflicts physical and energetic suffering on others. He writes that "white body supremacy" was itself born of violence in the places white settlers and colonists came from. Brutalized people came to these

⁵ Members of the LGBTQ+ community are, of course, also affected.

⁶ Davis has a critical view of the film as not going far enough in dealing with black experience.

⁷ Interview with Viola Davis in *Vanity Fair* (by Sonia Saraiya; July 14, 2020).

⁸ Add to this the redaction of history through a white lens and the ways black experience gets a separate, exceptional focus during Black History Month.

shores and began to brutalize other people. In other words, people in white bodies usually carry generational trauma also and have projected it on others. “White body supremacy” filtered into law after the Bacon Rebellion in 1676 when poor workers rose up against exploitative landowners. After the rebellion, poor whites were given a few privileges over poor people in differently colored bodies, becoming aligned with white landowners and abandoning their previous allies. Such divide and conquer practices pit struggling people against each other and give injustices even greater room to flourish.

Robin DiAngelo, author of “White Fragility” experienced this strategy as a poor white child. She learned the power of shame early when a teacher made her a public example of poor hygiene before her class. She also clearly remembers how her own mother would keep her from eating food left uneaten in a park because a “colored person” could have touched it. She knew she was poor. She also knew she was better for being white. As DiAngelo notes, white people may bristle over the term “white body supremacy” because we are used to rejecting “white supremacists” as bad apples. However, she writes that we fail to consider that the problem reaches much deeper into the cells of bodies. She also cautions that white people make it even harder for people of color when we say “we are color blind.” This approach actually denies the painful experience of those who always has to navigate a world shaped by white normalcy and privilege.

African American civil rights activist and long-term civil servant John Lewis died yesterday. He liked to say that he enjoyed “getting in the way” of injustice and getting into “good trouble.” Can those of us in white bodies dare to “get in the way” of our own defensiveness around our embodied privilege? Can we get into the “good trouble” of feeling uncertain and uncomfortable while we find the courage to name and face our privilege? Can we embrace the “good trouble” of rocking the boat of our culture, myths, policies, norms, ways of telling history, and the assumptions that leave others on the margin of experience and affirmation? I am feeling a level of discomfort and uncertainty about what this will mean, I tell you! Even more strongly, I feel that the Holy Spirit is making use of these challenging times to awaken and engage us.

John Lewis also liked to say that we need to have a vision of the world we hope to create. What is our vision for a renewal of our shared lives? When *On Being* host, Krista Tippett, asked Menakem about a vision, one thing he said was that he is not looking for a world free of growth and strife but for stripping away structures that make his life appear as “not worthy.” Another thing I keep hearing from people of color, including leaders in the United Church of Christ, is to stop asking them to tell us what to do when they have been doing so all along. They are asking white people to do their homework, talk to each other, risk becoming vulnerable and show up for this great challenge. It is an important starting place that can lead to trust-building and collaboration.

I said that I often feel uncomfortable and uncertain in these times but I also feel hopeful whenever I ground my hope in God and in community. We are people of the Spirit who is in our midst. We are people of the living Christ who walks with us on this difficult and, no doubt, long journey of learning how to create a culture in which all of God’s children are seen and treated as worthy. I am grateful that the apostle Paul reminds us that this is not just an intellectual exercise. It involves the healing of all our hearts, minds and bodies because as long as one part of the body of Christ suffers, we all suffer. And when one rejoices anew, he writes elsewhere, we can all rejoice. May the healing power of God prevail for our sakes and the sakes of generations to come!