

Body shaming tears apart the body of Christ

## **The thin cannot say to the fat, "I have no need of you."**

by [J. Nicole Morgan](#) in the [August 1, 2018](#) issue



Photo by Faith Lin courtesy of [Mennonite World Conference](#)

I made a profession of faith at a summer camp when I was 16 years old, and I was tempted to get baptized right then and there, in the pool at the camp. My motivation to move quickly had little to do with a newfound enthusiasm for faith. I was anxious because I feared there would not be a baptismal robe to fit me at the church when we got home. I imagined myself climbing the short set of stairs into the baptismal pool with a white robe stretched tightly over my body, clinging to every roll of fat—a spectacle that would only be emphasized when I came out the other side, skin cold and wet with a newly translucent robe.

I was too shy to ask to be baptized at the camp, so I spent the remainder of camp, the bus ride home, and the waiting days until the next Sunday wondering if the robe would even stretch over my body, or if I would be forced to wade into the small pool in shorts and a T-shirt. To make matters worse, I got my period the day before my baptism, and my mother advised that I ask the pastor if it was still OK to be baptized under those circumstances. The youth pastor deferred my menstruation question to a female youth leader, and I was set to wade into the waters. Thankfully, my church's largest robe was not as tight as I had imagined. Still, this sacramental moment, one of the most important for a Christian, was a very awkward day to be in my body.

Years later, I read an interview with Rick Warren, author of the best-selling Christian weight-loss book *The Daniel Plan*. In the interview, he tells the reporter about his motivation to write the book. The inspiration behind Warren's diet book came while he was "doing baptisms 'the old-fashioned way'—by physically raising and lowering people into the water." Warren said that as he was lowering people, he "literally felt the weight of America's obesity problem [and he] thought, 'good night, we're all fat!'" My mind flashed back to my 16-year-old self, wading into baptismal waters with jiggy thighs and a snug baptismal robe. Warren used a sacrament that welcomes us as beloved children into the family of God to issue judgment on the very people he pronounced new life over as he lifted them from the water.

As a teenager, I was afraid my baptismal robe wouldn't fit. But more than that, I was afraid of not fitting into life, of being unwelcomed, and what that might mean about my ability to fully participate in the life of the church. My experience in the years since then has taught me that I was not the only one with this fear. It is almost universal to fat people of faith. This fear hinders us from being a part of the body of Christ, which in turn hinders our ability to fulfill the mission of the church—to love God, love neighbors, and make the kingdom of God known on earth. When our churches exclude us through fat bias or structural barriers, we can't carry out that mission to our fullest potential.

When the writers of the New Testament sought a way to talk about the people of God as a collective whole, they used a concept we all know well: the body. Paul tells us, "We were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink" (1 Cor. 12:13, NIV). Jews and gentiles, those on the lowest rung of the social order and those higher up—we make up one body. That one body consists of bodies made in the

image of God and, as Paul points out, filled with the Holy Spirit. Just in case the metaphor is not clear, Paul elaborates: we are eyes and ears and feet. “If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be?” (1 Cor. 12:17, NIV). If the whole body were thin, we would never discover the way a fat body offers warmth and strength and stability in unique ways.

This body is a church that lives and thrives despite all her variations (and more than a few imperfections). We are the body of Christ—all of us, together. We’ve got thin legs and really wide hips. As a Christian community, we cannot fully understand the full beauty of the body of Christ, the image of God, until we include all the voices that make up that body.

This truth is evident from the very beginning of the Gospels, as we read the lineage of Christ. I have heard countless sermons on the people included in that list, on the wonder and beauty that they are imperfect and awed and include non-Judaic people. Either we are all welcome and needed, or the Gospels don’t make sense. Rahab, Bathsheba, Tamar, and Ruth add an authenticity and texture to the lineage of Jesus. The woman with the ointment, Zacchaeus the tax collector, Saul the enemy of the church, and me—a fat woman—add depth and variety to the tapestry of the church.

There’s a biblical passage about honoring the temple that’s frequently used to tell fat people to slim down. It reads, “You are God’s temple and God’s spirit dwells in you. If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy [them]” (1 Cor. 3:16-17, ESV). There is an online translation of the Bible that uses “y’all” where the text speaks in second-person plural. It reads, “Do y’all not know that y’all are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in y’all? If someone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, which is what y’all are” (1 Cor. 3:16-17, yallversion.com). As a girl from Georgia, I love this version. It makes clear that the scriptures are talking about us as a community, as a body.

In other words, Paul is not sitting down with one person, warning that person against the dangers of destroying their individual body; he is warning the collective church that they should take care not to destroy the body of Christ, the church. When we attack, marginalize, and shame into hiding individual Christians by policing bodies in the name of honoring the temple, we do precisely the opposite of what this verse is instructing us to do. We destroy the temple.

Let's take God's command to not destroy the temple seriously. Shaming bodies and causing damage to the dignity of bodies is damaging to the body of Christ. Whether we are talking about the way the body of Christ functions together as a community or talking about the way our own bodies function, body shame creates dysfunctional experiences. The warnings against destroying the temple are strong. Creating division through determining the holiness of our sisters and brothers by the size of their waist is counter to the will and love of God whose image is found in the body of every human being.

We undertake an important theological task when we see and embrace the *imago Dei* in humans of all shapes, sizes, and abilities—starting with our own. Thanks to our cultural and theological conditioning, this requires, at least at first, a deliberate and purposeful decision to reject a narrow view of acceptable body types. In addition, we must learn to reject body shame and instead live in a way that embraces our embodiment.

Each body, just as it is right now, is made in the image of God. We failed to recognize that truth pretty early on, but God kept reminding us. Jesus showed up in this same fragile flesh, and when he left, the Spirit stayed behind and deemed human bodies worthy even still.

As beings made in the image of God, we are gifted and entrusted with the same creative power and loving-kindness that characterize God. Our baptismal calling, whether we are fat or thin, is the same: to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. No judgment about which bodies are good bodies changes that truth.

*This article is adapted from J. Nicole Morgan's forthcoming book [Fat and Faithful](#) (Fortress Press), which will be published in late summer 2018. A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Fat in the body of Christ."*