

**June 28, 2009**

**Mark 5:21-43**

### **Franklin's Body Language**

**What does our church convey by its "body language?" I am reminded of this story.**

**When I give a date as B.C., I often mean "Before Children".** Madeline and I many years ago made a B.C. grand tour of Italy.

I still remember the statue of St. Peter at Rome's St. Peter's Basilica. It is one of the most popular pilgrimage sites in the world.

A public rite of kissing the feet of St. Peter's statue has been practiced since the Middle Ages. The original bronze stature is now worn due to centuries of people kissing it!

Even today, the most sophisticated, secularized visitor to St. Peter's must make their own decision when confronted by those shiny toes.

To kiss or not to kiss?

I remember very few made no gesture or pause at all.

Noticing St. Peter's toes is just one of the talents of modern semioticians -- those who have trained themselves to observe the signs of the times.

(Semiology is the study of signs and symbols.)

Signs are rarely verbal -- rather they are both the cultural and individual body language that signal how we feel, who we think we are and what we really care about.

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Everything around us -- from the news generated over the death of Michael Jackson and Farrah Fawcett, to the clothes we wear, to the cars we drive, to the churches we attend -- has a coded meaning.

But you don't have to be a semiotician to read the most obvious signs. Since World War I, cars made in Detroit had always been a huge nonverbal message in American culture.

I can remember as a kid very few drove foreign made automobiles. If you did you would feel very keenly the message you're sending and receiving.

Some other signs of our times are a bit more subtle. The most popular "look" for high fashion models is usually tall, thin and of course beautiful.

Young, glamorous men and women are the industry's hottest sellers.

Semioticians suggest that perhaps the strong, fit, sculptured look helps us forget the nightmares from our own disturbing global problems.

Why else would so much media hype be generated over the death of two celebrities?

Franklin Church, as the body of Christ, also lives in this "semiosphere" -- we are up to our eyebrows and hairlines in signs and signals.

Until quite recently, the church has always celebrated its nonverbal body language. The language of worship has traditionally been heavy with gesture and symbol.

Gestures are not a form of second-class communication. Body language is just as important in conveying the gospel as is the mind's language.

Words tell facts and what we want told;  
gestures tell feelings and emotions, hidden facts  
and moral values -- or, as some have put it,  
"secret movements of the soul."

Jesus was as concerned with body language as  
he was with salvation language.

Why would Jesus have spent so much time and  
energy devoted to caring for people's bodies if  
they were purely peripheral to faith?

The stories of Jesus' healing miracles are not  
just to demonstrate his power over disease and  
death -- they reveal how our bodies can reflect  
faithfulness and wholeness when committed to  
Christ.

In today's lesson: The hemorrhaging woman's  
faith in Jesus' ability to heal her went beyond  
what she knew.

"She felt in her body that she was healed" (v.29)  
-- not that she believed or observed or thought -  
- she felt with her body the movement of Jesus'  
healing power.

Movements of the body have always played an  
important role in the Christian faith. But today  
body language isn't deemed rational or  
objective enough to be taken seriously.

The semiotician notes that we readily apologize  
for a careless word or action by admitting,  
"Sorry, I wasn't thinking."

But have you ever heard someone confess  
"Sorry, I wasn't feeling?"

A gesture of the body traditionally meant  
something about the soul.

In the Middle Ages, a simple gesture carried with it legal power -- it could bind a person more contractually than a written document drawn up by a notary and signed by both parties.

Recall traditions such as the "laying on of hands" for healing, "throwing down the gauntlet" of challenge, receiving the "royal touch" of approval, blessing and favor.

Ever "cross your fingers" for luck? Did you know you were making an ancient Christian symbol of faith, a bodily demonstration of faith in God's protective, caring nature?

Crossed fingers were a Christian's "secret weapon" against evil.

Instead of crossing oneself openly, and thus inviting the attention of dangerous foes, a Christian could call on the powerful protection of the Holy Cross by making this small, inconspicuous gesture.

This was a devout believer's direct communication to God through body language.

At least in some of the more liturgically-oriented denominations, (Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodox) they are used to a certain amount of familiar body language.

They cross themselves, bow their heads, and kneel for prayer or communion. In many Pentecostal and African-American traditions, things can get a lot livelier.

Body language in those churches can involve jumping up, swaying, clapping hands, raising arms, dancing, sometimes even fainting.

But what is our church's body language outside its own walls, beyond the time of formal worship?

What Franklin Church is about is communicated less by our words than by our image, our gestures, our postures, our lifestyles.

Actions really do speak louder than words. As the Body of Christ, the gospel story and the body- life -- the semiotics and the semantics -- are connected.

Every time Jesus reached out and healed, banishing sickness, hunger, even death itself, he was practicing the body language of "conspicuous compassion."

This was the term used by attorneys appealing the decision of a judge to describe her reprehensible behavior in court.

It seems Indianapolis Judge Paula Lapossa, when listening to a victim plead for forgiveness and rehabilitation for the person who had raped, shot at, and beaten her, was so moved by the woman's forgiving nature that she shed tears.

The attorneys for the rapist appealed the judge's sentence on the grounds that the judge had shown herself unfit to render justice due to her "conspicuous compassion"

(" Chicago Tribune, 26 August 1993, Business Section, 3).

Is the church finally ready to practice some "conspicuous compassion" of its own?

- With conspicuous compassion, the Body of Christ should weep loud and long for the rising number of the homeless, orphaned and malnourished.

- With conspicuous compassion, the Body of Christ should burst into tears when confronted by the ongoing conflict in Iran, Iraq, in Palestine and Israel, North Korea and in our American neighborhoods.

- With conspicuous compassion, the Body of Christ should stoop to embrace parents who have lost a child.

- With conspicuous compassion, the body of Christ should mourn the slow death of our ecosystem.

- With conspicuous compassion, the Body of Christ should sob for the hunger pangs cramping so many millions of stomachs each and every night.

- With conspicuous compassion, the Body of Christ should let the tears stream down its face when prejudice and bigotry drive wedges of hatred through people of all colors, nationalities and faiths.

More often than we realize, our body language is all people judge us by. Too often the only "body language" struggling churches are concerned about is a "body count."

The more bodies present at the service or in the church school or anywhere in the building, the more "successful" the church is regarded.

Some bad body language is easy to discern.

Keeping the church doors locked except between 9 and 12 Sunday morning sends a potent message to our neighborhood.

But other body language can seem so right when what it actually conveys is all wrong.

Please never say:

- "Come, enjoy our facilities" -- say -- "Come enjoy Christ in our facilities."

- "Come, hear how great our music is" -- say -- "Come hear how great Christ is and how greatly God is praised through our music."

- "Come, join our church" -- say -- "Become a member of our Body of Christ."

Being the Body of Christ isn't a contest -- it is a witness. The focus of attention on any church should not be on its programming and personalities -- the Body's focus must always be on Christ.

Amen.

