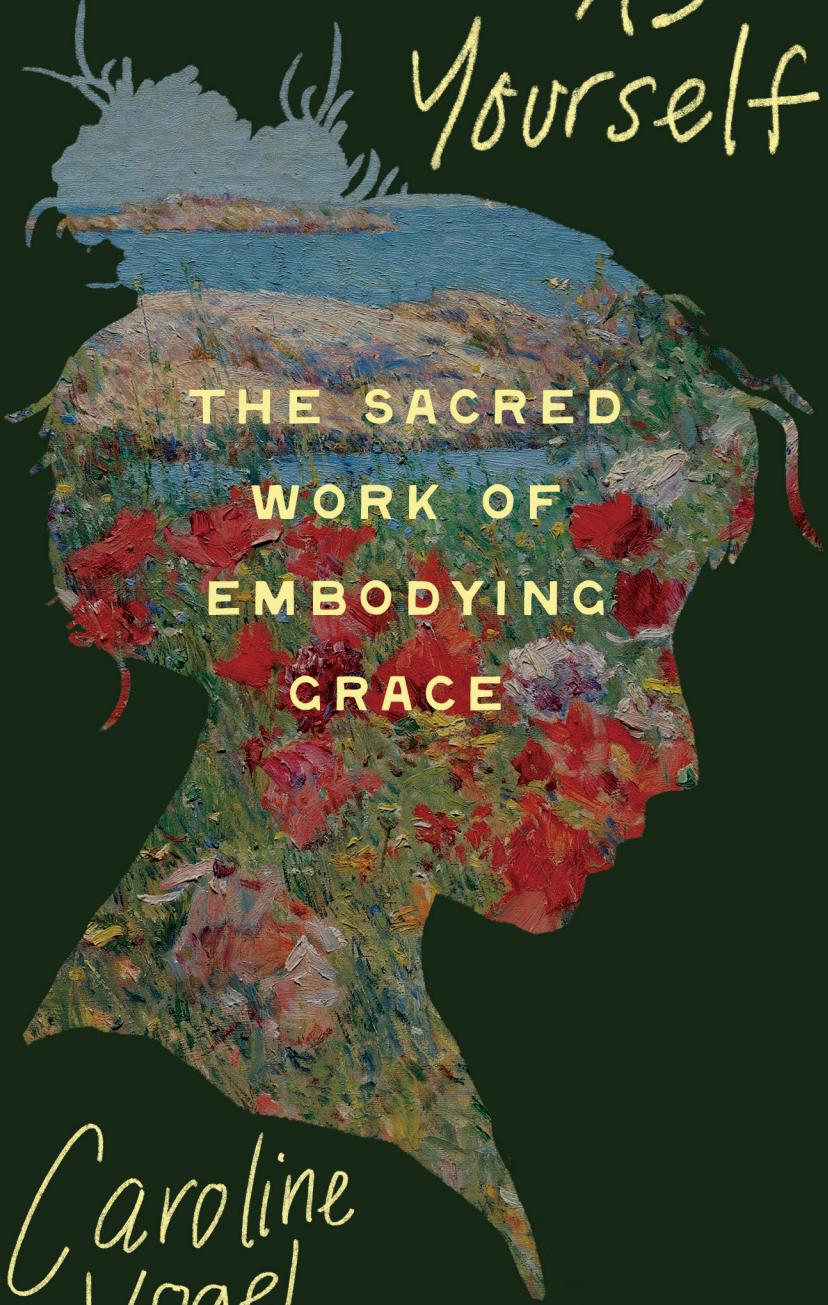


SAMPLER

AS  
Yourself



THE SACRED  
WORK OF  
EMBODYING  
GRACE

Caroline  
Vogel

As Yourself

*The Sacred Work of Embodying Grace*

Caroline Vogel



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## PROLOGUE

The way of grace isn't an easy road to take, and yet it is a way of living mightily by the breath of the Spirit and into her fruit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and equanimity. Grace isn't only something we contemplate; grace is also an embodied practice. Grace itself is an invitation from our loving God that can be integrated and embodied in us so that such grace flows through our beings.

This book is a journey into understanding the way of loving ourselves as God loves us—in mind, body, soul, and spirit—as a pathway into living embodied grace. Bring yourself just as you are. Start wherever you find yourself today. God will meet you there. Each chapter will end with a practice and prayer so that you can begin the intention of embodiment yourself. You might simply engage the practices as they arise at the end of each chapter. You may want to engage a practice each time you pick up the book to read. Or you may want to begin to weave these practices into your everyday life.

I use the feminine pronoun for the Holy Spirit for several reasons. *Spirit* in Greek is feminine. The Holy Spirit is also known as the “Advocate,” “giver of life,” “helper,” along with

## PROLOGUE

other names, and these are also gendered terms in Greek and Hebrew. Given that either pronoun can be used for the Spirit, I tend to use *she* more regularly for The Holy Spirit to diversify the predominantly male usage when referring to Jesus and God. If we are all created in God's image (Genesis 1:27), the Trinity makes room for a female reflection of the divine image.

I don't think the Trinity is all male or all female: I believe there is room for diversity in the Trinity. I'm advocating for balance and integration, for the inclusion of all people to be reflected in how we understand a triune God, because how we view God is how we often view humanity. If we struggle to see equality in our understanding of a loving God, we naturally struggle to not only see but treat and appreciate humanity with equality. When the Trinity is seen only as reflecting the masculinity of God, numerous people can feel closed off from the Trinity because they do not feel a sense of belonging. Why keep knocking when there is clearly no seat at the table for someone who looks like me? I deeply believe in a God who strives to love, connect, and serve all of creation. I find myself with new reasons to call the Holy Spirit *she* all the time, and I delight in every one of them.

So, welcome to the road and the gateways we'll pass through by the grace of a loving, benevolent God and the breath of a life-giving Spirit.

## CHAPTER ONE

# Love Your Neighbor as Yourself

*He said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”*

MATTHEW 22:37-39

Several years ago, I was going through a particularly difficult time. My life had taken so many quick, tight turns that my nervous system, mind, body, soul, and spirit were struggling to keep up. During this time, I had to step back and reassess many aspects of my life.

One late summer night, I had a dream about my dream home. For years, I had been going to this particular home in my dreams. My dream home had large, beautiful windows that natural light poured through, cream-colored walls, cozy chairs for reading, a

warm and welcoming kitchen (for someone else) to cook in, and a perfect little writing nook. Every time the Spirit led me there in my dreams, it was a divine gift.

This particular night in the dream, I was taking an evening walk with my two sons, and I realized we were in the neighborhood of my dream home. I pointed out the home to them, only to realize the house had been torn down. Even though I was surprised and hurt, I was also not totally shocked. I sensed God calling me to sit on a bench beside the foundation of this house that was once a home, and so I did. As the dream continued and I sat on the bench, God taught me about the home we were going to build together. God kept emphasizing the foundation. I began to realize that the foundation for this new house was an understanding of how to love myself as God loved me.

I recognized the dream as a symbol of God tearing down what I thought I had or wanted, leaving space to create something new and more solid in its place. This dream was a holy invitation to co-create with God an intentional home with a strong foundation of God's love that I could return to in any and every moment. I thought I understood God's love, but my dream helped me realize that this understanding had not permeated my entire being. Even though I believed in God's love and preached about it from every pulpit I could find, following the Spirit as best I could, I was not living with an embodied faith and integrated knowledge of God's love. God was calling me to allow the faith of my mind to move into the very fibers of my being and infuse my body, soul, spirit, and heart.

Given the synchronicity of life, I had an appointment with my spiritual director the morning I awoke from this dream. There at her kitchen table, we broke banana bread and leaned into the Spirit's wisdom that poured from my dream. I knew God was speaking to me in this dream. I knew God was calling me home in a new way. God had something to teach me about actually embodying the grace I professed with my lips. My spiritual director helped me see that I needed time to be with God to learn what it meant to lay a strong foundation for an inner home, a foundation of love and forgiveness, truth and healing, strength and lightness of being. Building this new "home" with God would be the process of learning to love myself as God loves me.

Just as I was getting anxious about the path before me, I realized that the Holy Spirit would be my guide. The Spirit would breathe into me her breath and guide me. As I have journeyed in this process, I have realized that the Spirit has been with me every breath, every step. I sit on the bench alongside my new foundation as it is laid by the work of the Spirit in me. I have come to know that her breath is infinitely connected to my own—the Divine breath is always breathing in us whether we are paying attention or not. Over time, I've realized that I am coming home to myself, to my own soul. Who knew it could be such a long journey to come home to one's own heart, mind, soul, spirit, body?

### Drawing Myself into the Circle of Grace

The foundation God was trying to build within me revolved around learning to accept that all people are beloved children

of God, which meant I had to include myself. I had to take my place within the circle of grace. I could no longer leave myself outside the circle.

Though my words would have told you that I did draw myself within the circle of God's grace, even a cursory look at my actions and self-talk proved a very different placement: a clear delineation of myself *outside* the circle of God's love. I berated myself for every misspoken word to my children and for the tone I took with them that made me inwardly cringe. I replayed conversations in my head, clearly believing that any relationship misstep would doom the friendship. I worked excessive hours, justifying it to myself because "I love what I do," when underneath the drive was a belief that I was unworthy of rest. I could not be okay with myself if I was not producing all the time. My view of myself clearly lacked any semblance of self-love or grace.

### "Throwaway" Words

When Jesus was asked which commandment in the law is greatest, he replied, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind' . . . and a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Matt. 22:37-39). The words Jesus uses when telling listeners about the greatest commandment are words he would have learned as a child and repeated throughout his life. These words come from Deuteronomy 6:5—"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." Jesus adds a second commandment, pulling this time from Leviticus

19:18, saying it is like the first: “love your neighbor as yourself.” We are called to love God with all of our being, and we are called to love our neighbors—*as ourselves*. We talk a lot in the church about loving God and loving our neighbors, but we do a horrendous job of learning and practicing what it really means to love ourselves.

Over the years, I have chuckled at this instruction to love our neighbors as ourselves. It feels like “as yourself” is a throwaway phrase tacked on at the end of the sentence, something to which no one is really paying attention. I have heard countless preachers offer thoughts about loving God and loving your neighbor, yet make no mention of “as yourself.” Jesus could have stopped the sentence early and said, “love your neighbors”—period. But he did not. He shared the whole phrase from the Hebrew scriptures: love your neighbor *as yourself*.

Perhaps loving yourself was a better understood concept in Jesus’ day, and over the generations, we have lost our capacity to love ourselves because it caused us to become too vulnerable. Or maybe we’ve always struggled with the capacity to love ourselves, which is why Jesus kept it in the greatest commandment. Without a daily practice of loving ourselves, we will fail miserably at loving others. The more we can genuinely love ourselves as God loves us, the easier it is to naturally love others. And if there is one thing this world needs more of it is a larger capacity and willingness to practice and offer genuine love for each other.

Some will be appalled at the idea of genuinely loving ourselves. A voice in me even revolts and fears that self-love will lead to selfishness. I’m certainly not promoting narcissism. Narcissism

and genuinely loving ourselves could not be further from each other. Narcissism is demanding love and attention from other people because we do not love ourselves or know how to receive God's love. When we become narcissistic, we demand from other people what we cannot or will not offer ourselves: love and belonging. Jesus' greatest commandment says that the key to loving others is learning how to love ourselves, not selfishly or narcissistically, rather as a gateway to understanding the full value of every single person, ourselves included.

### “As Yourself”

The theology of “as yourself” is boldly proclaimed from the description of Maundy Thursday, according to the Gospel of John. On the night before he died, Jesus made the disciples very uncomfortable by washing their feet. Peter boldly protested that, as their teacher and superior, Jesus could not take the role of a servant and wash their feet. You can imagine Peter squirming away from Jesus’ hands. However, their discomfort shook them awake and brought them to the gift of the present moment: they were physically experiencing the love of God in the touch and care of God’s son. On his knees, taking the role of a servant, Jesus was laying a foundation of lived experience, an embodiment of God’s love that no one could ever take from them. Later when he had died and was resurrected, even later when he ascended to be with God, the disciples could go back to that felt sense of being loved through God’s touch. The mind may play tricks on us all day long, but the body does not lie.

When Jesus stood up after washing their feet, he gave them a new mandate, “love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35). Jesus could have said so many things that night. He was trying to sum up his whole earthly existence, his whole reason for becoming the embodiment of God in the first place. And there it is in two sentences. “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

“As yourself” is the part of the greatest commandment that so much of humanity can’t grasp. Because we can’t grasp it, Jesus reframes the mandate. He says, “Love one another as I have loved you.” If we are ever going to figure out how to love God and our neighbors, we’re going to have to risk the vulnerability of receiving God’s love into our own beings. We’re going to have to open ourselves to the vulnerability of being so deeply loved by God that it changes everything about us. Only when we receive God’s love can we fully follow the commandment to love God and others.

For me, coming home to myself in God’s love meant accepting that I couldn’t earn God’s love, nor would I ever fully deserve it. Hustling for God’s love and for human love was killing me, and it had no place in living embodied grace. Brené Brown uses the word *hustle* to talk about how we try to outrun shame. Rather than embracing the parts of ourselves and pieces of our stories that cause us pain and tap shame, we hustle. In our hustle, we strive mightily in our own will rather than allow ourselves the

vulnerability of surrendering to God's love. When we surrender, we not only accept the painful parts of our stories and lives but also open to the flow of God's love that has the power to heal and transform us. In the surrender, healing and transformation reorient our whole lives; we become integrated by grace and empowered to then live out of that grace.

Embodying grace requires that our thoughts descend from the mind into the heart and then radiate to every fiber and cell of our beings. Embodying grace means that the way I speak to myself and others, my actions toward myself and others reflects that I am a child of God who is deeply loved and cherished by the Creator. Embodying grace demands that I accept and live as if every thought, action, and attitude points to the reality that I am God's beloved.

In fact, my hustling behavior was a sign that I was outside the flow of the Spirit, outside the fullness of God's love, continuing to draw myself outside the circle of grace. Living embodied grace meant embracing the invitation to be forgiven for all the ways I drift from God's love, fail to love others, and the numerous ways I fall short of loving myself. Embodying grace meant noticing and harnessing the movement of the Holy Spirit in my life, whether she was enlightening my mind, stirring my heart, or yoking my will to God's will. All of it was grace. It was a matter of learning how to embody it.

I have struggled all my life with the idea of receiving God's love into my own being, coming home to myself in the love of God. For most of my life, I would not have told you I struggled with grace because, for the longest time, I didn't know that grace

was what I was struggling with. My lips would have told you that I lived by grace. I believed in grace. Grace is the cornerstone of the Christian faith—my faith. I would not have been lying. But my lived theology—the way I lived and moved and had my being in the world—told a different story than the faith of my lips.

I heard someone say that you cannot give what you don't have. The Holy Spirit got ahold of me with this comment. "Well, what in the world have I been giving all this time?" I wondered. "What in the world was fueling my offering of love and grace to others?" It took me a long time to see it. Likely it took me a long time to be strong enough to see it because the truth was painful. I had been hustling for love and a sense of belonging. I was so eager to give other people the very thing I wanted in secret (unconscious) hope that they would reciprocate and offer love and a deep and abiding sense of belonging back to me.

Here is what the Holy Spirit has taught me: until I could be at home in myself (this vessel that God gave me), until I could love myself exactly as I am, as God loves me, and for who I am as God created me (weaknesses, flaws, imperfections and all), I'm not really loving others out of God's love. On some level, I'm simply hustling for love.

I had to learn that true love is given without restrictions, ties, or expectations. It is freely given without the need for return or interest. True love is an organic outward flow of the love God has graciously, extravagantly, abundantly given us and asked us to share with others. Given this grounding in God's love, God requires an open stance to receive love as well. True love is a natural flow of giving *and* receiving.

## The Linchpin of Our Faith

The linchpin to living a life of faith isn't only about loving God and our neighbor. Both of these are only authentically possible when we allow God's love to penetrate us, breaking open our ability to love ourselves. From this wellspring of loving ourselves like God loves us, an organic outflow of God's love pours from us, transforming the way we live, breathe, work, parent, and love those around us.

We must undertake a journey to loving God and loving our neighbor by another way. This journey asks us, by the grace of God, to find, remember, and then cultivate God's deep and abiding love within us—first—so that then we love God and love others as an outpouring of our love for ourselves. The essence of our faith is already within us. It's a matter of having the courage to come home and bravely live from that authentic place of wholeness and divine love already dwelling within and ready to spill over and flow from our beings.

In our hyperfocus on loving God and loving our neighbors, what if we've missed the linchpin of faith? What if what cultivates our capacity to naturally and truly love God and love our neighbors is our ability by God's grace to love ourselves as Christ loves us? Jesus offered us the New Commandment “to love one another as I have loved you.” When we can truly allow ourselves to be loved by God and receive that life-giving love, it transforms the way we live the first and second commandment—loving God and loving neighbor *as yourself*.

Most of us struggle to love God and our neighbors because we are clueless and ill-practiced in loving ourselves as Christ loves us. Most of us would rather not be loved *as yourself*, listening to the way we speak and treat ourselves. Our work as people of faith is to become willing to receive the love of God and allow that love to transform our lives. The root of love comes from God's divine gift of unearned and undeserved love for us. A natural out birth of love can then naturally flow from these roots and bear good fruit for God to share in this world, empowering us to truly love ourselves, love God, and love our neighbors.

It is by way of God's love for us that we receive the ability to know not just in our hearts but also in our minds and souls and spirits that we are deeply loved by a loving God, a God who knit us into creation and breathed life into us. We belong to God not by any merit of our own but by the simple love and mercy of God.

It sounds so simple, and yet it is one of the hardest practices of our lives. Allowing ourselves to truly receive God's love is intensely vulnerable. Brené Brown says "vulnerability is emotional exposure, risk and uncertainty." Allowing ourselves to receive God's love means knowing and owning deeply in our beings that we are loved by an incredibly gigantic, loving, and merciful God, and it means knowing that nothing can separate us from God's love. Nothing. We are not only loved, we belong just as we are, are loved just as we are. It moves me to tears every time I really meditate on this reality. As we receive God's love and begin to trust God's love, we are equipped to love ourselves, others, and God more fully.

I encounter people all the time who reflect a theology of deprivation and hustle, an active turning away from grace even if they aren't conscious of it. I watch so many around me act and believe just as I had my whole life. We live out of a deep and abiding belief that we have to earn our sense of worthiness and belonging. We feel we need to prove our worthiness for blessing and rest. And then we experience great fear at actually opening ourselves to the very blessing and rest we yearn for and have proven to ourselves that we have "earned." But the nature of God's love is that we cannot earn nor ever fully deserve God's love. The way we live our lives is so very counterintuitive to the definition of grace.

## Opening to God's Love

Our relationship with God is a covenant, one in which we agree to show up and do life together. Yet over time, I've learned that it's frankly not as simple as choosing to engage or not engage, to open or stay closed off. As a spiritual companion, priest, and therapist, I've walked with many people who would love nothing more than to open their heart to a loving God and engage God from this open place. Yet something holds them back. Opening the heart isn't always as easy as sitting in prayer and meditation. Sometimes even asking the Holy Spirit to open our heart doesn't produce an open heart.

We may need to spend some time getting to know our heart better to understand why we stay closed off. Are we afraid of being hurt? Have we been hurt by God or by others in the past

and we're fearful of being hurt again? Many find it helpful to connect with a spiritual companion, minister, close friend, or therapist to explore these questions.

I believe in a loving God that understands how hard life can be and how difficult it can be to trust. Many experiences in life warrant our wrestling with God. We can ask God the hard questions, such as "Where were you? Why did you let this happen? What does it mean that you love me in this situation?" It can be difficult to want to show up and open ourselves to a loving God when we don't even really know what that means to show up and open. I do believe our loving God adores our efforts, our intentions, our desires to connect even when it's hard, when it's risky, when it feels counterintuitive to what feels safe.

I believe God's loving us ("as I have loved you") is not a force; it's not a "have to"; it's not a push. Allowing God to love us and our ability to open to that love is a process that is easy and natural for some and hard and painful for others. Any of us can fall anywhere on that scale depending on what is going on in our lives. For some that have always found it easy to receive God's love, they can be uprooted and turned upside down by an event in life and not be able to open or connect with a loving God. For those who struggle with receiving God's love, a situation can break open their hearts in new ways that empower their ability to receive God's love in surprising and life-giving ways. There is so much mystery in both God's love and our ability to receive it. Let there be no shame if you struggle with receiving God's love. God sees you, hears you, appreciates whatever makes receiving arduous. God's love is in that too.

INVITATION TO PRACTICE:  
COMING HOME TO GOD WITHIN OUR SOUL

Sit quietly, allowing your body and mind to find some stillness, anchoring your attention in your breath. After a few moments of gentle breathing and settling into this time and space, place a hand over your heart. Allow yourself to breathe with your heart, the core of your being. Allow yourself to notice that God is here with you. The presence of God might feel far away, near, within you, or all of the above. Or you may not feel the presence of God at all. It's all okay. With your hand on your heart, simply allow yourself to be curious about the presence of God. Notice any genuine desire you might have to feel the love God has for you. Notice if you're open to feeling this love around you, near you, within you. You're not trying to will anything or make anything happen. You're simply noticing what is and allowing yourself to be open to experience even the smallest glimmer of God's love for you.

After a few moments of noticing, close your time with this prayer or one of your own.

*Holy and gracious God, I pray that your Spirit might empower me to love you with all my mind, heart, and strength. May I have the courage to receive the love you offer so freely. May this love empower me to genuinely love myself so that I may love my neighbors from this deep inner well. Amen.*

## CHAPTER 5

# Living Grace in Our Bodies

*Do you not know that your body is a temple  
of the Holy Spirit within you,  
which you have from God?*

1 CORINTHIANS 6:19

## Our Bodies: A Gift of Grace

What would it be like to wake up every morning with the assurance that our bodies are precious and perfect as they are—temples of the Holy Spirit? One of the hurdles of living an embodied faith is actually getting into our bodies, owning our bodies, being kind to our bodies, and listening to our bodies for wisdom and guidance from the Spirit.

We live in a culture that is obsessed with the perfection of bodies. We photoshop the lines, wrinkles, weight, shape, and color of almost every photo before sharing. We don't even need professionals to help us with this anymore. We have smartphones

that give us the ability to edit. We are constantly bombarded by images of “perfect” people that inform how we should look and what we’re striving for. I have spent far more time in this precious life thinking about some aspect of perfecting my body rather than listening to the wisdom of my body. By the grace of God and a lot of work, that mindset has shifted.

Treating my body as part of the gift of grace has become a spiritual discipline. I had to stop demanding perfection from my body and instead lean into kindness and love for this vessel God gave me. I want to care for my body because it is a chapel of the Holy Spirit. When I began to turn away from cultural perfection standards and turn toward the reality that this body is a vessel of the Holy Spirit, it shifted how I care for this vessel. Over time, I realized that I wanted to eat more kale not because some magazine told me kale would give me killer legs but because it was one of the only foods around that actually made me feel good.

I have always loved walking, and over the years, I realized how beneficial exercise is to stabilizing my mood, sugar levels, and energy. I also discovered that bilateral movement like walking, biking, and swimming helps clear the cobwebs from my mind. I can see situations in my life more clearly when I move my body. Part of this realization blossomed into the beautiful awareness that as I cleared the cobwebs from my mind and muscles, I was coming home to the love of God with more ease. It’s as if I was also clearing the cobwebs of the spiritual vessel of my being which cleared the way to arrive at home once again with my loving God. The Holy Spirit can more easily reach me and breathe through me when I care for my vessel. When I take the

time to clear the pathways for the Spirit's breath, I can align more easily with the breath of God.

Another aspect of living an embodied faith is learning to use tools that allow us to listen for the wisdom of the body. Again, there is so much buildup that happens over the days, weeks, months, and years of our everyday lives. It's as if our vessels become clogged and tarnished by the wear and tear of daily life. This isn't a bad thing. It is just part of the natural way of life. Our vessels create buildup. We have to learn ways to sweep, brush up, or even scrub, when necessary, our vessels to make room for the breath of the Holy Spirit to breathe in and through us. Even when our vessels are cleared and all channels are open, it still takes intention to be still and listen for the wisdom to bubble up. We learn to attune to the wisdom and be patient for it to arise. All of this takes some intention, patience, and practice.

Learning to trust that our body is our friend and on our side is part of the work. For so long, even within the Christian faith, we have been taught not to trust our bodies. We believe our "flesh" will lead to sin, fire, and damnation, and we downplay any importance of the physical for fear of it leading us further from God. It's rare for a church to talk about the beauty, strength, and usefulness of the body and how the body is part of the grace God has given us, rather than something that is always working against grace.

We don't learn that following the Holy Spirit requires listening and trusting our body to offer wisdom and guidance. We're not taught that our bodies are good and part of God's grace. If

we're not given permission to listen to our bodies, we will not find the wisdom that the Spirit has woven there.

Though our bodies can be part of our turning away from God (like our minds, hearts, souls, and spirits can as well), we've gone too far when it comes to vilifying the flesh. Our bodies are one of our greatest gifts given to us while we walk the earth. Our body is part of how we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28); the body takes in life-giving air and unifies our breath with the breath of the Spirit. Our bodies help us move through the world. They hold babies and loved ones. They kiss and hold hands. They make love. They see words in books and breathtaking landscapes. They taste food that sometimes seems straight from heaven. They hear music that enlivens the soul and brings tears to the eyes. Our bodies can bring us so much joy. It would be a completely different experience here on earth if we were merely souls drifting about without a body to shelter and temple the divine light within us.

### Missing the Wisdom of the Body

Certainly, the Enlightenment further severed the natural connections between mind and body. We became a people who prized the intellect and mind and further labeled and condemned the body. Our human tendency to split and categorize things as good and bad became stronger during this period of history. It could be argued, however, that Christianity split mind and body shortly after Jesus ascended to heaven. The Gospel of Mary shares a narrative that portrays Jesus as someone who didn't see the body as

bad or problematic. And quite possibly Mary helped Jesus' ministry in holding this wisdom to the Light.

When the gospels were canonized and Mary's Gospel along with others were left out of the official Bible, the wisdom of the body fell aside. The Christian faith has been wandering in the desert for a long time, wrestling with this tension between mind, body, spirit, and soul. Yet it is the Spirit herself that is guiding us back to the wisdom that these parts that make up our whole being are not meant to be in tension with one another; rather, we are called to align with the Spirit, which creates alignment within our body, mind, spirit, soul. It's as if the Holy Spirit breathes right through us and pulls a thin, light string so that our body, mind, spirit, and soul not only align with one another but also orient to her. In this alignment, we can best hear the wisdom of our bodies and follow the flow of the Spirit.

So many bodies that have walked this earth have been abused, beaten, taken advantage of, scorned, brutalized, and shamed. It's no wonder that we turn away from our bodies completely. When the body holds recent or long-ago trauma, it can be difficult to turn toward and befriend the body. So many people survive trauma because they momentarily or for long periods of time separate from their body. It is a tremendous gift God wove within our bodies to be able to not feel or be in our bodies at all times. What can be problematic over time, however, is that the body returns to separating even when it doesn't need to for survival. The mind may perceive danger, become fearful, and then automatically separate body and mind to create a sense of safety.

## Stress in Our Bodies

Given the heightened amount of stress people report to be experiencing individually and collectively around the world, it seems most of us are having heightened stress reactivity in our everyday lives. When we experience stress, our mind calculates that whatever we're encountering is more than our inner resources can manage, hence a stress response. Sometimes what we're encountering is an external situation—the loss of a job or a loved one, the end of a relationship, a shortage of food, difficulty paying the bills, trouble with a coworker. Sometimes the stress we're encountering is internal—we feel fearful, depressed, anxious, with our minds spinning a million miles an hour. Many of us experience chronic sleeplessness because of our heightened stress response as well. When we cannot regulate our nervous systems during the day, it makes it very difficult to sleep at night.

Stress is often a combination of external situations that compound our internal reactivity to whatever we are experiencing. For example, rather than calmly coping with a fender bender, we instinctively begin to beat ourselves up, chastising our lack of attention or carelessness, or we start raging at the other driver, focusing our stress response on them and blowing up the situation by a hundred-fold. Whether external cues or internal cues or a combination of the two, the perceived lack of ability and resources to manage the situation causes a stress response. The research has shown we don't experience stress within our thinking brains only, we experience stress within our emotional brains and within our physical bodies as well. Stress gets lodged in our

bodies. It gets stuck in the very place our Christian faith has taught us to separate from. To truly heal and move forward and to engage our resiliency, we must engage our bodies. By the grace of God, the light of Christ, and the breath of the Spirit, we must learn to turn toward our bodies, our God-given vessels, and to merge and work with them rather than against them.

For those of us who have experienced trauma, working with a mental health professional can be exceedingly helpful in working to reconnect with our bodies. Trauma happens in relationship, and we heal in healthy relationship. Many of us need a nurturing, knowledgeable guide to assist this work so we don't get overwhelmed in the process of reconnection. The appendix has further resources that can assist your journey.

Along with therapy, the spiritual discipline of meditation has given me a way to come home to my body. It offers a way to practice noticing the feelings and sensations in my body in a way that feels safe and inviting. One of the most beautiful parts of weaving meditation with Christian faith is that, as Christians, we do not take the journey home to our own bodies alone. The breath of the Spirit is directing us home. The Light of Christ is the lighthouse calling us and lighting the way home. The love and peace of God which surpasses all understanding is both accompanying the journey home as well as patiently awaiting our arrival. We are surrounded by God's love and the Trinity at work in and around us, guiding and accompanying us, awaiting our arrival while also enjoying the journey.

In my own recovery from childhood trauma as well as years and years of repeated stress overload, I found that turning toward

my body was terrifying at first. Though intuitively I knew my body could be trusted and was oftentimes befriending me even through very unpleasant feelings and sensations, stress had taught me to fear my body. We are wired to retaliate from pain. Our human instinct is to turn away from physical, emotional, mental, or spiritual pain. Part of the discipline is learning to trust God and ourselves so much so that we can override that instinct to turn away and allow ourselves and God to be with that which is painful.

It is in our turning away, in our freezing, in our fighting, and in our fleeing that so much suffering occurs. Taking the hand of God and turning toward our own pain is one of the hardest things we may ever do, and yet we can with God's help. We are fully equipped by the grace of God to be with that which is painful inside us. Not only does this strengthen our ability to connect with ourselves and God, it builds our ability to trust ourselves and God as well. In addition, the more we strengthen this ability to be with pain and suffering within ourselves, the more equipped we are to naturally (from a place of inner God-given, well-honed strength) be there for others in their times of pain and suffering as well. God uses the strength we hone within ourselves to share the grace of God with others when they need it most.

Maybe listening for the wisdom of the body comes easily for some people. In some aspects, it came intuitively to me, and in other ways, listening for the wisdom of my body was as difficult as learning a foreign language.

## INVITATION TO PRACTICE: BLESSING OF YOUR BODY

Allow your body and mind to find some stillness. Anchor your attention in your breath. Be curious about the presence of God's love with you. Then do a simple body scan, anchoring your attention in each part of your body:

Feet—remember that God loves your feet just as they are.

Legs—remember that God loves your legs just as they are.

Hips—remember that God loves your hips just as they are.

Stomach—remember that God loves your stomach just as it is.

Back—remember that God loves your back just as it is.

Chest—remember that God loves your chest just as it is.

Lungs—remember that God loves your lungs just as they are.

Heart—remember that God loves your heart just as it is.

Shoulders—remember that God loves your shoulders just as they are.

Throat—remember that God loves your throat just as it is.

Face—remember that God loves your face just as it is.

Mind—remember that God loves your mind just as it is.

Now notice feelings and sensations throughout your whole body. How does it feel to see and experience God's love through your whole body? What are you noticing?

End your body scan with this prayer or with one of your own.

*Holy and gracious God, thank you for loving me just as I am. Thank you for helping me see my body just as it is and loving it as you do just as it is. May your Spirit continue to breathe in and through me and keep me grounded in your love that flows through me eternally. Amen.*

*“Love your neighbor as yourself.”*  
—Matthew 22:39

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## WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO LOVE OTHERS “AS YOURSELF?”

In this heartening exploration of loving ourselves as God loves us, spiritual director and therapist Caroline Vogel invites you to embrace God’s deep and abiding love – a love that accepts you just as you are, today and every day. Through spiritual practices, Biblical insights, and personal story, you’ll find tools to help you claim your own belovedness and tap into the ever-present flow of God’s grace with your whole being.

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—REV. JEN BROTHERS, founder of House of Bread  
and Church of the Acorn Hope

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