

The gift of an ordinary life

Katherine Dickson

When I was born, I was immediately welcomed by a family ready to love me.¹ That included my aunt with Down syndrome, Debbie. I say that right away, not because Down syndrome was everything that she was but because being a person with Down syndrome was an important part of her identity and her life story—and, consequently, of our life together.

As Bill Gaventa, a leader in disability theology, often says, “Never underestimate the gift of an ordinary life.”

Mostly, though, she was just my aunt. She held me, teased me, ate snacks with me, played games with me, put my hair in funny designs. As a family, we went on vacations together at our favorite lake. She was our loudest cheerleader in high school sports. At church, she was baptized and affirmed her faith in her

own words. And after we walked together up the aisle to take communion, she would give hugs to people in their pews all the way back to our seats. Taking communion together always felt like a holy party—being at the table with Debbie and with so much joy.

I could tell stories all day—stories of our family living an ordinary life together. As Bill Gaventa, a leader in disability theology, often says, “Never underestimate the gift of an ordinary life.” But life wasn’t without hardship. (Is any ordinary life?) We created a space of hospitality and welcome for each other and those outside our family, but I also learned about ableism when encountering spaces that weren’t accessible for Debbie to enter or by seeing misunderstanding or prejudice with my own eyes. I recall the first time, when I was still a child, I saw a group of boys make fun of her in a restaurant. I know the story of her denial of public-school attendance before the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) existed. Debbie spent two hours on a bus to be with “people like her” instead of going to school down the street with her siblings and neighborhood friends. Some decades later, my mom and I would tour some poor living options for her, with stairs she could hardly climb or beds placed in a

¹ This piece was first delivered as a sermon in March 2022 at First Mennonite Church in Bluffton, Ohio.

living room, without regard for her need for space of her own. At the end of Debbie's life, we encountered a doctor who assumed that Down syndrome meant that her quality of life was low. We knew better.

Debbie's was a lifetime of love—a lifetime of relationships—not written in charts. The wholeness of who she was as a person and who she was in Christ was never in question to us. Debbie lived in a body with a particular condition, a particular developmental disability. It was visible and came with its own kinds of needs. But it is only one kind of disability. We live in many kinds of bodies that have many kinds of disabilities, visible and invisible. The phrase *people with disabilities* represents a vast group of people with different abilities, even as similar diagnoses impact people in different kinds of ways. Ailments, impairments, limitations, and vulnerabilities are all a part of living in bodies. Disability—understood as a physical or mental condition that limits a person's movements, senses, or activities—might be genetic or acquired over time through accident, illness, or the natural processes of aging. This notion of disability covers diagnoses like mental illness, dementia, and Alzheimer's disease. It represents a diversity of bodies. Disability is a fluid category—many people acquire a disability for a time, while many others live with a disability every day of their ordinary life. I write as someone who lives in a body that continues to teach me about limits.

Understanding disability

There are sixty-one million people in the United States and one billion people in the world living with some kind of disability. That's 26 percent of the adult population, or about one in four adults.² Disability affects every demographic of our human family. Whatever racial identity, gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity, economic status, religious background, political affiliation we are, disability affects us all. From a theological perspective, disability is just as much a reality of being human as anything else. We have a God who creates bodies, lived in a body, and died in a body. And we have a God who was resurrected from the dead—but with bodily wounds still showing!³

2 For these and other statistics on disability, see Center for Disease Control and Prevention, "Disability and Health Promotion," <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/>.

3 For a discussion of Jesus's post-resurrection wounds, see Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).

No body with a disability constitutes on its own a lesser quality of life in community—unless the design of places, systems, and social structures is one that doesn’t allow for hospitable access. Hospitable access leads to relationships and belonging, allows walls of hostility and misconception to be broken down, and makes room for understanding, mutuality, ordinary life together, and friendship. Here the design of hospitality is one that not only adds lifts to get around physical barriers like stairs but also works to create space for participation and the sharing of gifts.

There are three traditional models that serve as frameworks for how we understand disability. The first is the medical model, which understands disability as the problem of an individual, caused by a disease or injury. According to this model, a cure is the aim, and the disability is identified by a diagnosis. The second model is the moral model, where disability is understood to be caused by the sins of the person or their ancestors. This model has caused great pain, and theologies that support it are still alive today. The third model is the social model, which insists that any condition is only disabling insofar as its environment is not welcoming. In other words, disability is not an attribute of an individual but rather a complex collection of conditions created by an environment. Hence, the solution to the “problem” is found in collective action, and it is the responsibility of the community at large to create hospitable environments for all.

Disability and the church

In 2021, a disability pride flag was introduced internationally to celebrate what has been overcome. The flag has stripes that signify “cutting across” walls and barriers that separate those with disabilities from society, which—according to the social model of disability—are what make a person disabled.⁴ Sadly, the church is sometimes the last place persons with disabilities and their families would consider to have cut across such walls and barriers. At its best, the church is a body that could—and sometimes does—live into the social model. Families of people with disabilities continue to ask questions like *What do I do when my neurodiverse child needs to cry out during church?* or *How can we go to church without bothering anyone else?* People with disabilities might be thinking *I cannot sit that long in a pew—it hurts!* or *This disability is a part of me—please stop trying to pray it away!*

4 See Nancy DeVault, “Here’s What the Disability Pride Flag Represents,” *AmeriDisability*, July 11, 2023, <https://www.ameridisability.com/heres-what-the-disability-pride-flag-represents/>.

The ADA paved the way for access across the United States, but it allowed faith communities to be exempt. This means that it is up to the church community to decide whether to be as accessible as a bar, Walmart, or a school. Many congregations have paved the way for people to experience church—from making large print bulletins, to using a microphone, to offering a Zoom link for those unable to attend due to physical limitations, to figuring out adjustments to traditional Sunday School approaches so that all can come, and more. These accommodations are not to be taken for granted.⁵

In May 2022, Mennonite Church USA passed the Accessibility Resolution.⁶ A decade in the making, the Accessibility Resolution was a powerful move in naming the experience of disability in our churches over time, celebrating moves toward accessibility, and naming exclusions of the past.

When churches maintain inaccessible structures or social attitudes that put up walls of misunderstanding or keep us from seeing another's full humanity and worth, it can leave people with disabilities longing for the grace of human encounter and the dignity of being understood beyond diagnosis. That need for belonging and restoration in social relationships is just as true today as it was in an ancient story that we find in the Gospel of Luke.

Disability and Jesus's ministry

In one of Luke's healing narratives (5:17-26), the act of getting a man to Jesus for healing is a profoundly communal enterprise. Some men first carry their friend on a mat to where Jesus is teaching. We do not know how long they have carried him or whose idea it was to do it in the first place. But once they get to this place where the healing Jesus is teaching, they encounter a barrier. The crowd is too big. There is no accessible path to Jesus. No one is moving out of the way. So they do the reasonable thing: they go to the roof! I can imagine the moment they look at each other and say, *Well, up it is!* And I wonder who among them figured out what kind of system they would need to both remove tiles and lower their

5 The Anabaptist Disabilities Network (ADN) provides accessibility audits and grants for continued moves toward accessibility and discerning how to break down barriers in hospitable design for participation in community so that full gifts can be used by everyone. See <https://www.anabaptistdisabilitiesnetwork.org/>.

6 For a full text of the Accessibility Resolution, see Mennonite Church USA, "Statements and Resolutions," <https://www.mennoniteusa.org/who-are-mennonites/what-we-believe/statements-and-resolutions/>.

friend to safety. As Jesus is teaching, suddenly the roof opens, the light shines in, and a man is carefully and safely lowered down. This took creativity and teamwork. The friends helped their loved one to access care. They collectively and creatively made a path for this man to community—and to Jesus. In their case, it wasn't through a ramp but through a roof!

Now there is a hole in the roof—perhaps letting birds fly in—and there is this man lying in front of Jesus. Everyone is waiting to see what he might do. Jesus sees the faith of *the friends* of the man who is paralyzed and not just the faith of the man. Jesus says, “Friend, your sins are forgiven you.” Their faith and decisive action lead the man to forgiveness, but he is still

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lying on his mat. This shows that there is no correlation between the man's sin and disability, as with the moral model described above.

Jesus perceives the questioning of those who are wondering about his authority: “Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?” So Jesus identifies himself

as the Son of Man and then proceeds to heal the man's paralysis. Jesus says, “So that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins, I say to you, stand up, take your bed, and go to your home.” Immediately, the man stands and goes to his home, glorifying God. The healing of the man's paralysis is not a result of his forgiven sins but a testament to the power of Jesus. And as in any of the Gospel healing narratives, Jesus does something more than just addressing the physical ailment (which is the most astonishing to onlookers). Just by seeing the man who was paralyzed, addressing him, and being willing to transform him, Jesus has already restored the man to community. It is only then that Jesus calls him to stand and go to his own home. Here is a reversal of human status announced by the prophet! This man on the mat, left behind on the outside of the crowd, is brought to the center, seen by Jesus, and restored to community because his friends made a way for him to get in and be seen.

Paul writes in Galatians, “For all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (3:28), who Ephesians states “has made both into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us” (2:14). These texts serve as reminders of what Jesus's ministry was about: restoring people without privilege to equal standing in community. Jesus sees people in bodies just

as they are, and he does what needs to be done for them to be restored to community. In other words, Jesus exemplifies the social model of disability. Through God's transforming power, Jesus offers the greatest of all



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hospitable acts by breaking down walls between people, overturning privilege and the social hierarchies that create the walls in the first place, and puts everyone on the same level, capable to be in community in their own way. While Paul names the dividing lines that Jesus has abolished as "Jew or Greek," "slave or free," and "male and female," we can add to his list, "disabled or able." Paul's

list includes differences in status and privilege that set up social structures to work in a certain kind of way. Paul says these have been erased through baptism into the community of Christ.

There is a different message in these passages for those who have been oppressed than for people who have been privileged. The gospel suggests that those who think that they are insiders will find out that they are no more inside than anyone else. It helps us call into question our "us versus them" ways of thinking, even when we think about hospitality. The unity Paul mentions is not about removing what makes groups unique but about breaking down the walls of hostility between them. When we talk about hospitality, we imagine some people doing the including and other people being included. But even that structure is broken down in Jesus, in whom we can see ourselves all equally in the middle of God's enlivening power. Whatever our bodies, all of us are called into the enlivening power of God, continuing to break down the walls of hostility by designing access for community and relationship.

Jesus did his work. He modeled over and over what it means to see the whole human in every body. He modeled hospitality's ultimate design, one that sees each human as equal in status, equal in worth, and fully able to be a part of God's enlivening work in the world as part of a community. Through Jesus's work, we can see one another in new ways, allowing for mutual relationship between us all. This is something that we keep working toward, together, in our bodies, in whatever shape they are in and with whatever abilities they have. Because in all of them, we are whole, and we belong to one body, the church.

About the author

Katherine Dickson is a passionate advocate for individuals with disabilities and for accessibility and disability rights. As family member to an aunt with intellectual or developmental disability (IDD), she has served as a disability advocate, family caregiver, camp counselor, care assistant, and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) coordinator in both professional and volunteer capacities. She has an MDiv from Methodist Theological School in Ohio (MTSO) where she serves on staff in a variety of roles. She has served on the national core council for the Institute on Theology and Disability for five years and with Anabaptist Disabilities Network as a volunteer field associate for fifteen years. She began to attend First Mennonite Church in Bluffton, Ohio, after graduating from Bluffton University as a non-Mennonite and currently serves as a deacon there. She contributes a week of devotions annually for *Rejoice!*