

Disability theology

A journey toward liberation

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A journey through John 9

In John 9, we encounter a man who has been blind since birth—a story that is familiar to many of us who have grown up in the church. Jesus’s disciples, echoing societal norms, ask the question that we have all heard before: “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (9:2). This text, often framed as a miraculous healing story, has long



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haunted me—not because of the healing but because of the assumption that someone must be blamed for disability.¹

In 2015, I was diagnosed with a rare form of diabetes. My body’s rebellion against itself felt like a betrayal. The diagnosis forced me into a new reality—a chronic illness that would not be cured or prayed away. This was the kind of

diagnosis that disrupts life’s rhythms, adds new rituals, and forces you to confront not only your mortality but also the societal narratives that attach moral failure to sickness. This was not simply a medical issue. In my heart, it was also a theological one. My diagnosis caused me to confront years of theology that often centered healing as the ultimate form of liberation.

I found compassion for my new, uncertain circumstances in Jesus’s reply. His response to the disciples’ question—“Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him” (9:3)—is not about blaming or finding fault. It is not even

1 For an analysis of blindness as depicted in John 9, see Darla Schumm and Jennifer L. Koosed, “Out of the Darkness: Examining the Rhetoric of Darkness in John 9,” in *Disability in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: Sacred Texts, Historical Traditions, and Social Analysis*, by Darla Schumm and Michael Stoltzfus (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 77–92.

about the healing itself. It is about the man's humanity, his existence as someone already whole, already worthy of dignity and care. This passage does not highlight what was wrong with the person who has a disability; it instead points to the necessity of seeing the individual in their fullness. It is in this space, the "after" of diagnosis, where I found my footing in disability theology, an understanding of God that seeks not to fix us but to embrace us as we are.

Finding ourselves in the text

As we read scripture, it is critical to acknowledge the point of view from where we enter the text. Miguel De La Torre's work highlights how social location—the unique place we occupy in society—influences how we engage with the text.² As someone who is navigating the intersections of Blackness, queerness, fatness, and disability, reading scripture means that I see myself not only in the stories of triumph and healing but also in the silences, in the moments when people like me are overlooked, erased, or treated as objects of pity.

The lens of disability theology challenges us to read biblical stories differently. It compels us to ask, *What if the blind man's story isn't only about healing? What if it is about how we, as a society, refuse to see the blind man in his fullness until something about him changes? What if, instead of focusing on the miracle, we focused on the way Jesus saw him at the beginning of the story, before anything changed?* When we come to scripture from the margins, we are not merely spectators. We are participants in the sacred stories of those who, like us, exist on the outskirts of normative narratives. The biblical stories about disabled people are not just about miraculous healings; they are also about recognizing the inherent dignity and worth of people who have been pushed to the margins.

In recognizing this truth, we confront a central problem in Christian theology: the frequent insistence that healing is the only way to bring disabled people into community. This idea places undue pressure on disabled individuals, suggesting that our full participation in Christian life is contingent on becoming able-bodied or free from illness. Alice Wong describes how this approach dehumanizes disabled people by treating them as projects to be fixed rather than people with valuable contributions to


2 Miguel A. De La Torre, *Reading the Bible from the Margins* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002).

make exactly as they are.³ This approach thus treats disability as a deficit. We must resist this notion if we are to embrace a theology that is liberating for all people.

A biblical model of disability justice

Throughout scripture, stories of disability are often tied to moments of healing. However, focusing exclusively on these moments does a disservice to the broader vision of God’s kingdom. The biblical text also invites us to imagine a community where disabled bodies are not required to conform to an able-bodied norm in order to be fully integrated into the community.

Consider the story of the man at the pool of Bethesda in John 5, waiting for someone to help him into the waters. When Jesus asks, “Do you want to be made well?” (5:6), the man doesn’t respond with a yes. Instead, he recounts the systemic barriers that prevent his access to healing. This is not just a story about individual healing; it is a story about the so-



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cietal structures that keep disabled people from thriving. The focus on physical healing as the ultimate goal misses the larger point: there are social conditions that prevent the man from participating fully in communal life.

This is where disability justice enters the conversation. Disability justice, unlike a simple healing narrative, asks us to reimagine the world so that disabled people can live fully without needing to

be “fixed.” It asks us to confront the systems that oppress disabled people and create conditions where all people can thrive. This perspective shifts our focus from the individual to the community and its responsibility to create spaces where everyone belongs, regardless of their level of ability.

When Jesus heals the blind man in John 9, the story ends not with his sight being restored but with the community’s reaction to his healing, which is fraught with tension. The man’s neighbors debate whether it is really him who returned to them (9:9), and some religious leaders question the legitimacy of the miracle (9:16). The man’s identity becomes a

3 Alice Wong, ed., *Disability Visibility: 17 First-Person Stories for Today* (New York: Ember, 2021).

point of contention. What this reveals is that healing, in and of itself, does not automatically lead to acceptance or belonging. The community has to grapple with how to incorporate this newly sighted man back into their midst, and they struggle to do so. This echoes our modern-day struggles with inclusion. The issue is not disability itself; it is the way society structures itself to exclude those who do not fit within certain norms.

Unmasking and radical acceptance

In recent years, I have also been diagnosed with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism, both considered invisible disabilities. I am constantly placed in positions that required me to navigate the tension of being perceived as able-bodied while dealing with the realities of my own limitations and need for accommodations. I experienced my autism diagnosis, in particular, as a curtain being pulled back on a part of me that I had always known existed but had been masking to fit into societal norms.

With the support of family and community, I began the work of unmasking and embracing my authentic self, no longer hiding behind the facade of what others expected me to be. The process of unmasking allowed me to confront the societal pressures that had conditioned me to prioritize the comfort of others over my own needs. It opened up a space where I could acknowledge my limitations without shame and recognize that my disabilities are not weaknesses but intrinsic parts of who I am—in both my humanity and my faith journey. Unmasking also challenged the Christian community around me to rethink what it means to be whole and worthy.

I have been on a continuous journey to embrace the understanding that grace is found not in pretending to be “normal” but in the full acceptance of our complexities, and it is in this space that true liberation begins for us all. This shift in perspective has profound implications, not just for individuals but also for the systems and structures that define our communities. When we center the experiences of disabled people, we are forced to confront the ways society is built to exclude. This isn’t just about making spaces accessible, though that too is important. It is about changing the very foundation of how we think about community and belonging.

Jesus’s teaching on the sheep and the goats (Matt. 25:31–46) offers a framework for this kind of radical inclusion. Jesus speaks about caring for “the least of these,” those who are hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick, and imprisoned. This passage reminds us that the measure of our faith is

not in how we treat the powerful or able-bodied but in how we care for those who are most marginalized. When we center disabled people in our communities, we are living out the gospel in its fullest sense. We are acknowledging that liberation is not just for the able-bodied; it is for all of us.

Disability is not a shameful secret to be hidden or something to be healed away. It is a part of the rich tapestry of human experience. When we embrace it, we create a community that reflects the true diversity of God's creation. This is not just a theological concept; it has real, tangible implications for how we structure our churches, our policies, and our relationships.

Liberation in the after

Disability theology is not just about individual stories of healing or struggle. It is also about reimagining our communities so that all people—disabled, chronically ill, neurodivergent—are valued and included. Liberation comes not in spite of our disabilities but through them, as we embrace the fullness of who we are and demand that our communities do the same.

In this “after” space—after diagnosis, after exclusion, after erasure—there is hope. It is hope built not on the expectation of healing but on the promise of belonging. As we envision disability theology, let us center the margins. Let us follow the call of Black liberation, queer liberation, and disability justice, knowing that, as Fannie Lou Hamer reminds us, “Nobody’s free until everybody’s free.”⁴

About the author

Shana C. Green lives in Kansas with their wife and has an adult son. They serve as the Pastor of New Creation Fellowship, a Mennonite Church in Newton, Kansas.

4 Fannie Lou Hamer, “Nobody’s Free Until Everybody’s Free,” speech delivered at the founding of the National Women’s Political Caucus, Washington, DC, July 10, 1971; published in *The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer: To Tell It Like It Is*, ed. Maegan Parker Brooks and Davis W. Houck (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2013).