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Somatic Abolitionism

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I've titled this sermon "Somatic Abolitionism." If any of you saw that title in advance and wondered, *what?!*—that's fair. Somatic Abolitionism was the original title of the latest book by the author, activist, and psychotherapist Resmaa Menakem, but his publisher thought that title was a little too erudite, and that was likely a good call. Instead, they settled on *The Quaking of America: An Embodied Guide to Navigating Our Nation's Upheaval and Racial Reckoning*.

But I also appreciate the distilled wisdom encapsulated in that two-word title, so let's just take a moment to unpack it. *Somatic* comes from the Greek word *sōma*, meaning "body," and *abolitionism* is a form of the word *abolish*, as in "to get rid of" something. Historically the word *abolitionism* is most strongly associated with the movement to end slavery. So if we tie all that together, **somatic abolitionism is about dismantling racism and white supremacy culture through a focus on our human bodies.**

That's the gist, but there's a lot more to it. Here is Menakem's list of all that he has in mind when he uses the term Somatic Abolitionism:

- a living, *embodied* practice and culture of antiracism
- a return to the age-old wisdom of human bodies respecting, honoring, and resonating with other human bodies.
- the resourcing of energies that are always present in your body, in the collective body, and in creation

- an emergent process
- a way of being in creation
- a form of growing up
- an embodied response to the problems of white-body supremacy (2022: xi).

If this somatic approach to liberation sounds intriguing to you, both of Menakem's books are powerful and useful.

I would recommend starting with Menakem's first book *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*. I also recommend his latest book, but be forewarned that it is a direct and no-holds-barred take on the serious threats of our current political moment. It is also a powerful resource filled with practical tools to help you both process internally and act externally to create personal and social change. So check that second book out as well if you are interested.

I should also share with you a little about Menakem's background experiences to give you a sense of the real world experience he is drawing on to write his books. He has a Masters Degree in Social Work, and for many years he has been a therapist in private practice. One of his areas of specialization is the Somatic Experiencing approach to trauma developed by Peter Levine. He has also trained with Bessel van der Kolk, author of the bestselling book *The Body Keeps the Score*.

Menakem has served as the Behavioral Health Director for African American Family Services in Minneapolis, and as a consultant for the Minneapolis Police Department; he also managed the counseling services for civilians on fifty-three U.S. military bases in Afghanistan.

Most importantly, it is Menakem's embodied, trauma-sensitive approach that makes his work on racism stand out. There are a growing number of incredible books on antiracism, multiculturalism, and anti-oppression, but to me, **Menakem's first book *My Grandmother's Hands* remains one of the best because of his attention to both trauma and somatic experiencing.** I think he's right that our work for social justice, and especially racial justice—is much more likely to succeed if it is both

trauma-informed and attuned to the importance of regulating our bodies and nervous systems.

Part of what makes an experience not merely unpleasant, harmful, or stressful, but *traumatic* is that it is overwhelming. It's too much to process, too much to metabolize; so it stays in our system. Menakem says it this way: "To your thinking brain, there is past, present, and future, but **to a traumatized body there is only now. That now is the home of intense survival energy**" (2017: xv).

A related way we've talked about this in previous sermons is that when we feel rested and relaxed, we are in what neuroscientists sometimes call our "green zone." In this calm state, it is much easier to access our pre-frontal cortex, the most evolved, advanced part of our brain that allows us to engage with the world more sensibly and rationally.

In contrast, as our stress level increases—and especially if we feel under existential threat—we shift into our "red zone." Suddenly we're back into the much less evolved limbic stem of our brain sometimes called the "reptile brain." This is the "fight or flight" — "have sex with it or kill it" — part of our brain.

And this is where being trauma-informed can be all important. If an experience reminds us of a trauma that happened in our past, it can trigger a "red zone" reaction in the present moment that can be difficult to shift out of. Remember that earlier quote from Menakem: "To your thinking brain, there is past, present, and future, but **to a traumatized body there is only now. That now is the home of intense survival energy.**" (For more details on green/red zones, see my previous sermon inspired by the book *Hardwiring Happiness*.)

It is also vital to emphasize that trauma is not your fault. In Menakem's words: "Trauma is never a personal failing, and it is never something a person can choose. It is always something that happens *to* someone" (7-8). In the moment, it can be vital tool for survival. But long-term, we sometimes need help to move from PTSD ("Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder") to post-traumatic growth. The good news is that there are proven methods for shifting ourselves from a state of "fight, flight or freeze" toward compassionate practices sometimes called "tend and befriend."

If you are curious to explore these approaches, there are a growing number of therapists trained in Somatic Experiencing both here in Frederick and around the world. But for now, let's ground this discussion in an introductory embodiment practice:

Notice the outline of your skin and the slight pressure of the air around it. Experience the firmer pressure of the chair beneath you—or the ground or floor beneath your feet.

Can you sense hope in your body? Where? How does your body experience that hope? Is it a release or expansion? A tightening born of eagerness or anticipation?

What specific hopes accompany these sensations? The chance to heal? To be free[er] around the burden of racialized trauma? To live a bigger, deeper life?

Do you experience any fear in your body? If so, where? How does it manifest? As tightness? As painful radiance? As a dead, hard spot?

What worries accompany that fear? Are you afraid your life will be different in ways you can't predict? ...Do you feel the raw, wordless fear—and, perhaps, excitement—that heralds change? What pictures appear in your mind as you experience that fear?

If your body feels both hopeful and afraid, congratulations. You're just where you need to be for whatever comes next. (24)

Earlier I mentioned Bessel van der Kolk's influential book *The Body Keeps the Score*. Let me give you just one quote from that book: **"Once you start approaching your body with curiosity rather than with fear, everything shifts"** (27). That's really interesting and worth thinking about.

In particular, when confronting a racially-charged situation, it can be easy for everyone concerned to react in fight or flight mode. And some of you may remember that a few years ago I preached about how the practices of curiosity and commitment can inform and strengthen our work for racial justice. If you notice yourself getting defensive, experiment with getting *curious* about that: *Why* am I getting defensive? Even more importantly, what can I learn from this situation that I may be missing?

Menakem would also urge us to notice what somatic wisdom your body might be offering you?

Likewise, instead of running away from difficult conversations, how can I resource myself enough to be able to *commit* to staying at the table and work toward a way forward together? Learning more about embodied practices can be a transformative tool in making difficult conversations more workable.

I should, however, add an important qualifier. Neither I nor Menakem is saying to stay curious and committed if you are in a life-threatening situation. Sometimes a reptilian brain response of fight or flight is precisely what is needed. If you are in a toxic situation, sometimes the best option is to move away as quickly as possible (2017: 163). Sometimes the grass really is greener somewhere else.

Other times, do you know the saying, “Wherever you go, there *you* are?” In those times, we’re bringing our trauma with us wherever we go. And if that’s the pattern we find ourselves stuck in, then trauma-informed, embodied practices can make all the difference.

Let me give you another simple embodied practice that can help. Take a deep breath in...and let it go. Then, gently and slowly rock your upper body forward and backward a few times. Then—taking care not to knock into your neighbor—try gently and slowly rocking your upper body from side to side. “When you are done, stop and notice what your body is experiencing” (143). Even this little bit of slow, gentle rocking movement can shift what’s happening within. These embodied practices can be like picking up a remote control for your body and for your nervous system, one that empowers you to change your internal channel to a station that’s softer, gentler, and more fully present than the frequency you were previously tuned into.

Menakem writes, “**Few skills are more essential than the ability to settle your body**” (151). And if you are interesting in trying this out for yourself, there are many different embodied practices for working toward somatic abolitionism throughout both of Menakem’s books.

I also appreciate his reminders that settling your body also includes giving ourselves permission to prioritize the basics of self-care. See if any of the following suggestions resonate with you in particular in this season of your life. As we enter the

fall season, what do you need more of? Menakem writes that if we want to show up as our best selves, most of us need to:

- Sleep seven to eight hours a night.
- Eat healthfully
- Exercise at least thirty minutes a day
- Meditate regularly or do a similar spiritual practice of your choice
- Embrace simple pleasures—whatever you enjoy: spending time in nature, doing yoga, playing a musical instrument, creating art, gardening, spending time with friends, etc. (2017: 160-1)

All such practices help us calm our bodies and regulate our nervous systems to do the hard work of living.

There's one other insight I should mention. I love that Menakem includes on his list that, if your body is feeling really amped up or trapped in a social situation, you can always say: "I need to use the bathroom. I'll be right back." That is indeed one of the most reliable ways to give yourself a few minutes of peace and quiet to calm down your heart, mind, and body (2017: 169).

With all this being said, I would be remiss if I did not end with a reminder of what all this embodied self-care is for. The point is not only to care for ourselves and our bodies, but to increase our capacity and resilience for the work of co-creating a world in which all bodies feel supported, and are resourced with what they need to live a dignified life.

And if you do read Menakem's book, be forewarned that as with many good therapists, he is not afraid to speak the truth directly when it will serve the process of healing. I'll give you just a taste. Especially for those of us in white bodies, Menakem writes:

Honestly I don't care if your sister-in-law is Black; if you used to cut Martin Luther King, Jr.'s hair; if you adopted nine Black babies; if you gave \$50,000 to the NAACP's Legal Defense Fund last year; or if you're a sax-playing ex-president. **I do not keep a scorecard on you and your life. As an adult, neither should you....**

What I *do* care about is what you do with your life *now*. **Are you treating all human beings with genuine regard?** Are you calling out evil and immorality when you encourage it? Are you serving your fellow human beings? Are you acting out of the best parts of yourself? Are you working with other...people to...dismantle all forms of white-body supremacy? (268)