



Churchy Words
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We've been sharing of late about the shift in our theme. For the next several months, we will examine a new mark of vitality -- a new way that our ministries can be more relevant and vital. This new theme is Outward Incarnational Focus. In the spirit of confession, I admit that sometimes I shorten it to Outward Focus, dropping "Incarnational." It's a big word that requires unpacking – a churchy word. It's easier to understand and put into practice an outward focus, in which we pay less attention to our own desires and needs and look outward to the needs of our community.

I've realized, however, that my linguistic streamlining is not helpful. Dropping "Incarnational" actually sends us a step backward. Let me explain, using the most powerful incarnation we've experienced: God becoming flesh in the person of Jesus. The God of the Old Testament often gets a bad rap for being vindictive and angry, but the opposite is also true. God blessed Israel and its faithful leaders. God demonstrated compassion and caring, by leading the Israelites out of Egypt and sustaining them in the wilderness for forty years. Under David and Solomon, God built kingdoms and the Temple. God was charitable toward the people and, to put it crassly, did stuff to them from on high.

That all changed when God became incarnate, taking on flesh and becoming human. Jesus was now in the midst of the people, teaching them and touching them. He listened and questioned. He wept and ate and sweated. God's flesh changed the relationship we could have with the Divine. God, through Jesus, no longer did stuff to us; Jesus did stuff *with* us.

So, too, when our outward focus is missing the "incarnational" piece, we can perform wonderful acts of charity. We consider the needs of others, and we respond. Almost as if from "on high," we point our acts of charity toward others.

We can go deeper when we incorporate that churchy word: incarnational. When our mission activities take on flesh, we are moved to be with people – not as objects of charity, but as beloved children of God. We act as Jesus did, Incarnate God, in the midst of people at their best and worst. We act as Jesus did, Incarnate God, when we accept the bodies of others who are self-righteous or broken, diseased or powerful, outcast or royalty. In *This Here Flesh*, Cole Arthur Riley, a woman who was taught from an early age to despise her black body, writes about the spirituality of the body: "To be people capable of extending welcome to the body, even those bodies the world discards and demeans, is to be people of profound liberation. By this we will know our faith: We will stay whole." She then reminds us of the words of our Sacrament of the Lord's Table, in which Jesus offers his body and blood.

Our Outward *Incarnational* Focus is so much more than good mission. It is, at its core, relational. Having lived through a pandemic in which most of us became *virtual* rather than incarnational, we better understand the deep hunger for connection. As we embody the Word and look outward, I pray we will be liberated and able to love our neighbor and ourselves more completely.