

Sermon: “Taking Up Space” (Laurel)

‘Tis the season of new gym memberships and weight loss ads, of that constant barrage telling us our worth is conditional and any increase in bodily size is a moral failing. Just for the record, let me state clearly that fatness is not a moral failing.

I’ll confess that anti-fat bias was an abstract concept to me for a long time. It was a thing I knew was true, but didn’t fully grasp. And before that was the stage when I didn’t even question the idea that thinner was better - I was a teenager in the early 2000s when extremely thin bodies were held as the pinnacle of desire and I never heard anyone question that truth. I wish I had. I wish someone had said body diversity is a good and normal thing and we have way less control over our size than our culture tells us.

Taking up space in a world that wants us to be small is no easy thing. Maybe you’re intimately aware of that reality and it helps when other people share their stories so you know you’re not alone. Or maybe this is still an abstract concept, maybe even a foreign one, because you’ve lived your life in a body that has never been questioned or demeaned.

And as I said earlier, our commitment to universalism, to the belief that every person’s worth is inherent and unconditional, it asks us to question any system that treats our worth as conditional or our truth as invalid. But doing that, especially when we are on the receiving end of that violence is incredibly difficult.

I’ve been living in this tension for the last few years.

As it turns out, I have an autoimmune disease called Graves’ disease, which attacks the thyroid. It makes your body speed up and ultimately results in your body breaking down muscle tissue to use as fuel. I’ve likely had Graves’ disease for the last twenty years, but it wasn’t until the last few years that I really started to get sick. I was exhausted and becoming alarmingly weak, both struggling to eat because of nausea and somehow gaining weight at an inexplicable rate.

I tried to seek medical care, but all my doctors saw was someone who was gaining weight, so all of my health concerns were dismissed, treated with suspicion and disdain. My own report of my symptoms and my body was deemed invalid because I was too big. I was told to go on a diet and exercise to try to lose weight.

The scary thing is that Graves' disease puts you at risk for something called thyroid storm, which is when your internal speed starts accelerating so fast that you can develop a fever and your heart rate skyrockets, putting you at risk for a heart attack. High intensity exercise, especially when it's hot out, is incredibly unsafe. And that's exactly what my doctors prescribed, because their only goal was to make me smaller.

I fired those doctors. And thankfully I now have a wonderful primary care doctor and a kind and brilliant endocrinologist. I'm on the right medicine and I'm also on something called the Autoimmune Protocol, which eliminates all the foods that are known to interact negatively with autoimmune disease. It's sort of like a long-winded allergy test. As your health improves, you start adding foods back to see what you can tolerate and what you can't.

So why am I telling you this? It's pretty rare that I preach about myself and I'm not under any obligation to disclose my health information.

One reason is that my experience illuminates how dangerous weight bias can actually be. My old doctors were so focused on making me smaller that they both withheld medical care and told me to do the one thing that could've made my illness life threatening.

We talked about this in OWL with the high schoolers and I think it bears repeating - if a medical provider is making you uncomfortable or is refusing to believe you or take you seriously, you can and you should fire them. Being a doctor or a nurse or a specialist does not mean that someone deserves access to our bodies or stories or health information. With power comes responsibility. We get to say no, especially when someone misuses their power or forgets their responsibility.

I am also telling you all this because chronic illness is both invisible and hard to

hide. There's the paradoxical reality that I seem fine and my illness puts profound limits on how I live my life. Simple tasks are exhausting, almost like I'm doing everything at a jog. My immune system is already compromised, so I have to be very careful not to get Covid or any other illness. I'm also too sick to get the Covid booster. And the foods I can eat are so limited that it's nearly impossible to eat out or share meals with other people.

Yes, Graves' disease can be mild and can go into remission, but getting Covid last March sent my immune system into a flare that still isn't over. My blood is saturated with antibodies. It's sort of ironic that we made all these masking policies to protect people who were immunocompromised and I didn't know I was one of the people who needed protecting.

And I still do. Things are slowly improving, but I'm still sick. I now have an excellent medical team and I am doing everything I can to get better, but health is rarely actually in our control. And I want to be clear that it is not your job to take care of me. I don't need suggestions or assistance. I will set the right limits to take care of myself. You can trust me to say no when I need to.

I'm also conscious that what I do is a lot more impactful than what I say. And being a minister means that moral value can be read into my actions. So I want to be clear. Because the size of my body and the way that I eat are dictated by a medical condition. The way that I exist in my body is not a judgment. I want to be clear about that.

You get to take up space. We all get to take up space.

You do not need to be healthy to be worthy.

You do not need to be thin to be worthy.

You do not need to make yourself small to make other people comfortable.

And the process of taking up space can be rocky and it can be painful and having someone on our team can make a profound difference. Sometimes we need another person to hold faith for us when we can't imagine that things could get better. So I tell you my story to help you imagine that things can get better, to help you understand how much of a difference compassion can make.

It's horrifying to me to think of what could have happened to me if I had listened to the doctors who wanted me to be small. It feels like a miracle that I didn't listen, that some part of me knew they were wrong. And I am so thankful that I had people on my side, insisting that I not give up, that I find new doctors. It matters that we have someone in our corner when we lose our mooring.

And so I tell you all of this to make room for these stories, both for the people living them and for the people who don't know what it's like to be so dangerously dismissed.

It is possible to find people who care.

It matters how we treat each other.

And above all, your worth is not conditional.

Amen and blessed be.