

An American writer and artist named Shelley Jackson has published a short story, but you won't be able to read it in a book or a magazine. Instead, you'll have to look at the bodies of random people around the world, because Jackson's story is written solely on human skin. Seriously, I'm not joking.

Appropriately entitled "Skin," the 2,095-word piece of fiction is the basis of a very unusual project. More than 2,000 volunteers agreed to have one word from the story tattooed on their bodies. Each person bears one word and one word only, and the full story was distributed only to the participants. Rob Poulos, for example, carries the single lowercase word "back" on his left wrist. He heard about the project from his literature professor, who also decided to participate and received the word "pen," followed by a question mark.

Shelley Jackson calls her story a "mortal work of art," and she says it connects each participant to 2,094 other people. Jackson was the first person to get tattooed, inking the story's title to the underside of her wrist, and she quickly received more than enough volunteers to complete the project. People from all over the world signed up to participate from dozens of countries from America to Japan.

So, do you find her idea a bit bizarre? Most likely you do. Was it a bit impulsive and foolish? Quite possibly. But let's suspend any judgments we might have and think about it for a minute, especially if you aren't a big fan of tattoos. After all, one might say that in some way the church is also a "mortal work of art" that enfleshes the gospel so that it is visible to an observing world!

Take Paul's letter to the Ephesians for example. In it the apostle speaks of a "mystery"— a mystery that was made known to him by revelation. That mystery was not a surreal fantasy like Shelley Jackson's story "Skin," but instead it contained the mystery of how God was at work in the world through Jesus Christ. And what's interesting about that story is that it is, like the Shelley Jackson project,

a mortal work of art — a tale that is carried into the world by flesh-and-blood human beings like us.

“In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind,” writes Paul, “as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.” Like the words carried out into the world by Rob Poulos and his literature professor, the good news of what God has done in Christ is carried by walking, talking, living, breathing human beings, by holy apostles and prophets, as well as by people like ourselves. The big difference, though, is that **the gospel is more than skin-deep.**

Ok, so how do you think we are doing as mortal works of art? Are we taking seriously the story that has been entrusted to us? Through Jesus, God has made us “fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” We’re not connected only to 2,094 other people with tattoos on their wrists — we’re linked to millions of fellow Christians in 238 countries around the world. And it is a relationship that is only made possible by Jesus, the one who came to connect us to God and to one another. Without Jesus, there is no relationship. Without Jesus, there is no good news. Without Jesus, there is no story.

But let me ask you a serious question, are we presenting this story to the world? We have to give Shelley Jackson and her 2,095 volunteers credit — they’re not afraid of showing other people that they have a tale to tell. Run into them at Starbucks, and you’ll see their word. Encounter them at a concert, and you’ll be given a piece of the puzzle. Bump into them at work, and you’ll catch a glimpse of what they are up to. You won’t see much, of course, but enough to know that they are part of something bigger than themselves.

When people see us, they should understand that we are part of a story as well. A good news story. A God-given mystery story. A gospel story. And it’s

important for us to reflect on the quality of the story that we are telling the world, especially as we look ahead to the New Year on this first Sunday of 2024. After all, we are the only gospel that some people will ever read, and the only sermon that some folks will ever hear.

When people look at our skin, they should see the Good News of Jesus Christ being fleshed out in our day-to-day human lives. They should see a sign that God reaches out to them through Jesus and desires them to be part of his family. They should see the message that God so loved the world that he sent his only Son — not to condemn the world, but to save it. That’s the Good News. That’s the gospel.

And its vitally important that we are clear about this story, which is so much more than skin-deep: It reveals that everyone has the chance to become “fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” Everyone. Everywhere. Male, female, black, white, native-born, immigrant, rich, poor, gay, straight, Jewish, Palestinian, Russian, Ukrainian. The mystery story that we are challenged to tell is a tale of God’s unexpected inclusion of everyone who has faith in his Son Jesus Christ.

So, what are people going to see when they take a good look at us? A message of acceptance ... or rejection? Inclusion ... or exclusion? Receptivity ... or inhospitality? Unseasonable warmth ... or a January chill?

If you’re a minivan soccer mom with a vanload of rambunctious, wild, and crazy kids. What word is tattooed upon you? If you are headed into the office after a morning disagreement with your spouse, and you’ve got a meeting with staff and you’re not prepared. What word’s tattooed on you? If you’re in a restaurant, and are known for being a notoriously horrible tipper. What word is tattooed on you? If you are at your grand kid’s Little League baseball game, and the clueless coach isn’t giving your grandchild enough playing time. What word’s tattooed on you?

Marianne Sawicki, the author of a book entitled *Seeing the Lord*, is convinced that human beings can copy a biblical text in one of two ways. First, we can copy a text onto paper or onto audiotape or even onto the body of another person. Or, on the other hand, we can copy a text into our own bodies, gestures, and words. In this case, the writing is internal, and our bodies are modified to carry the pattern of the text.

The second form of copying she mentions may seem odd, but we do it every day. Marriage as a text that is seen in the daily activities of the couples in our society. Job descriptions are carried out in the performance of certain professional duties. Styles of clothing suggest certain types of fashion. The gospel of Jesus Christ is transmitted whenever people feed the hungry, welcome strangers, care for the sick, visit prisoners, or tell the story of Jesus. In other words, our bodies, gestures, and words can copy a biblical text and carry it forward. When we do this we join the apostle Paul in helping “everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things!” And I think that in faith we can all agree that this mystery is more than a page-turner. It’s a world-changer.

Fortunately, the copying of the gospel is not something we have to do as isolated individuals. Like the 2,095 people who are presenting the story “Skin,” our sharing is a collaborative, interactive, mosaic sort of thing. And it is absolutely essential that we work together to present the gospel to the world, for it is only together that we are the body of Christ. After all, some of us are feet, some are hands, some are ears, and some are eyes, and it is as a collection of members that we can accomplish the work of apostles, prophets, teachers and healers. It is only when we work together that the whole Christian story can be told.

So, let me ask you, how will we tell this tale in the year that lies ahead? What New Year’s resolutions will we make as the body of Christ in this place today, and what will we do to show that our commitment is more than skin-deep?

One could easily argue that this is the year for us to: Show real *warmth* as we welcome visitors to our congregation, and work to strengthen the bonds of Christian community among us.

This is the year for us to demand authenticity in how we live out our faith and love for God in the things we do and say. This is the year for us to seek *passion* in our worship and ministry, so that everyone will feel our commitment to the work of our gracious and powerful God. This is the year for us to focus on *Jesus* in every aspect of our church's life, so that we will all be able to deepen our relationship with the One who is our Lord and our Savior.

Warmth, authenticity, passion, and Jesus. These are four key characteristics of a healthy church, and they are qualities that will be decisive for the vitality of the body of Christ in 2024 and in all the years to come. Studies show that young adults between the ages 18 and 35 — the biggest gap in the membership of many American churches — are looking for these exact characteristics in a community of faith: warmth, authenticity, passion, and Jesus.

So, do you think that we can develop these qualities in our own bodies, and in the body that is this congregation? I certainly believe that we can! But we have to go more than skin-deep. We have to copy this message into our words and deeds. We have to act in ways that show the gospel to the world. We have to embody the “boundless riches of Christ” as we care for one another and serve our neighbors. Together, we can be part of the beautiful story that God is writing in the world. Together we are an immortal work of art. And thanks be to God for that.