

Column

A friend tells how his mother as she got older would speak of “our miserable bodies.” At the time, he found her expression puzzling, but following her death and as he himself got older he understood.

She was not contradicting the psalmist who speaks of humans (bodies included) being “fearfully and wonderfully made.” Rather she was acknowledging what she was experiencing: as the years pass our bodies don’t work as well as they once did. Parts wear out and need repair. “Frail children of dust, as feeble as frail” says hymn writer Robert Grant.

While I don’t think I have one foot in the grave (though one never knows), I found myself identifying with my friend’s mother’s words a few weeks ago while hiking Mt. Le Conte in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The most direct trail to the summit is 5 ½ miles up and of course the same down. While some make reservations in advance and spend the night at a rustic lodge at the

top, my hiking companion and I made both the ascent and descent in one day.

As I journeyed up, I noticed that I was not as quick and agile as I was seven or eight years ago when I last made the hike. More than that, I began experiencing occasional twinges around my ankles. One kind person, an Asian-American man, seeing I was struggling offered me a walking stick which I initially declined but took after he insisted.

On the way down, this stick proved invaluable as the occasional twinges around my ankles migrated upward to my thighs and became full-fledged cramps. They became so intense that I found it difficult to walk. At one point I was not sure I was going to make it down the mountain, though in actuality I had no other option but to proceed slowly and methodically. I certainly did not want to sit down and become supper for Mamma Bear and her cubs!

Thankfully, after about 30 minutes, my muscle contractions began to calm, and I was able to continue at a reasonable pace to the car park.

Whatever the cause of my leg cramps, my friends' mother's expression – miserable bodies – took on a new meaning and became personal.

There is a spiritual and biblical application to what I experienced that day. Our bodies, though a marvelous piece of engineering, do on occasion fail and in the end return to dust. The committal service in the burial office of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer speaks of 'our vile body'. This description must not to be interpreted as meaning that our present bodies are worthless or should be despised. Still less, that we would be better freed from them and to become pure spirit. Rather, 'vile' reminds us of what we have already seen, our bodies break down and at times let us down.

The good news is that better bodies are coming. One such body has in fact already come off the assembly line – the resurrected body of Jesus. This body is a pledge that bodies of a similar nature will be given to all who have been united to Jesus in faith and baptism. "As we have borne the image of the earthly, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly," writes Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:49.

So, as followers of Jesus, we do not deny the reality of pain and suffering in the world. Instead, we look back to the cross where God in the person of His Son joined us on our journey and took that pain and suffering upon Himself and on to the day when all will be made new in Him, when His victory will be ours, when all creation will be put right and will resound with His glory. Mt. Le Conte is but the training ground for something better. So let us live and work in hope.

O GOD, whose never-failing providence ordereth all things both in heaven and earth; We humbly beseech thee to put away from us all hurtful things, and to give us those things which are profitable for us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Collect for the 8th Sunday after Trinity, Book of Common Prayer)

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