

Encountering The Disabled God

I have been part of several congregations whose practice of receiving Eucharist includes filing to the front of the sanctuary and kneeling at the communion rail. Often, because I am either in a wheelchair or using crutches, an usher alerts me that I need not go forward for the Eucharist. Instead, I am offered the sacrament at my seat after everyone else has been served.

The congregation is trying to accommodate my presence in the service. They are undoubtedly trying to be conscientious and inclusive in their own way. But in effect, they are transforming Eucharist from a corporate experience to a solitary one for me, from a sacralization of Christ's broken body to a stigmatization of my disabled body.

I am hardly alone. For many people with disabilities, the Eucharist — which should be the ultimate sacrament of unity of believers — is a ritual of exclusion and degradation. Access to this celebration of the body is restricted because of architectural barriers, ritual practices, demeaning body aesthetics, unreflective speech, and bodily reactions. The Eucharist becomes a dreaded and humiliating remembrance that in the church we are trespassers in an able-bodied dominion.

For many disabled persons, the church has been a "city on a hill"— physically inaccessible and socially inhospitable. This Eucharistic exclusion is symbolic of a larger crisis. Sadly, rather than offering empowerment, the church has more often supported societal structures and attitudes that have treated people with disabilities as objects of pity and paternalism.

The primary problem for the church is not how to "accommodate" disabled persons. The problem is a disabling theology that functionally denies inclusion and justice for many of God's children. Much of church theology and practice — including the Bible itself — has often been dangerous for persons with disabilities. The prejudice, hostility, and suspicion toward people with disabilities cannot be dismissed simply as relics of an unenlightened past. Christians today continue to interpret Scripture and spin theologies that reinforce negative stereotypes, support social and environmental segregation, and mask the lived realities of people with disabilities.

On those occasions when denominations and congregations make progress in asserting and implementing accessibility, it usually happens through a subtle but powerful paternalism of the able-bodied church, liberally "welcoming" those of us with disabilities. Even some of the best denominational statements articulating a theology of access still speak in the voice of the able-bodied community, advocating for persons with disabilities but not allowing our own voices, stories, and embodied experiences to be central.

The growing and dynamic disability rights movement in this country and around the world is raising crucial cultural and moral questions not simply about the meaning of disability, but the very meaning of embodied experience, human dignity, social justice, and community. It is a ripe moment for the Christian church to reflect on its own core values and traditions and allow the emergence of a theology of disability, with liberating meaning and power for all of us.

The first task in developing a liberating theology of disability is to identify and confront the key aspects of the church's disabling theology, beginning with its biblical roots.

A common theme in the Hebrew Scriptures is the conflation of physical disability and "impurity." The "holiness code" of Leviticus 17-26 communicates a strong message that physical disability is a distortion of the divine image and an inherent desecration of all things holy. Bodily unwholeness is "unclean" and needs to be kept at the periphery of the community. Leviticus

21: 18-20 prohibits anyone "blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes" from priestly activities or entering the most holy place in the temple. These and similar passages have historically been used to warrant barring persons with disabilities from positions of ecclesiastical visibility and authority.

Although the specific physical standards of such passages may not be retained as criteria for today's religious leadership, the implicit theology persists in church actions and attitudes. As recently as 1986, the General Conference of the American Lutheran Church declared that people with "significant" physical or mental disabilities would be barred from ordained ministry.

New Testament texts have also been read to support a link between sin and disability. Several Gospel narratives and even Jesus' own statements are ambiguous, sometimes upholding and sometimes discounting such linkage. Luke's account of the man with paralysis who is lowered through the roof of the house where Jesus is speaking has often been interpreted as a story of heroic helpers and a crippled sinner (5:18- 26). Jesus' own words — "Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Stand up and walk?'" (5:23) — suggest some association between forgiveness and healing.

In John's story of the man by the pool of Bethesda (5:5-16), Jesus follows his healing with an apparent affirmation of the link between sin and disability when he tells him, "Do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you" (5: 14). In John 9: 1-3, however, Jesus offers a very different perspective. When his disciples ask whether the man's blindness is the result of his or his parents' sins, Jesus answers: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."

A different but equally troublesome biblical theme is the ideal of virtuous suffering. In passages such as Paul's account of the "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7-10), righteous submission to divine testing is upheld as a praiseworthy disposition for Christian disciples. Likewise, early interpretations of Job and the story of Lazarus (Luke 16: 19-31) purported that physical impairments were a sign of divine election by which the righteous were purified and perfected through painful trials. Disability is seen as a temporary affliction that must be endured to gain heavenly rewards. While more subtle, this theology of virtuous suffering has been no less dangerous. It has encouraged persons with disabilities to acquiesce to social barriers as a sign of obedience to God, and to internalize second-class status inside and outside the church.

The biblical theme of charitable giving has had equivocal outcomes for people with disabilities. In ancient societies, almsgiving provided a vital means of survival for people deemed outcasts or who were without the means to provide for themselves. Yet as many of the biblical prophets proclaimed, the people of God forgot that such offerings were the rightful stipends of those who were socially or physically prevented from economic productivity; instead they pushed aside the needy and refused to establish justice "at the gate" (Amos 5: 12-15). Hence the system of charity; which had always included a requirement of justice, soon failed to accord dignity or even adequate provision.

From its inception, the Christian community has always acknowledged a special responsibility and mission to marginalized persons, including those who are physically unable to provide for themselves (Acts 6: 1-6). Furthermore, several New Testament passages link the notion of charity to healing. In the account of the disabled man at the Beautiful Gate (Acts 3: 1-10), Peter and John responded to a request for donations with miraculous action. As in this case, healings often restored the person not only to an able-bodied state, but also to social participation and religious inclusion.

Subsequent church practice often lost sight of this broader vision. Historically, church-based charities have provided humane care, medical advances, and indispensable financial support. Yet this has often resulted in segregating people with disabilities from the Christian community rather than restoring them to social and religious participation. While engaging in individualistic charity and healing, the Christian church has neglected the social and political needs of people with disabilities, failing to place as central emphases political engagement and social inclusion.

Our task is not simply one of correcting some faulty texts or even of building greater architectural access. The Christian church must develop a theology of disability, emerging from the lives and even the bodies of those with disabilities. Such a theology must not be construed as a "special-interest" perspective, but rather an integral part of reflection on Christian life. We must come to see disability neither as a symptom of sin nor an opportunity for virtuous suffering or charitable action. The Christian community as a whole must open itself to the gifts of persons with disabilities, who, like other minority groups, call the church to repentance and transformation.

Much of my life I waited for a mighty revelation of God. I did experience an epiphany, but it bore little resemblance to the God I was expecting or the God of my dreams. Growing up with a disability, I could not accept the traditional interpretations of disability that I heard in prayers, in Sunday school, and in sermons. "You are special in God's eyes," I was often told, "that's why you were given this painful disability." Or, "Don't worry about your suffering now — in heaven you will be made whole."

This confused me. My disability had taught me who I am and who God is. What would it mean to be without this knowledge? Would I be absolutely unknown to myself in heaven, and perhaps even unknown to God? I was assured that God gave me a disability to develop my character. But by age six or seven, I was convinced that I had enough character to last a lifetime. My family frequented faith healers with me in tow. I was never healed. People asked about my hidden sins, but they must have been so well hidden that even I misplaced them. The theology that I heard was inadequate to my experience.

In my teen years, I became actively involved in the disability rights movement-joining persons around the globe who were struggling for basic human rights for the now approximately 650 million persons with disabilities worldwide. Through this movement I came to understand why those of us with disabilities have such depreciated views of ourselves and lack genuine convictions of personal worth. I began to see the "problem" not within my body or the bodies of other people with disabilities, but with the societies that have made us outcasts and treated us in demeaning and exclusionary ways. I helped organize sit-ins to achieve access to public transit and public facilities and to promote human and civil-rights legislation.

For a long time, I experienced a significant rift between my activism and my faith. My activism filled me with a passion for social change that would acknowledge our full value as human

beings. But my theological and spiritual questions remained unanswered: What is the meaning of my disability? The movement offered me opportunities to work for change that were unavailable in the church, but my faith gave a spiritual fulfillment that I could not find in the movement.

Yet I also had to name the ways in which Christian communities participated in our silencing. Within the church, often other people with disabilities were uninterested in political and activist matters. Many activists, meanwhile, saw religion as damaging or at least irrelevant to their work. I felt spiritually estranged from God.

My return to intimacy with God began at an Atlanta rehabilitation hospital for persons with spinal cord injuries. A chaplain asked me to lead a Bible study with several residents. One afternoon after a long and frustrating day, I shared with the group my own doubts about God's care for me. I asked them how they would know if God was with them and understood their experience. After a long silence, a young African-American man said, "If God was in a sip-puff, maybe He would understand."

I was overwhelmed by this image: God in a sip-puff wheelchair, the kind used by many quadriplegics that enables them to maneuver the chair by blowing and sucking on a straw-like device. Not an omnipotent, self-sufficient God, but neither a pitiable, suffering servant. This was an image of God as a survivor, as one of those whom society would label "not feasible," "unemployable," with "questionable quality of life."

Several weeks later, I was reading in Luke's Gospel about an appearance of the resurrected Jesus (24:36-39). The focus of this passage is really on his followers, who are alone and depressed. Jesus says to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see."

This wasn't exactly God in a sip-puff, but here was the resurrected Christ making good on the promise that God would be with us, embodied, as we are — disabled and divine. In this passage, I recognized a part of my hidden history as a Christian. The foundation of Christian theology is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yet seldom is the resurrected Christ recognized as a deity whose hands, feet, and side bear the marks of profound physical impairment.

This was my epiphany. The resurrected Christ is a disabled God — one who understood the experience of the others in my Bible study in the rehab center, as well as my own. Encountering this disabled God became for me the source of a "liberation theology" of disability. Jesus Christ, as a living symbol of the disabled God, shares in the human condition; he experiences in his embodiment all our vulnerability and flaws. In emptying himself of divinity, Jesus enters the arena of human limitation, even helplessness. Jesus' own body is wounded and scarred, disfigured and distorted.

In his ministry, Jesus builds community and experiences human solidarity with those who are disabled, socially stigmatized, and denied their full human dignity and capacity. Jesus Christ the disabled God is consistent with many images of Jesus in solidarity with all those who have struggled to maintain the integrity and dignity of their bodies in the face of injustice and bodily degradation. "

Jesus Christ the disabled God repudiates the conception of disability as a consequence of sin. Our bodies participate in the image of God, not in spite of our impairments and contingencies but through them. For many people whose disabilities keep them from participating fully in the

church or from feeling full-bodied acceptance by Christ, accepting the disabled God may enable reconciliation with their own bodies and Christ's body, the church. Hence, disability not only does not contradict the human-divine integrity, it becomes a new model of wholeness and a symbol of solidarity.

The disabled God is a survivor. In our society, "survivor" is contaminated with notions of victimization, radical individualism, and alienation, as well as with an ethos of virtuous suffering. In contrast to that cultural icon, the image of survivor evoked here is that of a simple, unselfpitying, honest body, for whom the limits of power are palpable but not tragic. The disabled God embodies the ability to see clearly the complexity and the "mixed blessing" of life and bodies, without living in despair. This revelation is of a God who is for us, one who celebrates joy and experiences pain not separately in time or space, but simultaneously.

The disabled God is a God for whom interdependence is a necessary condition for life; a fact of both justice and survival. The disabled God embodies practical interdependence, not simply willing to be interrelated from a position of power, but depending on it from a position of need. For many people with disabilities, mutual care is a matter of survival. To posit a Jesus Christ who needs care and mutuality as essential to human — divine survival debunks the myth of individualism and hierarchical orders in which transcendence means breaking free of encumbrances and needing nobody.

This disabled God makes possible a renewal of hope for people with disabilities and others who care. This symbol offers us a liberating realism that accepts our bodily limitations as part of the truth of being human. At the same time, this hope pushes us toward social and interpersonal transformation, toward a justice of access and mutuality that is free from barriers that exclude, constrain, and humiliate us. It situates our hope in the reality of our existence as ones with dignity and integrity. It affirms that our nonconventional bodies, which oftentimes dissatisfy and fail us, are worth the living.

People with disabilities are part of the sacramental body of Christ in the church. So it is painful and tragic that the bodily practice of the ritual of Eucharist, as I described, often serves to stigmatize and exclude those with nonconventional bodies. The Eucharist is a remembrance of a broken body — and a celebration of the miraculous liberation that wells up from that broken body.

The church-made up of all of us — is beautiful and broken, impaired but powerful, complex and gifted. It is this body, the church, which incarnates the disabled God for our world. It is this body which is called to follow in the liberating ways of Jesus Christ the disabled God, who embodied a commitment to justice, and who challenged all structures, social codes, and rituals of degradation that deny the full personhood of marginalized people. This liberating mission is only possible when sisters and brothers with disabilities are integral to the life of the community — when our voices are heard, our experiences honored, and our gifts allowed to flourish.

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