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Disability

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Editorial

Jackie Wyse-Rhodes

Metaphors that invoke able bodies are everywhere. "She stands up for justice." "I hear what you are saying." "I feel seen." "They were blinded by their own ambitions." "My words fell on deaf ears." These metaphors assume that normal bodies are able bodies. Such speech thus limits our imaginations around what makes for a good and functional human body, suggesting that the "best" bodies are ones that can stand, see, speak, and hear with no need of accommodation. It has not escaped my attention that even the title of this journal, *Vision*, draws on deeply ingrained assumptions around eyesight and the ability to move through the world with intention. Why do organizations have a "vision statement" rather than a "statement of purpose"?

Metaphors that invoke able bodies are everywhere.

A friend of mine once described herself as "temporarily able-bodied." The truth is that most of us will, at some point in our lives, experience a disability, and untold numbers of us already do. When the language we use, in our churches and beyond, constructs a worldview in denial of the prevalence and diversity of disabled experiences, we participate uncritically in cultural assumptions about what kind of bodies are admirable and to be emulated. As such, we close ourselves off from experiencing the rich kaleidoscope of diverse embodied experiences. Such rigidity results in harm to disabled and (temporarily) nondisabled people alike.

In this issue

In this issue of *Vision*, we bring together fifteen writers who engage with disability theology as a transformative conversation partner for biblical interpretation, theological reflection, worship leading and preaching, and spiritual autobiography.

In the issue's opening essay, Sarah Werner invites us to embrace the connection between unique expressions of physical embodiment and robust spiritual vitality, and in so doing, to resist the cultural idealization of "normalcy." Though Western cultures often frame disability in terms of individual loss, an integrated view of spirit and body could serve as a resource for faith communities seeking to accommodate and welcome bodily differences. Werner offers historical and theological resources for interpreting difficult and potentially alienating biblical passages that portray acts of miraculous healing.

The next four essays place autobiography and personal experience in conversation with disability theologies. Bryce Miller explores ongoing, messy aspects of Christian call narratives that he dubs "ministry in spite of." He reflects on embodiment and pastoral identity, telling his own story while suggesting that a more capacious culture of call will help to attend to the Spirit's ongoing work, both individually and corporately.

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Christina Reimer describes how her experience parenting a child with disabilities has changed the way she engages scripture, preaches, and teaches. Reimer mines biblical narratives from Exodus and the Gospels, offering alternative interpretive options.

Heike Peckruhn reflects on her experience teaching disability theologies in higher education settings, noting especially a resistance among her students to consider the image of a disabled God. Peckruhn describes how her students buy into a persistent myth linking "normalcy and potency" and find it especially "destabilizing" to think of the divine as having any "cognitive or emotional limitations." Peckruhn suggests that it is in just such theologizing that "we begin to desire and work toward a future that is interdependent and inclusive."

In addition, this issue of *Vision* features an excerpt from Amy Kenny's book *My Body is Not a Prayer Request* (Brazos, 2022). While telling her own story, Kenny reflects on the liberative power of wheels and describes how conversations about the afterlife often erase disabled bodies.

Four more pieces engage Christian worship and disability. Rebecca Spurrier shares her learnings from a multi-year process in which a group of scholars and pastors with and without disabilities are working to create a prayer book that centers disability in worship and ritual. She explores ways of "thinking more creatively, flexibly, and expansively about worship" while actively supporting disabled clergy and lay leaders.

Emily Hunsbaker narrates her changing understandings of what makes for a valuable community member, explaining how her own life experiences helped her shake loose the ableist assumptions that shaped her childhood congregation. Drawing on her work with the Anabaptist

Disabilities Network, Hunsbaker offers practical tips for churches wishing to "nurture spaces of belonging for people with disabilities," observing that making these changes will benefit all, disabled and nondisabled alike.

In an interview with *Vision*, Darla Schumm reflects on her scholarly journey as an expert at the intersection between religious studies and disability studies. She gives readers a preview of her forthcoming book, exploring the experiences of people who are disabled in their religious communities, and she encourages faith communities to "prioritize accessible love."

A prayer by Erica Lea-Simka rounds out the collection of pieces addressing worship. Her prayer was first made available on the "Welcoming EveryBODY" website created by Mennonite Church USA.[1]

Three pieces in this issue explicitly address biblical interpretation. Leah Thomas explores the book of Job through a disability theology lens, challenging René Girard's characterization of Job as a "failed scapegoat." By integrating the insights of several disability theorists, Thomas highlights Job's bodily suffering, suggesting that Job is in fact an "ideal scapegoat." Thomas's interpretation offers resources for modern readers as they contend with the stigmatization and scapegoating experienced by disabled communities today.

Shana C. Green integrates reflections on the Gospel of John with their own story, modeling engagement with New Testament stories of healing through the lens of disability theology. By placing these texts in conversation with their own embodied experiences, Green empowers readers to seek practices of liberatory reading and interpretation.

Katherine Dickson's sermon on Luke 5:17–26 highlights how "the social model of disability" is at play when, in this Gospel story, the physical structure of a building is altered by a community in order to enable access for their disabled friend. Dickson calls all into "the middle of God's enlivening power" and "continued work of breaking down the walls of hostility, designing access for community and relationship."

The final three pieces directly engage Anabaptist theology. In conversation with disability theologians, Daniel Rempel argues for an anti-Docetic Christology that takes seriously Christ's woundedness and suffering. "Following the disabled Christ" invites us to "embrace human

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[1] See https://www.mennoniteusa.org/ministry/peacebuilding/learn-pray-join/welcoming-everybody/.

contingency," release the need for control, and come to terms with our own wounds.

Engaging the thorny matter of "inclusion," jason greig explores how traditional Anabaptist theologies of baptism prioritize choice, a difficult stance for those with profound cognitive disabilities. In particular, he engages the baptism and membership curriculum recently published by the Anabaptist Disabilities Network (ADN).[2] Jeanne Davies, executive director of ADN and author of the curriculum, replies to greig's critique, explaining the ways the curriculum responds to a deep need for resourcing among Anabaptist congregations.

A tribute to Nancy Eiesland

I would be remiss not to comment on the fact that in this issue eight writers—Reimer, Peckruhn, Kenny, Schumm, Thomas, Dickson, Spurrier, and Rempel—all cite the work of Nancy Eiesland (1964–2009), particularly her 1994 book, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability.* As editor, I did not request that writers interact with Eiesland's work. All eight did so independently. For any readers hoping to engage disability theology for the first time, or to explore it anew, there is no better place to start than Eiesland's groundbreaking first book. In many ways, this issue of *Vision* serves as a tribute to the profound way her life and work inaugurated—and continues to enliven—theologies that center disabled people in the context of a world (and a church) that often, knowingly and unknowingly, relegates disabled bodies to the margins or erases them altogether.

About the author

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[2] See Jeanne Davies, *Believing and Belonging: An Accessible Anabaptist Baptism and Membership Curriculum* (Elkhart, IN: Anabaptist Disabilities Network, 2023), https://www.anabaptistdisabilitiesnetwork.org/resources/baptism-curriculum/.

Embodied faith

Incarnation and wholeness

Sarah Werner

We are all embodied beings, both sacred and fragile. Our bodies are integral to the functioning of our minds and the wellbeing of our spirit, and each of us is connected in a rich web to the rest of the created world and one another. In addition to this, we worship an embodied God. The incarnation of God in Jesus is at the center of Christian faith, but modern Protestant churches often treat the body as suspect and a place of sin. The people who lived in the time of Jesus inhabited a different cultural landscape where the body and soul were reflections of one another and intimately connected.[1]

There are many reasons why we have forgotten this early Christian emphasis on embodiment, but learning to reconnect our spiritual health with the miracle of our physical embodiment can help shed new light on what it means to be part of the body of Christ, connected to God, creation, and one another. It can also help us see the danger in categorizing bodies into "normal" and "abnormal" when we have all been created by God to be unique. Disabled bodies often fall outside of this normal ideal, and so are subject to attempts to "fix" them in ways that can cause more harm. People with disabilities often do not see themselves as broken and in need of fixing.

Western culture tends to see disability through the lens of loss—loss of sight, hearing, movement, or cognitive ability—but disabled bodies are simply a reflection of a diverse creation. A lack of a certain function only becomes disabling when the built or social environment is designed to exclude. Churches can be places of radical acceptance and belonging or exclusion and indifference, depending on whether the congregation is willing to change its structures and practices to accommodate these differences in ability.

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[1] For more on this subject, see Bethany McKinney Fox, *Disability and the Way of Jesus: Holistic Healing in the Gospels and the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019); Mark Wallace, *When God Was a Bird: Christianity, Animism and the Re-enchantment of the World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019).

The body as sinful

It is important to understand how we have failed to recognize the goodness of embodiment and the beauty of each unique human creation. There are many reasons for this, and those of us in the West have inherited a long legacy of disconnection from our bodies. At the heart of this is the myth of dualism, the idea that each of us is broken into pieces—alternately called mind and body, soul and body, or brain and body. These are all reflections of the myth of dualism in different garb.

Augustine and other Western Christians argued that the body is sinful and keeps the soul from living up to its highest potential.

Augustine gets a great deal of attention for being perhaps the most memorable proponent of the idea that the body is doomed by original sin, but he was not the earliest or only voice telling us that our bodies are places of sin rather than holiness.[2] Augustine and other Western Christians argued that the body is sinful and keeps the soul from living up to its highest potential. In this theological position, the body and the soul are in conflict with one another, rather than a unified whole. This same idea was expressed earlier by Plato in his dialogue *Phaedrus*, when he described each person as being driven by two horses—one representing the body's sinful impulses, and the other representing the soul's noble and beautiful wisdom—who often try to move in opposite directions.

During the scientific revolution, this idea of dualism took on the veneer of scientific legitimacy, best exemplified by the ideas of philosopher René Descartes. Descartes is famous for his phrase, "I think, therefore I am." The implication here is that only thinking beings, by which he meant human adults without cognitive disabilities, were worthy of status in society. According to Descartes, the body is fickle, subject to illness and decay, and therefore humanity should put all its effort into our mental lives.

Perhaps the most profound effect of dualism on Western Christians today comes from the purity culture espoused by certain modern evangelical Christians, which has led generations of Christians to be distrustful of their bodies and forever vigilant against what they consider sinful urges that might coopt their soul for evil. Like Descartes and others, they

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[2] St. Augustine of Hippo, *On the Grace of Christ and on Original Sin*, trans. Robert Ernest Wallis (New York: Lighthouse, 2018).

argue that our souls are stronger and more important than our bodies. We should not listen to our bodies because they are only temporary containers for our eternal souls and only lead us astray from more important spiritual goals.

All this emphasis on the body being subject to the will of the mind or soul has led to body shaming, an alarming rise in eating disorders among young people, and a distrust of the body fostered by churches who encourage their followers to disregard the wisdom of their own bodies because they are inherently sinful. The problem with this faulty logic is that we aren't made up of disparate, warring pieces. We are meant to be an integrated whole. God is not only spirit but also body, reflected in Jesus and the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in creation.

Incarnation

This biblical integration of body and soul plays out most strongly in the incarnation of Christ. Jesus is the embodied aspect of God, God "made flesh" to live among us on earth (John 1:14). This means that we ought to take seriously our own embodiment. Our bodies are our places of connection to both creation and the Holy. They are the crux of our link to all life, the earthly and spiritual interwoven into an intact whole. We are not souls inhabiting bodies; we are all of it altogether at once. In the eyes of the biblical writers, who clearly thought bodies were important, resurrection isn't just a spiritual return but also a bodily one, for Christ and for us. The Gospels spend a great deal of time recounting the many healing miracles performed by Jesus, where people were healed in body and soul. Paul, in many of his letters, lays out a theology of cosmic restoration that includes the salvation of humans, body and soul, as well as all creation.[3] Additionally, both the Gospels and the letters of Paul allude to the importance of bodily resurrection at the end of time (Matthew 22:29–33; Acts 24:15, 21; 1 Corinthians 15:54–55).

God took on human form, became enfleshed, to better connect with us through Jesus. Even after Jesus was finished walking the earth, the Holy Spirit continued to be present with us in the created world at all times and places. The incarnation is a reminder that God is present throughout creation and throughout time and space. The world is a holy place, suffused with the presence of God, and this includes our bodies. Our

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[3] For more on Paul's vision of cosmic restoration, see David G. Horrell, Cherryl Hunt, and Christopher Southgate, *Greening Paul: Rereading the Apostle in a Time of Ecological Crisis* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010).

bodies are not a place of sin and brokenness. They are the place where we connect with God and with one another. Jesus walked on this earth in a body. He ate and slept and felt angry in the same ways that we do. The fact that God would take on human form means that our bodies are also holy and good and builds on ideas from the Hebrew Bible regarding the goodness of humans and of creation in general. Near the end of the first creation account, God surveys all creation and proclaims it "very good" (Genesis 1:31).

Finding our way back and some thoughts on healing

Given all of this, if we heed this miracle of incarnation at the heart of our faith, we ought to recognize the miracle of our own embodiment. Original sin is not a concept found in the Bible. What we find instead is a rich theology of embodiment, culminating in Paul's vision of a cosmic restoration that includes our bodies. We are created "very good" and in the "image of God," according to Genesis 1. When the Hebrew people were wandering in the wilderness after escaping slavery in Egypt, God sent manna to sustain their bodies. After they established a kingdom in Israel and social inequality was on the rise, the prophets reminded them that God calls God's people to care for the wellbeing of all bodies. God cares about the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner, those with the least resources, whose bodies were most at risk for depravation and violence.

When Jesus began his ministry, he continued this tradition of the prophets, repeatedly teaching his followers to care for the most vulnerable members of society. In addition to this, Jesus spent a great deal of time healing people. These healing miracles are an important aspect of the gospel narratives and of understanding embodiment in the Bible, but it is hard to know what to do with these stories as modern readers. Some of them sound so odd and even offensive from our twenty-first–century perspective. Those who are part of modern Western culture tend to view illness as resulting from faulty body processes. For example, schizophrenia is not the result of demon possession but is a brain disorder caused by a combination of genetic and environmental factors. Similarly, leprosy is a skin disorder caused by a bacterial infection, not the result of sin. Given this modern understanding, reading Gospel accounts of healing requires interpretation to make them understandable to modern ears.

This is where it is helpful to delve into the cultural context in which the Gospels take place. Our modern conception of the separation of mind and body would not have made any sense to those living at the time of Jesus. They understood the body as an outward reflection of the soul, where healing incorporated not just the body but also the person's spirit and their connections with others in their family and community.

In the first-century Mediterranean world, people understood illness to be the result either of sin or of demons, which is why Jesus's followers and other onlookers were so concerned with a disabled person's sins. Those of us in the modern West tend to see illness as a biological phenomenon that happens to individual bodies, but for ancient Mediterranean people, illness was more cosmic in scale.[4] The time of Jesus's ministry was also one of political turmoil and social oppression at the hands of the Roman Empire. The miraculous healings that Jesus enacted would have been perceived by those witnessing them as evidence of the coming kingdom of God.[5]

When Jesus enacted healing miracles, those who were healed could then return to their families and communities, and so healing extended far beyond their bodily reality to their spiritual and social wellbeing. Ethics scholar Bethany McKinney Fox points out that the New Testament refers to healing more than any other document from the period and that each of the synoptic Gospels "presents Jesus spending a significant portion of his ministry engaging people with illnesses and disabilities, and transforming their lives."[6] This is the context within which Jesus healed, as he also disrupted the cultural understandings of the cause of illness.

Miracle stories can be hard for disabled people to read because they seem to offer an impossible or even unwanted healing.

Miracle stories can be hard for disabled people to read because they seem to offer an impossible or even unwanted healing. Disabled people often have had negative experiences of people attempting to heal them in religious settings, focusing only on their perceived deficit rather than all the gifts and wisdom they bring to the community. We also inhabit a culture that is hyper-focused on curing whatever is not perceived as "normal" for a human body. This includes deafness, blindness, bodies that are larger than "normal," people who use mobility equipment to navigate the world, and neurodivergent people. All of these are simply differences, not

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[4] Fox, *Disability and the Way of Jesus*, 30.

[5] Fox, *Disability and the Way of Jesus*, 34.

[6] Fox, *Disability and the Way of Jesus*, 28.

necessarily disabilities, but our culture tends to see them only as problems to be fixed, regardless of whether the affected individuals see them as such.

Given all of this, the miraculous healing narratives in the Gospels often make those of us outside this spectrum of "normal" cringe. These differences make us who we are. They affect how we experience and engage with the world. The point I take from miracle stories is that Jesus healed people in order for them to return to a place of belonging in their community. People with skin conditions, those with walking impediments, blind and deaf people, and those with mental illness were all outcasts in Roman culture during Jesus's time, struggling to survive with little or no social support in a culture that wanted to discard them. Wholeness and holiness aren't a perfect body but a body able to live in community.

After Jesus was resurrected, his body became disabled in a sense because he still bore the injuries of crucifixion. He wasn't miraculously returned to perfection; the wounds in his hands and feet remained even on his resurrected body. His wounds were a witness to the violence of the Roman Empire and a reminder that when God became embodied through Jesus, God also experienced pain and suffering as we do.

Toward an embodied faith

We are inheritors of a faith centered on embodiment. Jesus is God embodied, the one who walked among us and felt our human pain and our joy. God created us along with all creation and called it "very good." The original paradise in Genesis was one of humans and nature in harmony, a garden of peace and plenty. And in Revelation the final vision of the restored earth is one of similar harmony: the river of life flowing through the center of a holy city, on whose banks grows the tree of life, producing every kind of fruit for sustenance and healing (Revelation 22:2). We are created good, embodied beings living in a sacred creation, connected to one another and beautiful in our diverse experiences of being human.

It seems fitting to end by detailing some of the ways we might live out this embodied faith, both individually and as part of our human communities and the wider world. First, it's important to remember that we are all embodied children of God, each one of us created whole and holy. Our physical, tangible experiences of the world are important, and every person feels and moves through the world differently. Each of us is valuable and whole just as we are, whether we currently inhabit bodies deemed "normal" by our culture or not. No one is defective. In the words of the psalmist, "I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14).

Second, there are cultural aspects to living into an embodied faith. We should recognize that everyone is different. The way you understand something will be different from how another person understands, and so each of us has an incomplete picture of the whole. People come in all shapes, sizes, abilities, and cognitive ways of being. We all see the world in different ways, and so we ought to listen to diverse voices when attempting to understand our place in it. There is no single mold we should all fit into, and this is a beautiful thing. God created each of us unique, a reflection of the diversity of creation. It is only together that we can foster the kin-dom of God, a society where all are valued and valuable.

Third, given all of this, we need to work to make our churches welcoming communities for all kinds of bodies—abled, disabled, neurodivergent, deaf, blind, old, young, tired, exuberant. Communally, the way we live out our faith through worship, Christian formation, and service should reflect this beautiful diversity of creation. We can ask questions about our own churches: Who do we see in the pews on Sunday morning? Who is absent? How does the structure of our building welcome or exclude? Are our worship practices only inviting for certain types of people? Church buildings might need to change to make room for wheelchairs or strollers or large and small bodies. Some disabilities are invisible, and many people suffer in silence for fear of being excluded from the community rather than asking for accommodations.

It is only in paying attention to our own embodiment and welcoming the myriad ways that others are embodied that we can build communities and societies of true belonging. This is what it looks like to be the body of Christ together, to live into an embodied faith.

About the author

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Ministry in spite of

Telling and owning all of our calling story

Bryce Miller

Ministry arises from a sense of call: a hard-to-express but impossible-to-ignore sense of the working of the Spirit bringing forth ministry for the individual. Finding and owning the story of that sense of call is often an important part of the formation of a person toward ministry. The story sometimes becomes well worn: the sense of initial openness; shoulder tappers along the way that gave permission, if not a mandate, to pursue the call; the process of accepting and identifying the call within us and through us. This forming story proves critical as it confirms and convicts us of who we are as ministers. When we find ourselves in need of reassurance, we often turn to this sense of calling to anchor us to that which invited us into ministry in the first place.

Often these stories remain just that: accounts of how we got where we are. We are less good at telling the story that keeps developing along the way as the Spirit continues to lead. Moreover, we tend to be selective in how we tell our stories. Just like we know a good salvation story involves the lost person eventually being found (something of which I have been envious as a lifelong churchgoer), we know that a story of call "goes down better" when it concentrates on the positive attractions of and affirmations toward ministry. The challenges to the call, the hesitations, the doubts (be they self-induced or external), the things that we carry with us and minister in spite of—these things generally don't get talked about, or at least not publicly. In this way, we rob ourselves and those with whom we minister of a broader sense of what it means to be called and how to live our calls out on a day-to-day basis. Witnessing to a dynamic sense of call brings a more honest, Spirit-led, and spiritually insightful form of ministry to the body, especially when it comes to ministry across a range of abilities.

Pastoral ministry in spite of

I term this other half of our call story *ministry in spite of* largely because that is often how it is presented and understood. As a minister who happens

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to have lived a life defined by physical limitations, that is often how it is described to me: that which I was called to do in spite of what is seen as the obvious impediment to my ministry. For me this means having physical challenges that our two young children have taken to calling "Daddy's wiggly arms" and a voice that doesn't always articulate as clearly as I would like. This is part of my *ministry in spite of*, alongside much else. Given that this is what sticks out about me as a ministering person, it is often what people are surprised by, for good and for ill. My physicality, a manifestation of my diagnosis of Cerebral Palsy on the lower-impact end of the spectrum of affectation, presents itself as something well outside the norm of what we expect our pastors to be: traditionally capable, articulate, and a manifestation of the mainstream normalcy that we accept.

Most of the time this *in spite of* is meant as a term of admiration and inspiration, and as an expression of gratitude for ministry that is unique beyond the expectations that we carry. Other times people struggle to accept ministry from someone who is not a typically formed physical vessel, reflecting their theology of what it means to be less than perfect and their expectation that ministry can only happen through those who reflect the normalcy that they themselves expect of God. Many times, I have been asked the question asked of Jesus in John 9—Who sinned that this person is what they are?— expecting an explanation to account for what they are seeing.[1] It sounds a lot more awkward when phrased in the second person, especially when you happen to be the *you* they are questioning. Mostly, this is a good moment for a quip to gently puncture their expectations the best I can.

But here's the thing: I don't think I am extraordinary by virtue of my conditions or for any other reason at all. My circumstance merely lays bare what is universally true: ministry happens *in spite of* no matter the person to whom we are referring. Everything we come to know and understand about God happens in spite of our human disinclination toward being oriented to the working of the divine. Every call comes to be accepted and

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[1] John 9:1–2; seldom do those who pose these queries seem to have read the entirety of John 9 to hear what all Jesus has to say of what is going on here.

lived in spite of the circumstances that mitigate against it, whether or not those reasons are clearly articulated.

There is a fundamental narcissism to the task of getting up with regularity and proposing that you have something to say about God that might prove insightful, let alone useful, in guiding others toward the gospel of the Kingdom. We forget this at our peril. When we perpetuate the mythos of ministry as the task of the heroically convicted and called, we build barriers for those whose personal sense of call might not seem to measure up to those standards. We trap ourselves into the expectations these assumptions carry and pass those same expectations on to those to whom we minister. The widely reported loneliness, mental health struggles, and other difficulties found in those who minister is due in no small part to the cultural and personal expectation that ministry is a task only for the fit and the sound. When we cannot minister with an honest articulation of our *in spite of*, we find ourselves alone and isolated for want of expression, being fairly sure that we don't measure up or, more damaging still, holding as secret that which we expect to be our disqualification for the task to which we are given. If we were able to expand our calling to include that which stands in its way, we would be able to minister from a place of more genuine humanity and honesty than we could before.

When we perpetuate the mythos of ministry as the task of the heroically convicted and called, we build barriers for those whose personal sense of call might not seem to measure up to those standards.

Congregational ministry in spite of

Ministry happens *in spite of* not only for the minister but also for the congregation. The context in which my wife Emily Toews and I co-pastor is rural Eastern Washington State, a land of endless views and similarly unstoppable wheat fields. Menno Mennonite Church is a congregation of farmers who work this land as have the generations before them. Hearing loss is the routine price of farming, a natural consequence of years working with machinery. It is what is normal in this context. But it is also a challenge to adapt to when one's vocal patterns are not always easy to hear. I offer several accommodations: I publish my sermon manuscript both electronically and in hard copy for people to follow along with (albeit with the basic disclaimer that I reserve the right to depart from it), and I use a particularly suitable microphone, among other accommodations.

Following the pandemic, we have continued to livestream our worship via YouTube for those at a distance to enjoy, which is especially important given that some routinely drive ninety miles one way to get to church. Given our geography, it makes sense to continue streaming as a basic accommodation. But this practice has also revealed some surprises along the way. Several times now I have received comments from people who have chosen to watch the livestream of worship outside their usual pattern of attending church in person. Having done so, they tell me that they can understand me far better watching online. It has been a bit of a revelation for some, opening the door for a conversation about their own challenges with hearing and listening. In one case, it even yielded the opportunity to design a solution that offers sound directly from the audio board to an individual's hearing aid using the same device they use to watch TV at home. This removes the social barrier of going and requesting bulky hearing equipment from the sound booth. It also opens up the mutuality of ministry as we encounter the *in spite of* inherent in each of our circumstances.

Relying on the Spirit in ministry

By being explicit about how ministry happens in spite of the circumstances that we each carry, we normalize the fact that we do not always show up to church ready to be inspired, no matter how well the sermon is preached or the music is performed. In speaking of ministry *in spite of*, we normalize the experience of not getting a whole lot out of church for a while, as well as commending the best remedy: to just keep coming, all the while being gentle with yourself and with those who are trying to communicate to you, as you both wait for the Spirit to do its work in overcoming the barriers between you. When we can name that this all happens in spite of our "stuff" and acknowledge that it is the Spirit that makes any of this possible, we build a way of working with and beyond the model of capacity and performance and trust the working of the Spirit that welds our effort and God's presence together.

To be clear, this is not about accepting a less than rigorous approach to the work of getting ready for ministry and doing our best. Far from it. The practice of ministering, whether it is public ministry or personal counseling, is just that—a practice that demands a committed, reflective, and improvement-oriented approach at all levels and times. But it also must be couched within the spiritual context in which it exists. Sometimes the sermons on which we have worked the hardest are the ones that fall the most profoundly flat. Other times, when we are the least confident in what we have to say, we solicit the strongest connections. Acknowledging that ministry happens in spite of what we do places the working of the Holy Spirit at the core of all ministry and reminds us of the miraculous nature of it all. We prepare, study, practice, adjust, and grow. But we need not despair entirely when, despite all that we do, things fall flat, nor chastise ourselves unnecessarily for the consequences. We seek the Spirit that works alongside us and in spite of us, allowing our best efforts to see fruit in God's grace. In this way, ministry ends up looking a whole lot more like baseball, where an exceptional batting average is .300 (30 percent), than it does a theatrical performance where it comes down to being faithful to the script.

Acknowledging that ministry happens in spite of what we do places the working of the Holy Spirit at the core of all ministry.

Acknowledging ministry in spite of who we are and what we face allows us to better access the changing nature of call. We have our call that starts us on the journey of ministry. But that does not mean the Spirit ceases conversation at that point. Recognizing the things that complicate our yes to ministry acknowledges that our yes is conditional, and our conditions change. The conditions change for us internally as we grow and mature, allowing the experiences of our lives to shape us as they will and as they must. They change externally as the circumstances of our lives shift around us as well. Emily and I have found ourselves drawn to relatively far-flung places as our ministry contexts, drawn to the people we find there. But as we age and our children grow, we are increasingly conscious of our need for rootedness, and we wonder how that will impact the direction of our ministry. There are other external factors that are not personal. It does not take a huge leap of imagination to envision a time where the gifts and challenges that we bring to our particular place may no longer be compatible with the needs of the community we serve. I especially consider how my speech may stretch the needs of an aging community too far, and I wonder whether my ability to minister *in spite of* may be too demanding for a congregation's particular needs and requirements. Holding this, uncomfortably at times, as a fundamental part of the nature of ministry helps us better release the notion that a particular difficulty in ministry is evidence of a failure of desire, adaptation, or goodwill. Instead, we can see it as part of the long and organic process of calling. We serve where the Spirit is willing. The fleshy nature of our call can push and pull us, but that does not mean that the call is somehow invalidated along the way. Ministry together between a leader and congregation is a working and will of Spirit, and we would do well to trust that work within us.

Conclusion

The late singer-songwriter (and, I would add, psalmist) Leonard Cohen is known for how he captures the spiritual life. An avowed seeker, he wrote often on themes of spirituality. Over the years, a song of his has become of psalm of mine. "If It Be Your Will" contemplates what it means to be allowed to be part of what the Spirit is up to. Written at a time of crisis for Cohen as he faced the prospect of a career-ending throat disorder, he wrote this song as a prayer of release to the will of the giver of the gift in the first place. While Cohen contemplates what it might mean to be allowed to continue to speak in order to raise the praises that he owes, the song is ultimately a psalm of submission to the empowering will to continue or to release.[2]

We are called to ministry, sharing in the great mystery by pointing to what God is up to in this broken, beloved world. We must acknowledge that we are called not because we are studied, accomplished, capable, or otherwise gifted. We may well be all that and more. But that is not why we are called. Calling is a function not of ability or disability but of the gifting of God's invitational love. We are called because it is the will of the Spirit and the one who guides that Spirit toward God's will. In this we can all listen, hear, follow, and stand amazed.

About the author

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[2] This song is worth hearing, especially as introduced by Cohen himself in a live performance in London with the Webb Sisters; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O_Xc-MAGZjuY/.

Who is the God we worship?

Reading scripture through disability theology

Christina Reimer

I became interested in theologies of disability as the parent of a child with cognitive and physical disabilities. This lived experience has changed the way I preach and teach and the way I think of God and community. Disability theologies tend to emerge from the real lived experiences of persons with disabilities and those close to them, and they offer creative readings of scripture and crucial insights into the practices of the church. They also expose the ableism of certain normative understandings of God. In this essay I discuss one of the central questions asked by disability theologians: Who is the God we worship?[1]

Divine attributes and human nature

When we ask who the God is we worship, it raises further questions about the relationship between divine and human attributes: What attributes do we associate with God? What do these attributes say about us, if we are created in God's image? Which comes first in our theology: divine attributes or human nature? Do we look at ourselves and what we deem to be good and true and then form a picture of what God must be like? If we form our conception of God based on our vision of humanity, there's a temptation to deify the existing order—a potentially unjust order that needs dismantling and transformation.

In his piece "The Disabled God," Burton Cooper writes, "Our tendency is to think of divine power in the same terms as our power, except to extend God's power unlimitedly. That is, there are limits to our power; there are no limits to God's power. If we can do some things, God is able to do anything. Thus, human 'ableness' provides us with the image to think about God's power."[2] Cooper highlights a human inclination to think of God as the ideal version of what we aspire to be but cannot

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[1] See John Swinton, "Who Is the God We Worship?" *International Journal of Practical Theology* 14, no. 2 (Feb 2011): 273–307.

[2] Burton Z. Cooper, "The Disabled God: Understanding God's Creative and Redemptive Love," *Theology Today* 49, no. 2 (1992): 173.

reach as mortals. The God we worship, then, is simply a better version of ourselves. In a similar vein, Stanley Hauerwas and Tom Reynolds both argue that Christian theology has been greatly influenced by the values of modernity, which shapes the way we view God. For example, assigning an attribute such as self-sufficiency to God aligns with the modern Western values of autonomy and independence. And a person's ability to achieve these values in our society is a mark of one's success as a human being.[3] In theological terms, achieving autonomy and independence means that we resemble God's image of self-sufficiency.

One of the important offerings of disability theology is that it problematizes the connection between ableist modern values and Christian theology.

One of the important offerings of disability theology is that it problematizes this connection between ableist modern values and Christian theology. A new image emerges when we focus on other aspects of God such as vulnerability and interdependence rather than perfection and self-sufficiency. But we must be careful not to simply swap one set of outdated values with another set of current values. If we do this, we run into the same theological temptation to project onto God's image what is normative today. One way to avoid this is to look to scripture for a more holistic picture of the image of God.

Moses's speech disorder—and God's—in Exodus

In 2014, the blockbuster movie *Exodus: Gods and Kings* was released. It is the epic story of Moses leading the Hebrew slaves to freedom. Moses is played by Christian Bale, the same actor who played Batman in the *Dark Knight* trilogy a few years earlier. In *Exodus*, as in the Batman movies, the protagonist is portrayed as an almost super-human, muscle-bound, lone-wolf type of hero. Certainly, Moses is one of the leading men of the Hebrew Bible, but if we read biblical descriptions of him through a disability theology lens, we get a radically different depiction of him.

When God calls Moses to lead God's people out of slavery in Egypt, Moses is wracked with self-doubt and does not want to accept the call for

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[3] See Stanley Hauerwas, "Timeful Friends: Living with the Handicapped," *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* 8, nos. 3–4 (2005): 11–25; Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008).

fear that no one will listen to him or take him seriously. Exodus 4:10–13 (NRSV) narrates the conversation:

> *Moses said to the LORD, "O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." Then the LORD said to him, "Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak." But he said, "O my Lord, please send someone else."*

One likely explanation for Moses's discomfort with speaking publicly—especially when given the immense responsibility of representing God—is that he had a speech disorder. What we learn about God from this passage is that God does not seem to be concerned with Moses's ability to orate perfectly. In the following verses, we also learn that God is flexible and accommodates Moses's request to refrain from public speaking by appointing Moses's brother Aaron for that task as his replacement.

Talmud and Rabbinics scholar Sarah Wolf observes that God needs Moses and Aaron to help God communicate with God's people. God is not self-sufficient but depends on them.[4] We can take this one step further to argue that God also experiences an impediment to speech. Something stands as a communication barrier between God and God's people. God appears to need a translator to get God's message across effectively, and this mutual need for support highlights the value of interdependence.

Wolf also states that this passage from Exodus discloses something about how humans are formed in God's likeness. She writes: "God made humans *betzelem elohim*, in the image of God. Perhaps, then, God is reminding Moses of that: all humans are created by God, humans are physically diverse, and therefore all humans in all their differences are created in God's image."[5]

Jesus as disabled and divine liberator in the Gospels

Nancy Eiesland writes about the estranging effects of Christian theology regarding the question of how persons with disabilities are viewed as made

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[4] Sarah Wolf, "Why Did Moses Have a Speech Disability?" JTS, Torah commentary, January 20, 2023, https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/why-did-moses-have-a-speech-disability/.

[5] Wolf, "Why Did Moses Have a Speech Disability?"

in the image of God. In her experience, theology has been exclusionary rather than liberatory for persons with disabilities. She experienced this in her own life as someone living with a significant physical disability and chronic pain, and she admits that for many years she felt "spiritually estranged from God."[6]

One of the moments that helped Eiesland overcome her own spiritual estrangement was when she re-read Luke 24:36–39 through a disability theology lens. This passage describes the moment when the resurrected Jesus meets his followers, and they know him by his wounds. Eiesland writes, "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 a profound impairment."[7] Here we encounter a disabled God, an inclusive God in whom we find our image in all of its diversity. This God suffers with us and lives among us.

> **Disability theologians have provided fresh models for interpreting scripture and discerning the nature of God in a way that welcomes all followers of Christ to find their place within the Christian story.**

Eiesland and other disability theologians have provided fresh models for interpreting scripture and discerning the nature of God in a way that welcomes all followers of Christ to find their place within the Christian story. After reading Eiesland's work, I was inspired to return to Jesus's healing narratives to see if they remained exclusionary—associating sin with disability and forgiveness with restored ability—or if they could be re-interpreted as possible texts of liberation.

John 9:1–12 describes a conversation between Jesus and his disciples about a man who could not see and had to beg for food to stay alive. The disciples ask Jesus who had sinned to cause the man to lose his sight. Jesus said, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so

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[6] Nancy Eiesland, "Encountering the Disabled God," *The Other Side* 38, no. 5 (Sept. and Oct. 2002): 13.

[7] Eiesland, "Encountering the Disabled God," 14.

that God's works might be revealed in him" (9:3). After this, Jesus mixed his spit with dirt and put the mud on the man's eyes. The man washed in a pool of water and was then able to see. A blind person hearing this miraculous story might feel estranged given that most people, even people of deep faith, do not experience miraculous ability after disability.

Blindness is used as a metaphor for the spiritual inability or refusal to hear and follow God's voice. Throughout the Bible, visual impairment is sometimes used as a symbol of ignorance, sin, and unbelief. It can also refer to a lack of understanding due to moral failure (see Exodus 23:8; Isaiah 56:10). It is no surprise that the disciples would assume that someone's sin had caused the man's blindness. But in John's narrative Jesus disrupts this assumption by saying that sin is not the cause of the man's blindness. When I read this passage, I see Jesus calling on the liberative resources of his religious tradition to challenge normative cultural beliefs about who is in and who is out.

Conclusion

When my son was young, we didn't know if he would ever talk, but through weekly visits to a speech therapist, he was slowly able to verbalize and share his inner world with us. This process did not cure him of his disabilities, but it made us feel like someone had put mud over our eyes so that we could see him more clearly. Disability theology has also acted as a healing mud, providing new perspectives on how we might read the Bible, practice Christian community, and encounter God.

About the author

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A disabled God

Disabilities as divine possibilities

Heike Peckruhn

> *"I just feel like you took the holy out of* God *and dragged it into the mud."*
>
> *"What good is an anxious* God *to me? I'm already anxious enough myself."*

The above statements were made by students in my disability theologies course who were eager to explore images of God. I have taught this material in a variety of settings and find that people come hungry for conversations on potentialities regarding our visions of the divine that can transform communities. In these classes, I have encountered a desire to resist the harmful valorization of normalcy and productivity that shapes our real-life embodied experiences and permeates religious spaces. But this eagerness to learn is sometimes mixed with resistance when disability theologies seem to go too far.

A disabled God

In her groundbreaking work *The Disabled God*, Nancy Eiesland laments that disabled persons in Christian communities are at best accommodated and tolerated and at worst excluded and degraded.[1] Eiesland criticizes the insufficiency of theological articulations in church doctrines and urges Christians to engage with and articulate theologies from disabled embodiment. She challenges communities to go beyond gestures of hospitality and to reorient radically towards justice and inclusion: the problem we face is not simply practical (ramps, microphones, lights) but also appears in theologies that fundamentally exclude and deny justice to disabled persons. Theologies that only emphasize access are based on a paternalistic framework in which "we" welcome "them." What is needed, Eiesland emphatically argues, is disability theologies—liberation theologies

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[1] Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 82–86.

from within the embodied experience of disability, theologies that begin with embodied differences as a normal, unsurprising part of life. These are theologies that conceive of impaired bodies not as a problem but as an *is* in the world, a given context that offers value and gifts to all. Differences in how our bodies, minds, and emotions manifest in the world are fully compatible with how we ought to imagine what is good, holy, and divine.[2]

Differences in how our bodies, minds, and emotions manifest in the world are fully compatible with how we ought to imagine what is good, holy, and divine.

Eiesland proposes that we make experiences of disability central to our theological imagination and take seriously the power of language and metaphor in the construction of our lived experiences. She reexamines the Christian story for openings toward justice for disabled people. She turns to the resurrected Jesus, highlighting that Jesus's wounds remain; the resurrected Christ is therefore a symbol of a God who is disabled. As such, Jesus does not overcome human embodiment but displays redemption in all variations of it. Jesus continues to share the human condition of vulnerability and limitation, scarred but not broken, interdependent and in need of community; thus disability in Jesus also emphasizes that disability does not contradict or take away from the integrity of God.[3]

Eiesland's challenge to re-imagine theology was taken up in important engagements from various disciplines, from biblical studies exploring the range of disabilities in texts and contexts, to practical theologies investigating communal responses and responsibilities.[4] In addition, disability theologies have focused on disentangling the idea that humans are created in the image of God from its ableist permeations and on significantly rethinking what it means to be created and beloved as human.[5] While re-imagining theological anthropologies via disability has been a much

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[2] Eiesland, *Disabled God,* 103–105.

[3] Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 101.

[4] See, for example, in biblical studies, Candida R. Moss and Jeremy Schipper, eds. *Disability Studies and Biblical Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); in practical theology, Erin Raffety, *From Inclusion to Justice: Disability, Ministry, and Congregational Leadership* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2022).

[5] See, for example, Molly C. Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability: Human Being as Mutuality and Response* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012); Hans S.

needed liberative correction, imagining a God who is and remains disabled has not found as much traction in disability theologies. With some exceptions, Eiesland's call to radically re-imagine *God* as disabled has been repeated but not much heeded.[6]

An intellectually or emotionally disabled God

Perhaps some of the hesitation to fully imagine disability in God can be explained via critiques directed at Eiesland, as Lisa D. Powell notes in her recent book *The Disabled God Revisited*. For example, for some theologians, the resurrection narratives portray Jesus's body glorified and transformed (a sort of re-ablement, perhaps), and this complicates locating disability in the divine. Others point to the risk of naturalizing debilitation (disablement caused by violence, personal and structural), arguing that maintaining disability in God could lend itself to justifying oppression and the disabling harm it creates as potentially divinely designed.[7] Yet by far the strongest resistance I have encountered to a disabled God (in students and scholars alike) emerges not when we imagine a physically wounded Jesus who empathizes with our experiences of architectural and social barriers, but rather, when we imagine a cognitive or emotionally impaired Jesus, especially post resurrection. For many, it seems relatively palatable to imagine God's bodily experiences of trauma and impairment via incarnation in Jesus, thus articulating God's desire and ability to suffer-with. But a God with cognitive differences or emotional difficulties appears to be a no-go zone for the theological imagination. When I explore cognitive or emotional differences with my students as metaphor for divine possibility, our conversations often return to framing these kinds of disabilities as loss, deficiency, or lack—ideas difficult to reconcile with the being of

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Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

[6] One such exception emerged in Deaf Liberation Theology that imagines a Deaf God—or, specifically, a God who signs and does not privilege hearing or oralism. See Hannah Lewis, *Deaf Liberation Theology* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Wayne Morris, *Theology without Words: Theology in the Deaf Community* (New York: Routledge, 2016). Deaf communities emphasize Deafness as linguistic and cultural difference (Deaf as culture versus deaf as physical symptom) toward liberatory ends rather than an identity grounded in disablement via denigrated impairment.

[7] Lisa D. Powell, *The Disabled God Revisited: Trinity, Christology, and Liberation* (London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2023), 21–22, 26. Powell succinctly and clearly presents different critiques (especially that of John Swinton) and their salience in her work and offers her own critical constructive proposal.

God. Instead, my students find more comfort in John Swinton's theological exploration of experiences of dementia, in which he constructs a God whose steadfast memory holds our self and personhood even when our minds fail. (Is this an omnicogniscient or hypercognitive God?)[8]

I notice a persistent resistance (or refusal) to flesh out anything other than a God who is removed from disability, enables the overcoming of disability, or was formerly-wounded-but-is-now-beyond-disability, and I wonder if this might be grounded in a deeply embedded linkage between normalcy and potency, especially where cognition is concerned. A desire for a potent and omnipotent image of God is not threatened anymore by any (temporary) earthly experience of physical limits in Jesus or even in the remaining wounds in his glorified body. But a theological construction of God with cognitive or emotional limitations seems too much, too destabilizing of "everything that is holy," and something that could shatter our theologies.

Why are cognition and emotion the areas in which capacity, strength, and autonomy must be preserved in representations of the divine?

To those harboring these fears, I ask, Why can't we go there? Cannot a (disabled) God, in whose image we are made, whose being is relational, vulnerable, and in need of mutually caring relationships—cannot this God experience, embody, and know the world with intellectual or emotional differences and disabilities? Why are cognition and emotion the areas in which capacity, strength, and autonomy must be preserved in representations of the divine? Is it not imaginable—and even more than that, liberating—to construct a God with Down syndrome, an anxious God, or an autistic God? If our response is that we ought not to imagine such a God, lest we shatter the divine image into something less holy or less divine, then I wonder if our resistance is grounded in a deeply held desire for human progression toward competency and saneness—that is, in an ableist imagination of what is beautiful, right, and good. This kind of imagination links mental and emotional competency with productivity and worth, and it links potency with progress, not unlike the ableist imagination that fuels life under capitalism. And this kind of desire for saneness reflects values that make it impossible, even unholy, to see cognitive

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[8] John Swinton, *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God* (London: SCM, 2012).

and emotional differences as anything other than deficit or lack, rather than part of the beautiful kaleidoscope of being in the world.

Disabilities as divine possibilities

One way to get around such issues would be to move further away from an anthropomorphized God (as plenty of theologians have done). But metaphors of a person-like God are still powerful and moving; they are visceral and can make us feel truths, and so we must risk constructing new metaphors that move toward greater inclusion.[9] Perhaps we need to remind ourselves first of what can be gained by seeing the disabled experience in God. Such a commitment demands we look to disabled persons as teachers and interpreters of God and divine action in the world.

In the exquisite book *Loving Our Own Bones*, Julia Watts Belser, a Jewish rabbi, professor, and wheelchair user, writes about reading scriptural passages that describe God on wheels (e.g., Ezekiel 1) and feeling the utter joy of that image.[10] Belser (who lives with a form of multiple sclerosis) finds using wheels freeing and joyful, a powerful and sensual experience of moving through places and sensing vibrations of earth in her body. She explains how her bone-deep knowledge of the interplay of world, body, and emotion illuminates her sense of God's presence and action in the world. Belser notes that if God has wheels, then God knows the disability experience from the inside out—the joys and exhilarating pleasures of disability life and the shape of disabled pain, the frustrations of being excluded, the hurts and anger that emerge from encountering ableism. And perhaps God, too, has an "access problem" in this world and laments structures that deliberately exclude.[11]

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[9] I am leaning here on Sallie McFague's work on metaphors and models in theological language: god metaphors are more personal than doctrine, capture imagination, link to story, and describe relationship. Belief and action are related to credible metaphors that capture our relationships and can move us towards action. Models of God are metaphors with staying power and cannot be prescribed. Speaking of God with metaphors must reflect our knowledge of the world and have an inclusive vision. See Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

[10] Julie Watts Belser, *Loving Our Own Bones: Disability Wisdom and the Spiritual Subversiveness of Knowing Ourselves Whole* (Boston: Beacon, 2023).

[11] Julia Watts Belser, interview, in Jak Soroka and Claire Cunningham, "5.1: Carving a Crip Space," in Guide Gods: Digital Collection, Beautiful Disabilities, podcast audio, 8:55, https://www.clairecunningham.co.uk/guide-gods-digital-collection/beautiful-disabilities/.

Without imagining and speaking of a disabled God, a God who shares and knows *all* disability experiences intimately, we cannot begin to investigate the social and theological structures that impede God's full presence in this world. Contemplating, perhaps even feeling, the presence of a disabled God can confront us with the deliberate choices and casual thoughtlessness we may enact toward disability and with how we often excise God's presence from spaces, theologies, communities, and within ourselves.[12] When we explore the variety of disabilities as divine possibilities, we begin to desire and work toward a future that is interdependent and inclusive. When certain parts of the human experience continue to be unimaginable in the divine, we continue upholding ableist notions of wholeness, goodness, and purpose. If it is destabilizing, threatening, or even blasphemous to speak of God as embodied in cognitively or emotionally disabled experiences, it speaks less to the nature of God and more to who in a community is allowed to represent the divine. In this way, communities of faith can (unwittingly) reinforce debilitating social structures that ostracize, stigmatize, and exclude from dignity those who are cognitively and emotionally different from what is considered acceptably normal. When loss of cognition, emotional imbalances, or neurodivergence cannot be part of the exquisite brilliance of God in the world, ableism remains the pulse of God-talk.

When we explore the variety of disabilities as divine possibilities, we begin to desire and work toward a future that is interdependent and inclusive.

I personally cannot articulate the neurodivergence of God because I am a fairly neurotypical person and cannot speak from this particular human embodiment. But I am interested in learning from neurodivergent folks about needs and wants, limits and joys, pain and determination, suffering and hope, community and an inclusive present and future, obstacles and embodied justice. This is what exploring God's kaleidoscopic presence in the world through the varieties of disability can look like. It is not just wheelchair access and proper safety measures so all can participate in communities according to their desires; it is creating a world in which disabled people can be at home and *teach* and *lead* and *represent the future.*

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[12] Belser, *Loving Our Own Bones*, 234.

It is about creating a world with access to emotional and sensory refuge and developing sensory-friendly gatherings that support neurodivergent people's joyful experiences in community. For people with intellectual disabilities, it is about cognitive access to meaningful conversations and to agency in our communities. Imagining a disabled God means wondering what a Deaf God knows and how a Deaf person encounters God; it means marveling at how an autistic God perceives the world and what she might teach us about the divine in the world; it means pondering the depths of a nonspeaking God and their expressions of love. To imagine a disabled God is to "know the sacred through a thousand disabled languages,"[13] all of which are glimpses of God unfolding in the same way that disability manifests in the world through our bodies, "through your flesh and mine."[14] And to know all those ways of God, we must turn to the many ways people are at home in and as bodies in this world and learn to love ourselves and each other, in all our limits and varying capacities, without desire to change. Imagining the source of life through the kaleidoscope of disability experiences is one way we might move toward this kind of being together.

About the author

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[13] Belser, *Loving Our Own Bones*, 236.

[14] Belser, *Loving Our Own Bones*, 236.

Disability in the new creation and in the here and now

Amy Kenny

I am certainly not the first person to think of God as disabled.[1] Nancy Eiesland, who pioneered disability theology, imagined God in a sip-and-puff wheelchair. After a friend declared that her disability would be removed in heaven, Eiesland was horrified because she felt that would erase a part of who she was and how she understood God. To nondisabled people, this is particularly difficult to understand because of the hypothesis that disability is always bad or a result of the fall, something to be redeemed *from* in the new creation. To imagine God as disabled seems to diminish God's power or presence. "God can't be disabled," they inform me. "That's insulting to the heart of the Creator of the universe," another retorts. What's insulting to God is when we don't consider disabled people image-bearers. Or when we can only imagine paradise by erasing one-quarter of humanity. Or when we don't feed the least of these when it is well within our power to do so.

I am not interested in adding to the will-we-or-won't-we-be-disabled-in-heaven conversation. On some level, it doesn't matter if our heavenly bodies will be disabled or not. No one can know that. It is out of my control and does nothing to restore the way I am treated now. But at the very least, I would like to be able to go to church without listening to folks impose their unexamined theology on me. Without being bombarded with so many "somedays" and "at leasts" and "you'll be running/kick- boxing/flying/fixed/whole/human in heaven." How we think about eschatology influences how we treat people today. We can't simply put eschatology in another box in our brains. If we believe that disabled people are not whole until they cross an enchanted threshold into the afterlife, that will certainly impact the way we engage with them in the here and now. We talk about God's kingdom as the now and not yet: the in-between space that we get glimpses of but are not fully a part of yet. Treating disabled people as image-bearers only once we get to the not yet impacts the now. Let

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[1] Content taken from *My Body Is Not a Prayer Request* by Amy Kenny, ©2022. Used by permission of Brazos Press.

disabled people lead in imagining what new creation could be for us. For some, that's using wheelchairs; for others, it is not. For some, it includes God using ASL. For others, it means seeing. Who's to say it will be the same for all of us? The disability community is a diverse group of various physicalities, mentalities, and beliefs. Learn from us when we tell you how we imagine restoration. Let our imaginations for restoration light the way.

There are those who will counter that I am a beloved child of God, so it doesn't matter what my body looks like or how it functions. This one is well-intentioned, but it fails to understand a key aspect of my identity. I am disabled. I don't say that to garner pity or to overemphasize my disability. I fully recognize that it is not the totality of my identity either. But the truth is, being disabled is a core part of the way I interact with the world and with God. Kind acquaintances often want to justify erasing disability by claiming that it just doesn't matter. "God doesn't see you as disabled," they promise. Why should it matter if we celebrate that there are no more disabled people in heaven, when your core identity is in Christ? Here's why it matters. Imagine if folks cheered for a song that touted "no more brown eyes in heaven." That's a quality that you didn't choose and you can't change. Perhaps some days you don't even *like* your brown eyes. None of us can know if our eye color will endure in a new-creation reality. But a whole crowd chanting, cheering, and celebrating that your eyes won't be brown might feel a bit squidgy. Imagine how you might feel with them belting out, "No more brown-eyed girls, because we'll finally be healed and whole." Guess God isn't a fan of Van Morrison.

> **If we believe that disabled people are not whole until they cross an enchanted threshold into the afterlife, that will certainly impact the way we engage with them in the here and now.**

Folks who want to erase my disability in the name of embracing how God understands me are still erasing my disability. The idea that our bodies don't matter to God is a lovely idea that comes from a warm place with a cozy blanket, but it is not true. To be sure, I am a beloved child of God, but it *does* matter what happens to my body. Our bodies matter. If they didn't, why would Jesus bother with the incarnation? Seems messy to go through all that spit and sweat and suffering if it was *merely* about souls. Jesus could have snapped a finger, Thanos-style, and waved goodbye to the dominions of darkness. It certainly would have been so much cleaner (and less painful) that way.

But Jesus chose to take on a body and enter what it means to be human, even all the snotty bits we blush about. The Word became flesh, and we try to turn it back into words again. Our theology is incarnational because bodies matter. To say that it doesn't matter if I am disabled is to dismiss the incarnation. Maybe if we started acknowledging that, we wouldn't treat prayer like a genie granting wishes. Maybe then we could acknowledge someone else's pain without quickly changing the subject. Maybe then we could stop blaming disabled bodies on the fall. Maybe then we would understand that all of us—disabled and nondisabled people—are made in the image of God.

It isn't about whether disabilities exist in new creation. They exist now.

It isn't about whether disabilities exist in new creation. They exist now. If you can't imagine a restored world without getting rid of 25 percent of the people in this country and 15 percent of people globally, there is something askew with the imagination. It is simply too small for our big God. Whether we have brown eyes or wheelchairs in new creation, we shouldn't celebrate the erasure of those traits here and now. Most people don't even realize they are doing this. They have conflated disability with suffering and assume it's best to erase both. The issue is, not all disabled people suffer from their disabilities. Not all disabled people want those disabilities changed. But *all* of us suffer from ableist assumptions about people's bodies. All of us suffer from limited imaginations that confine God's creation to replicating Barbie doll versions of humanity.

What if wheelchairs became like glasses? Glasses are correctives, to be sure. We know they act as ocular prosthetics to assist folks to see more crisply. Yet I have never learned of anyone with glasses targeted for curative prayers or shaming calls to repentance. Glasses are a fashion statement, so specifically tailored to someone's aesthetic that some don specs just to look geek chic. Cat eye, aviator, shield, rimless, tortoiseshell; the shapes and styles are boundless. What if we did the same for mobility devices? Instead of stigmatizing wheelchairs, scooters, and canes, what if we celebrated them as fashion statements for disabled folks?

Mobility devices should be functional and effective, but that has never prevented us from designing beautiful, quirky glasses. My cane is royal blue, but what if it were molded to look like Wonder Woman's magical sword? Seriously, can someone make this for me? What if my scooter had fiery images inside the wheels to create a flip-book effect when I'm zipping down the pavement?

My wheels liberate me and allow me to operate in tandem with my scooter, Diana. Her tires grip the pavement, absorbing the shock waves that my legs would otherwise have to endure. I lean into her slightly as we curve around a corner, like water gently caressing the riverbank as it flows. I feel the texture of the earth, the rhythm of the cement. I hear the symphony of vibrations as we drift from concrete to cobblestone. My physicality does not stop at the tip of my toes or the crown of my head; it extends to the frame of my cobalt chair, able to transport me to new worlds. Just as in Ezekiel's vision, I am fused with these wheels that are my ticket to freedom. I am body, wheels, and fire.

If only people could imagine my wheels in the way they do glasses. My nieces and nephew certainly do. To their vibrant minds, my scooter makes me cool. They don't interpret anything about my mobility devices as tragic, which shows the impact of the kill-or-cure narratives we construct around disability. They think it's exciting that I get to zip around. Perhaps if we recovered this childlike faith of witnessing the beauty in all bodies, we could sing about new creation in a way that included all of us. I do not know if I will be disabled in new creation, but I know there won't be pain, and it's painful for people to celebrate erasing part of me. Maybe what needs healing isn't my body, but society. Maybe people will come to appreciate that disability is not a sad form but a cultural identity with its own wealth of lessons, just like my nephew and nieces do.

Maybe what will be healed is ableism.

About the author

Amy Kenny is a disabled scholar whose writing on disability has been featured in *Teen Vogue*, *Sojourners*, *Shondaland*, *Reader's Digest*, and *Huff Post*. Her award-winning book *My Body Is Not a Prayer Request* (Brazos, 2022) mixes humor, personal narrative, and theology to invite faith communities to rethink their unintentional ableism and learn from the embodied wisdom of disabled people.

Unlearning ableism in worship

Rebecca F. Spurrier

In this article I share some of the ways I am being shaped by and with disabled Christians as part of a multi-year project to create a new worship resource. As I chart our process in creating this prayer book, I offer a possible roadmap for those seeking to engage in anti-ableist collaboration and partnership within faith communities.

Encountering the disabled God

The God whom I first encountered in worship—through sermons, through hymns and songs, through confessions and prayers of intercession—was a God who chose to be with God's people by seeing and hearing them. God's seeing and hearing was both comfort and judgement, for God saw and heard what others did not. Moreover, this God called humans to be like God by opening their eyes and ears. God transformed those who were "blind" to divine activity in the world and "deaf" to the cries of those around them. Divine power and compassion were most evident when disability, literally or metaphorically, was healed or erased.

It wasn't until I began to learn from disability communities and scholars that I came to name and know God differently: in the disabled God present as the risen Christ, returned to his disciples with his body altered and marked by his crucifixion and resurrection.[1] This God, known in part through consensual touch, invited his beloved friends into new forms of embodied knowledge. Through attending to the witness of disabled Christians and to hidden histories,[2] this God appeared to me elsewhere: as one who chooses to move through the world on wheels in Ezekiel or to speak through the disabled voice of Moses and his interpreter Aaron.[3] This is a God who both chooses to access creation through created bodies and provides access for God's people when they ask.

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[1] Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 98–105.

[2] Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 66–67, 98.

[3] Note, for example, Julia Watts Belser, *Loving Our Own Bones: Disability Wisdom and the Spiritual Subversiveness of Knowing Ourselves Whole* (Boston: Beacon, 2023), 73–92, 214–37.

In *The Disabled God*, disability theologian Nancy Eiesland argues that "body practices of inclusion" require (1) acknowledgement of and accountability for harm; (2) centering the experiences of people with disabilities; (3) transformation of theological symbols and norms, such as our names for and images of God; and (4) political action toward liberation for all who experience oppression.[4] Inclusion efforts in congregations often focus on non-disabled Christians providing hospitality or accommodations for disabled people within ministry. Eiesland emphasizes instead that to repent of ableism and foster flourishing for disabled Christians means asking hard questions about ideals for God, for individual bodies and capacities, and for the social and political communities that shape relationships.

Anti-ableist Christian worship

As someone who oversees an ecumenical chapel space in a Christian seminary, I interrogate these ideals regularly in communal spiritual and religious practices. When I examine the practices for which I bear responsibility, I am convicted of the persistent harms that occur not only through lack of access to worship space and time but also through prayers, songs, and sermons that do not take seriously the lived experiences of disabled people. Ableist interpretations of sacred texts and use of disability metaphors perpetuate tragic or inspirational understandings of disability. These harms also occur through instructions that do not anticipate the full range of human embodiment and that do not anticipate disabled people as members of and leaders in our faith communities. Yet making changes that reflect my accountability for this knowledge can be hard. They cause me to ask questions like these: What kinds of changes are helpful while still respecting the communal nature of faith traditions over time as well as the challenge of altering faith practices that connect us to prior generations? How can those of us who lead worship and prayer not simply erase harmful language about disability but center those of us who are disabled and our lived experiences of disability?

As a partial response to these questions, I have been working alongside others to create an anti-ableist resource for Christian worship that demonstrates liberative commitments to those of us in the disability community and that prioritizes the experience of disability as a vital part of faith communities. Inspired by several creative liturgical resources that

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[4] Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 70, 86–87, 90–98.

have emerged from and with minoritized communities, our collaborative team has created prayers and patterns for worship and devotion that engage wisdom from, with, and for the disability community.

As a group of scholars and pastors with and without disabilities, we began by investigating our own rituals: prayer books, hymnody, customs of extemporaneous worship, and other liturgical sources in order to identify places of harm and to develop a set of prayers, practices, and questions to guide us. This work looked different for each of us, for we have been shaped by different denominations and traditions. For some of us this included identifying prayers used during seasons of Advent and Lent that use negative metaphors or interpretations of disability. For others, this work meant examining instructions and prayers for Christian rituals of communion and baptism that have implications not only for who can participate but also for what it means to know and belong to one another. Still others in our group reflected on approaches to teaching and preaching and what kinds of topics and experiences are emphasized or ignored in these practices.

By inviting the divine spirit of creativity to move through a group of diverse people, we invested time in new ways of praying and understanding God and one another.

After exploring familiar prayers and rituals with attention to the kinds of language that perpetuate injustice and to the kinds of experiences the material was missing, we engaged with disability theologies, liberative approaches to worship, and sacred texts as conversation partners to inform and challenge us. These collaborative conversations were not only a means to creating the resource; they were also a spiritual practice. By inviting the divine spirit of creativity to move through a group of diverse people, we invested time in new ways of praying and understanding God and one another. For me, this collaboration was a practice of spiritual formation, one that expanded my experience of the divine in me and through my co-creators.

In addition to engaging the lived experiences of our writing team in conversation with disability studies and theologies, we also conducted twenty-five in-depth interviews with disabled Christians. We asked about experiences of disconnection and connection in worship, about names and images of God, about meaningful and troubled relationships with scripture, and about communion, baptism, and other services. Bearing witness to the sacred stories that were shared, we sought to incorporate both common themes and unique experiences into prayers, instructions, and worship elements. For example, those we interviewed identified how meaningful both music and communion were to them and yet also signaled significant barriers, both theological and practical, to their participation. We took seriously both the joy and concern of these testimonies as we crafted a section on hymns and songs and another one on communion. Interviewees also identified a wide range of scriptural texts that they both relished and struggled with in their relationships with God and others. We included a number of these texts with strategies for praying and preaching them without succumbing to the temptation of ableist hermeneutics. Paying attention to the stories of our research participants helped us create prayers and practices to support anti-ableist worship.

The problem of inclusion

Even with our careful dialogical, qualitative, and textual work, we still had work to do. The first time I presented on some of this research, I received constructive concern from a disabled co-panelist. She respectfully pointed out that the focus of this gathering was not centered enough on the needs of disabled people in the audience; instead, we were most ostensibly focused on the reformation of non-disabled people from ableists to non-ableists. As a person attempting to integrate what I had learned from over a decade of education and spiritual formation with and through disability communities, I was deeply troubled by this analysis of the event.

Alongside other collaborators on this project, I reconsidered my own collusion with liturgical experiments that participate in what disability scholar Erin Raffety, among others, has identified as the "problem of inclusion." In her analysis of liturgical experiments intended to include disabled Christians in corporate worship, Raffety investigates practices of formation that purportedly center disability by making accommodations to existing liturgical patterns. While such patterns seemingly chart new routes for collective worship, they often require disabled worshippers to comply with norms, structures, and centers of power that perpetuate an understanding of people with disabilities as problems to solve rather than as participants who themselves nurture, shelter, and guide communities. Through interviews and critical reflection on projects that seek to create shared spaces for those who have experienced exclusion, Raffety critiques ministry experiments that "focus on integration but maintain the structures of power" because they "will always maintain the conditions for oppression."[5] In such models of inclusion, even the construction of shared spaces or communal paths for consensual worship reinforce particular normative structures that benefit some of us more than others in their distribution of energy, imagination, and resources.

And so, in the most recent versions of our liturgical resource project, we begin not with a focus on resources to support change in predominately non-disabled communities, even as we intend these resources to also contribute to more liberative conditions for worship for disabled Christians. Instead, we begin with a section on devotional prayer and communal action that was created by and for disabled Christians to lament and protest experiences of ableism and to affirm God's presence in these situations. In the interviews our research team did, disabled worshippers frequently asserted the importance of their own encounters with the disabled God, as one who was with people with disabilities. The disabled God is God with me, God with us, they insisted. And by *us*, they meant those who had abided with and shared in particular, diverse experiences of disability with God, knowing from God's perspective the divine experience of living in a disabled body. This was a God they had come to know through participating in community with other people with disabilities and through disabled authors like Eiesland. For many, Eiesland's text formed them in a love for themselves that was counter to the formation they had received in many Christian worshipping communities.

We begin with a section on devotional prayer and communal action that was created by and for disabled Christians to lament and protest experiences of ableism and to affirm God's presence in these situations.

Affirming the disabled God, who chooses to be with disabled Christians even when congregations do not, some of our writing team crafted prayers that center their lived experiences of disability and their knowledge gained through a group of disabled Christians with whom they regularly met to discuss theology. These prayers primarily focus on the devotional needs of others in the disability community, such as a prayer to be used before going to a new doctor, a reflection on being let down by friends, a prayer when encountering microaggressions, and a blessing for

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[5] Erin Raffety, *From Inclusion to Justice: Disability, Ministry, and Congregational Leadership* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2022), 142.

travel through airports or before a difficult holiday.[6] While these writers affirm the need for anti-ableist liturgical work, seeking repentance and conversion among non-disabled worshippers, they also resist recentering the spiritual needs of some worshippers, even the needs of those worshippers to engage in more liberatory and less harmful practices.

Centering disability in worship

Our work has led us to reflection questions like these: What does it mean for faith communities to center disability wisdom, experience, and leadership in the planning and design of worship and prayer? How does centering disability in worship and ritual transform the prayer and spiritual practices of faith communities? Here are some ways I now answer these questions as a non-disabled worship leader, even as those with whom I collaborate continue to teach and shape me.

First, centering means continually evaluating who benefits most from continuity or changes in worship, whether in language, space, time, or gesture. This involves what some of those we interviewed described as practicing a culture of feedback so that those participating in liberative change can learn from those most impacted by changes. In my experience, such evaluation often means distinguishing the preferences of some who are used to having worship that centers their experiences from the access needs of others whose needs are often considered peripheral to worship planning and leadership.

Second, disability centering means considering how I am actively supporting disabled clergy, worship leaders, and lay leaders. As one of those who contributed to our project insisted:

> *Not just able-bodied people but also people with disabilities. So how are disabled people in your congregations using their gifts? What good work are they doing? And maybe not even in your congregation, but how are they using the gifts in their–in the rest of their life? And are you recognizing their contributions as a good work prepared in advance by God to do? Or are you getting in their way and being a barrier to them doing the good work that God has prepared for them to do?*

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[6] I am especially grateful to Rev. Allison Connelly-Vetter and to Rev. Bekah Maren Anderson, who is also the co-editor of this forthcoming worship source book, for their wisdom and creativity in this important work.

And as another put it: “It really would be important to have more pastors with disabilities (and other faith leaders) in a way that frees them to reshape things.”

Third, I have learned from disabled leaders that such centering entails thinking more creatively, flexibly, and expansively about worship and about the ways worshippers might engage in and lead different actions simultaneously, embracing many ways to pray in worship rather than expecting everyone to participate in worship in the same ways. Some of us can stand and some of us can sit to sing a hymn, not as an exception to standing as a norm but as manifold response to the Spirit, who is present in a multiplicity of responses to God. Some of us can sit quietly at attention, and some of us can rock, stim, vocalize, move around, and leave the room as necessary. Some of us can rely on explicit oral instructions about how to participate in worship, and others can have that information printed in large print font in a bulletin. Such differences may entail conflict: Someone’s need to move interferes with someone else’s need for quiet; someone’s need for kinesthetic participation is at odds with another’s need for low sensory spaces. And yet, these kinds of conflicts too are part of imagining together what it means to worship in ways that prioritize the belovedness of each one to the God whom we worship. These tensions and possibilities help me to engage in deeper discernment with my neighbors in worship and to look to the creative power of the Spirit to make such manifold practices of access possible.

> **I have learned from those of us in disability communities to emphasize consent in worship and in projects that involve disability and worship.**

Finally, I have learned from those of us in disability communities to emphasize consent in worship and in projects that involve disability and worship. Because some of us have often been subject to coercive practices of prayer, healing, pity, inspiration, inclusion, and erasure, I continue to learn how to emphasize and practice consent at every move. This consent also involves considering experiences of disability along intersections of other experiences of minoritization: racial and gender identity, sexuality, citizenship status, and the many other identities that inform disabled Christians’ complex and varied experiences of worship.

Conclusion

Centering disability in worship and practicing anti-ableism invites me to turn and return to the God who continues to self-reveal through an "insurrection of subjugated knowledges." I follow new names for and understandings of God into "the worlds they open"[7] and witness what kinds of flourishing together may be possible within these new landscapes for prayer and worship, personal devotion, and political action. I proactively seek not only my own flourishing in these spaces but also the flourishing of others. This love for my neighbor in worship matters to me because it matters to the disabled God to whom I pray.

About the author

Rebecca F. Spurrier is associate dean for worship life and assistant professor of worship at Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia. She is the author of *The Disabled Church: Human Difference and the Art of Communal Worship* (Fordham University Press, 2019).

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[7] Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 105.

From acceptance to belonging

Living into Anabaptist community values

Emily Hunsbaker

Unintentional ableism

Growing up in the Great Lakes farming region of the Midwest, I was raised to believe in the power of community: a group of people who gather routinely, learn from each other, and aid each other in times of crisis. The Mennonite church I attended was heralded as a prototypical faith community, and my parents taught me to be a member in good standing by working hard and serving wholeheartedly, even when doing so inconvenienced their time or bodies. My mom served as the church janitor and taught children's Sunday School each week, and my father served as a trustee, caring for maintenance and leading the church in the direction he thought it should go. My parents were valued members of the church community, and I drew a correlation between their acts of service and that value.

Unfortunately, this correlation meant that I also learned that a person's standing as a valued community member was determined by what they offered the community, despite their own limitations. My mother pushed through the daily pain of an undiagnosed chronic illness to clean the church. My father cared for maintenance projects at the church in addition to his jobs as a crop farmer and a semi-truck driver while experiencing chronic pain and a disability due to an amputated leg. Through watching my parents, I learned, both implicitly and explicitly, that to be a good, Midwestern Mennonite meant rising with the sun, working past exhaustion, and inconveniencing yourself to serve others. A person had value in the community when their body could work, and the more the body worked, the more valuable they were.

An unintended consequence of valuing community members for their able minds and bodies is that those whose bodies and minds work differently are valued less. Those whose bodies don't function well, or whose minds can't keep up, are shuffled to the margins of the community. People using wheelchairs only fit in the back of the sanctuary, and those with cognitive disabilities or dementia aren't asked to teach Sunday School. Community members may feel they must hide their differences or slowing bodies, lest they also be pushed to the margins of the community.

The Mennonite church I grew up in reflected this ableist mentality: farmers who hid their aches and pain, ignored their illnesses, and pushed themselves beyond their limits; elderly people who refused hearing aids; parents who harshly punished their neurodivergent children; and a youth group that was mainly made up of athletes. There was no room for an atypical body or mind. To fully belong to the community, you had to navigate and conquer the many barriers the ableist culture constructed. Otherwise, your existence was tolerated and accepted, but you didn't fully belong.

When, as an adult, I began to experience the disabling effects of anxiety, depression, and a chronic illness, my understanding of community membership had to change. I could no longer prove my worth to the congregation by volunteering to do yard work, make meals, or set up for events. I needed to carefully plan my energy expenditures to ensure my body continued to function. Nor could I maintain my (imagined) status as a top-tier member by leading worship, teaching Sunday School, or heading up youth group. Getting in my car to drive to church became a massive undertaking due to my mental health. Whereas I once assumed that I belonged to my congregation because I had a lot to offer physically and mentally, I was left with a body and mind that I viewed as subpar. This made me wonder whether I was still a valued member of the community, capable of giving and receiving—whether I still belonged or would merely be tolerated and accepted, now that my disabilities were limiting my offerings.

Accessibility and accommodations

My work with Anabaptist Disabilities Network provided an avenue to redefine my understanding of Anabaptist faith communities within the context of disability and mental illness. I saw how God speaks to and through everyone in the community, everyone has a valuable gift to offer the community, and everyone belongs in the community just as they are. Living out these values requires attention to the needs of disabled people and intention to make changes to engage them fully in the community. Nurturing a community that is physically and attitudinally accessible to people with disabilities and mental illness allows for a more beautiful and enriched community, one in which everyone is invited to be their whole selves without hiding the parts of themselves that don't fit society's idea of normal. Below I discuss concrete ways congregations can live into these values, providing accessible spaces and creating places of true belonging for all people.

The first item typically considered when speaking about disability and the congregation is the physical church building: Can a person with a wheelchair or other mobility aid (scooter, cane, crutches, etc.) enjoy full access to the church? My original faith community included many elderly people and a man who used a wheelchair to access the world. Entering the church building with physical limitations was difficult: opening the doors required significant upper body strength. Additionally, the sanctuary podium was only accessible via stairs. Though this congregation claimed that God could speak to the community through anyone, the lack of accessibility reflected a different truth: that God speaks to the community only through those whose bodies work the way society deems "normal."

God speaks to and through everyone in the community, everyone has a valuable gift to offer the community, and everyone belongs in the community just as they are.

When a person with a mobility aid cannot enter the church building, they receive the message that the community is mainly for able-bodied people, but they're allowed to enter *if* someone else invites them in. Their membership in the faith community is contingent on others choosing to allow them access. When a person with a mobility aid cannot access the leadership area in the sanctuary, they receive the message that their insights are less valued than those of their able-bodied peers; God does not speak to the church body through them because of the state of their physical bodies. Modifying the church building to be physically accessible to all people proclaims that access to the community and to God is for everyone, regardless of the way a body functions.

Physical accessibility is merely one step in nurturing communities that everyone can access. Accommodations must also be made for hidden disabilities, such as hearing loss, intellectual disabilities, and neurodivergence (those with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, autism, or other mental illnesses). In the congregation of my childhood, microphones were optional when addressing the congregation, excluding those with hearing loss from the conversation. In response to judgmental looks from others, parents harshly shushed their children who struggled to sit quietly, with the result that children and adults with neurodivergence and intellectual disabilities stopped attending Sunday morning worship altogether. Considerations were not made for adults who struggled to read litanies, follow a long sermon, or refrain from outbursts, and as a result these people and their caregivers withdrew from the faith community. The lack of consideration for people with invisible disabilities in the worship service excluded them from partaking in the community, limiting their ability to receive the gifts of others and to offer gifts of their own.

Sometimes, accommodations for hidden disabilities can be provided easily but require education and an attitudinal shift. Assistive Listening Devices can feed sound from a microphone directly into someone's hearing aids, though congregants must remember to use the microphone, and staff or volunteers must ensure the devices remain functioning.

> **Sometimes, accommodations for hidden disabilities can be provided easily but require education and an attitudinal shift.**

At other times, accessibility might require a bit more creativity and a change in behavior from more people. For someone with hearing loss to participate in a Sunday School class discussion, the whole class may need reminders to speak slowly, one at a time, and to show their lips when talking. These simple acts invite full participation by the person with hearing loss who can now understand what is being said and offer their own perspective on the conversation.

Creating spaces in which people with intellectual disabilities or neurodivergence can participate fully in the community demands even more creativity and flexibility, as the structure of the typical white Midwestern Mennonite Sunday morning service includes many barriers for them to receive the gifts of the community and to contribute their own gifts in return. Within worship, embodied prayers and dramatic reenactments of Bible stories, as opposed to long spoken prayers and a reciting of Scripture, engage parts of the brain that allow people with varying cognitive abilities to find meaning in the rituals. Creating spaces for movement along one side of the sanctuary and offering ways to direct excess energy (coloring pages, fidget tools, or origami) gives neurodivergent people the permission to stay in the worship space when they get restless or anxious, rather than leaving the communal space when they are not able to sit still like the rest of the congregation. A sensory room (or quiet room) with low-lighting, sensory aids, and fidget tools can offer spaces for people to go when they need a sensory break, allowing them to return to the sanctuary or fellowship area when they are ready to re-engage, instead of leaving the church building altogether.

An adult Sunday School class in which participants are invited to participate in tangible ways—recreating Bible stories out of LEGO blocks or Play-Doh, knotting comforters for an Anabaptist nonprofit, singing well-loved hymns and sharing memories elicited from those hymns, and so on—provides spaces for adults with dementia and intellectual disabilities to engage with biblical concepts, connect with their peers, and offer their gifts of service to the broader community. While an academic book study or heady theological conversation is a barrier to full participation by someone with an intellectual disability, embodied practices and service offer adults of all ages and abilities a way to build relationships and learn from each other.

Each of these suggested changes welcome disabled people into the faith community as they are, without demanding they change to be included. By accommodating the needs of people with disabilities and mental illness, faith communities live into the belief that access to God is for everyone, regardless of abilities. When everyone can understand the content of a worship service or Sunday School class, they can participate fully, offering their own perspectives to the church body. God speaks to the community through everyone. Everyone's participation in the body is valuable.

From acceptance to belonging

Nurturing spaces of belonging for people with disabilities and mental illness invites nondisabled members of the community to relax into their own ailments and limitations. The congregation I currently attend is comprised of people with varying abilities and disabilities: able-bodied farmers and teachers; elderly folks beginning to experience hearing loss, memory loss, and limited mobility; young adults with autism, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), and anxiety; high school students with mental illness, trauma, and physical disabilities.

While some attendees serve by helping with building renovations or leading worship, others serve by playing board games once a month or making cookies for the youth group. By drawing on the gifts of everyone in the community, those with limited energy need not stretch themselves thin, and the church body benefits from multiple perspectives and experiences in leadership positions. Those of us with disabilities and mental illness do not feel the need to hide; we are treated as valued members of the church body, and our needs and experiences are considered when planning programs, renovations, and services.

When I am experiencing a flare-up from my chronic and mental illnesses, I interpret the care I receive as a mark of belonging to the community, a way for others to offer their gifts in care for me, just as I offer my gifts in care for them. When disabled people can physically access the faith community's gathering areas *and* understand the content being shared, we are accepted into the community. When our needs are met with joy rather than resentment, we are included. When we are then able to share our own insights and receive the insights of others, we belong.

About the author

Emily Hunsbaker serves as communications director for Anabaptist Disabilities Network in Elkhart, Indiana.

Accessible love

An interview with Darla Schumm

Editor's note: Darla Schumm is professor of religious studies and associate provost for curriculum and faculty engagement at Hollins University in Roanoke, Virginia. She is the co-editor, with Michael Stoltzfus, of four books, including *Disability in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (2011) and *Disability and World Religions: An Introduction* (2016). In September 2024, *Vision* co-editor Jackie Wyse-Rhodes sat down with Schumm to discuss her current work on intersections between religious studies and disability studies. At the time of the interview, Schumm had just finished a book manuscript, tentatively titled *Healing Ableism: Stories about Disability and Religious Life*, that explores the experiences of people who are disabled in their religious communities.

Vision: Tell us about your work, your research interests, and your academic journey.

Darla Schumm (DS): I'm starting my twenty-fourth year working at Hollins University. For the first twenty years, I taught religious studies. Now I am the associate provost for curriculum and faculty engagement.

I am a Goshen College graduate, where I focused on psychology, history, and women's studies. A couple of years after college, I went to Berkeley and did a master's degree in social ethics at the Pacific School of Religion. Later I did a PhD in religion, ethics, and society at Vanderbilt University. And that's where I met my husband, who is an Episcopal priest. I identify as a Mennonite Episcopalian (whatever that is!).

I describe myself as functionally blind. I have a guide dog. I can see a little bit but not enough to get around without some type of mobility aid. Disability studies, as you probably know, is a relatively new field. Toward the end of my time at Vanderbilt, I happened upon a book called *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*, by Nancy Eiesland, and I started thinking a little more deeply about the intersections between religion, disability, and my own experience. That book introduced me to the idea that disability could be a site for theoretical as well as theological exploration. I discovered feminism in college, and so I was already familiar with, and a champion of, theorizing from personal experience. But I had never thought about it through the lens of disability and from my personal experience before reading Eiesland's book.

In graduate school, I co-authored a paper with a friend of mine, Dr. Jennifer Koosed, exploring the use of the metaphor of blindness in the Gospel of John. That was my first publication in religion and disability. We went on to publish three more journal articles together over the course of the next twenty years. I also started co-writing with another Mennonite scholar, Michael Stoltzfus. We published a couple of articles on religion and disability and then planned to do an edited collection, but we got so many submissions that we ended up publishing two books. At that point, in the early 2000s, the Bible and disability was a growing field, and there were a number of texts written about Christian theology and disability, but Mike and I edited the first books specifically on world religions and disability.

It is not disability that needs healing; it is ableism that needs healing.

About ten years ago, I decided to do a project interviewing people with disabilities about their experiences in religious communities and organizations. Originally, I framed it as an academic monograph. Simultaneous to the COVID-19 pandemic, I started getting involved in more public facing scholarship. I finally realized that the book I wanted to write was not an academic monograph but a book written for a general audience. A year ago, I pivoted the project, pounded out a new book proposal, and found a new publisher. I sent my manuscript off two days ago.

Vision: What does this new version of the book look like?

DS: The working title is *Healing Ableism: Stories about Disability and Religious Life*. The book is a blend of reflection on my experience living with disability and other disabled people's experiences, and I'm putting all of it into conversation with some theoretical concepts from critical disability studies. I am trying to present an honest overview of the experiences of people who are disabled in their religious communities.

Experiences are mixed, but they are often hard, ableist, exclusionary, and inaccessible. My overarching argument is that it is not disability that needs healing; it is ableism that needs healing. The message that most of us with disabilities hear from most of our religious communities is that we need to be healed. I'm pushing back against that and trying to say that disability is one form of human variation—and often a celebrated one. That was what I heard from other people with disabilities.

I wrote one chapter in which I introduce the idea of the misfit as a positive and capacious image of disability. In another chapter, I challenge the definition of normalcy that a lot of religious communities hold. The book also addresses how a lot of religious ritual is embodied in a way that keeps people with disabilities from being full participants in the ritual and, therefore, from being full participants in the religious community. I also explore time and the future—particularly the notion of the afterlife—through a disability lens. And in the last chapter, I home in on the idea of "accessible love" as one way religious communities can engage in the work of healing ableism. In no way do I believe that religious communities perpetuate ableism intentionally or maliciously. But it's happening, and we have to deal with it.

Vision: Who do you hope reads your book?

DS: The people who are going to be the most interested will be those who have some kind of connection to religious community. But I have discovered that I'm writing a critique that could be applied to all kinds of institutions. For example, many of the things I talk about in the book also apply to higher education.

I hope people with disabilities will read the book and discover that they are not alone, if they don't already know that. But it is also geared for the able-bodied world and for religious leaders, practitioners, and congregants. My hope is that people who don't necessarily identify as religious would also pick it up and apply it to their workplace or organization.

Vision: You began doing more public-facing scholarship during the COVID-19 pandemic. Now that we are four years in, what impact do you think this pandemic continues to have on people with disabilities?

DS: I wrote a piece at the beginning of the pandemic called "The New Normal?" In that piece, I talked about how this "new normal" that everybody was freaking out about—feeling vulnerable about their health and not being able to move through the world in the ways that they were accustomed to or wanted to—this was "same old, same old" for a lot of people with disabilities. It always bears noting that disability is an incredibly large category, and it is not a monolithic group. We have to talk about disabilities as opposed to disability. If we think about "disability" as both a physical impairment and the social and cultural conditions around us, we can see how things like COVID impact people with disabilities differently. A lot of people with disabilities are also immunocompromised. I have disabled friends who are still totally isolating. For them, it's not about choice; it's about survival.

At the height of the pandemic, when medical resources and hospital beds were limited, there was quite a bit being written about the allocation of resources and deciding who to prioritize when you have limited resources. Do you prioritize a ten-year-old child or a ninety-year-old adult? Do you prioritize someone who's healthy and probably going to recover fully if treated or someone whose health is fragile? These are complicated questions.

Vision: When religious leaders read your book, what do you hope they prioritize in the work for disability, justice, and access in their own congregations and communities?

DS: I want them to prioritize accessible love. I certainly also want them to prioritize access and inclusion, but what is tricky is that access and inclusion involve much more than accessible bathrooms or braille worship leaflets or ASL interpreters. I want religious communities to have all those things, but what I heard repeatedly in my interviews is that when a community has those things, often they think their work is done. It is usually much harder to figure out how communities can practice access and inclusion in such a way that people with disabilities feel as though they belong, not just that they are tolerated.

Accessible love is not a formula. It is about communities figuring out what access, inclusion, and belonging mean in their context and seeing those things as justice issues.

A lot of congregations have pew cut outs for wheelchairs, but often they are located at the back of the church. What that communicates is that we have a place for you, but you're on the periphery—literally in the back. If a few cut outs were in the second row or even in the middle, that alone would symbolize that somebody using a wheelchair is in the center of our community. That is seemingly a small thing, but it's a significant shift.

In the book I also talk a lot about sacred texts and the messages they communicate. If you look at the Christian Gospels, any time Jesus encounters a person with a disability, he heals them. They are only ever welcome into the community once they have been healed. It's problematic. From a pastor's point of view, it raises the question of how to address these texts in an inclusive way when they show up in the lectionary.

A common slogan in disability activist communities is this: "Nothing about us without us." I want communities to include people with disabilities in the conversations about access and inclusion. There is always a balance. In anti-racism work it is not incumbent on people of color to come into a space and help white people fix their racism. This is also true for people with disabilities. At the same time, it is also annoying when able-bodied people decide what's best for us. One of my favorite things to say is that two things can be true at the same time. It can be true that I want able-bodied people to seriously do the work of undoing their ableism *and* that I want them to talk to people with disabilities about what that looks like.

Accessible love is not a formula. It is about communities figuring out what access, inclusion, and belonging mean in their context and seeing those things as justice issues. Hopefully, communities ask these questions for any non-normative body that enters the space. How do we build a community that helps people feel that they are welcome and wanted and that they belong?

Creator of every body

A prayer

Erica Lea-Simka

Oh, Creator of every body in all our glorious diversity,

We thank you that we are each and all wonderfully made. Forgive us when we forget that we each and all have a seat at your abundant welcome table. Move us from ignorance to sensitivity, from judgment to humility, from fear to fellowship—ever deepened by remembering that we are all already one in your love.

May we know deep in our being that you call each of us your beloved as we are made in your image. Remind us that we are most whole as Christ's body when we are unified in the sacred calling of faithful discipleship. Open our minds and hearts to serve and to be served by our siblings in faith, especially those who live with all types of disabilities.

May the Holy Spirit transform us so that we more clearly recognize your presence in each other as we experience your presence at work within ourselves. Give us wisdom as we deepen our commitment to solidarity with all struggles, remembering that all justice is intertwined. Strengthen our bodies to be of service as part of the Body of Christ that is made of many bodies.

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.[1]

About the author

Erica Lea-Simka is a Christian minister with over ten years of experience serving as a missionary and pastor. She has served primarily Baptist congregations in Wyoming, Texas, North Carolina, and Washington, DC. She currently serves as pastor of Albuquerque Mennonite Church in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

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[1] This prayer was originally published on the Mennonite Church USA's webpage Welcoming EveryBODY, https://www.mennoniteusa.org/ministry/peacebuilding/learn-pray-join/welcoming-everybody/. See this webpage for more resources on accessibility and disability inclusion.

Job and disability theology

A lens for examining communal blame

Leah Thomas

The book of Job has resulted in much discourse around suffering and disability. Among the many approaches to the investigation of the figure of Job, René Girard proposes that Job functions as a scapegoat for his community, albeit a "failed" one.[1] Yet Girard spends little time examining the role of Job's physicality in the community's decision to scapegoat him. I propose that, considering the role of the body in the Ancient Near East, Job's bodily suffering and disability have been overlooked in the theory of Girard. Greater attention to the role of the body would confirm Job as the ideal scapegoat candidate. This missing component of Girard's theory not only strengthens his case but also directly connects to the work of scholars who have focused on disability studies and disability theology, such as Nancy Eiesland and Sharon Betcher.[2] Indeed, Girard's scapegoat mechanism in conversation with disability theorists functions as a lens through which we can recognize the scapegoating of disabled people in contemporary society.

Job as disabled

In his book *Job: The Victim of His People*, Girard proposes that Job is the scapegoat of his community. He uses Job's fall from power, the mimetic desire of his friends, the community's attitude towards his guilt, and his lack of family to speak on his behalf to confirm that Job is the ideal candidate to become a scapegoat.[3] Yet, while Girard admits elsewhere that "sickness, madness, genetic deformities, accidental injuries, and even disabilities in general tend to polarize persecutors," he does not draw on this

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[1] René Girard, *Job: The Victim of His People*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987).

[2] See Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994); Sharon Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007).

[3] I discuss "mimetic desire" later in this essay, notably under the section "Job as scapegoat."

insight in his theory of Job as scapegoat.[4] Exploring the role of Job's bodily disfigurement in his scapegoating thus requires examining the position of the body in the Ancient Near East.

For ancient Israel, the ideal body was the whole body, and those Israelites without "whole bodies" were placed in a separate category, subject to restrictions as outlined in biblical purity law. A whole body was defined as one that contained all parts and functions and had no open sores. For Israelites, a whole body was more than the prerequisite for social interactions but was also a symbol for the society itself.[5] Ritual purity laws ensured that the social order was maintained. When these laws were not followed, dirt or pollution (including excretions or mutilations of the body) threatened both the individual body and the social order.

A closer examination of the specific bodily suffering that befell Job reveals that his suffering would have placed him outside the concept of bodily wholeness.

A closer examination of the specific bodily suffering that befell Job reveals that his suffering, indeed, would have placed him outside the concept of bodily wholeness. The Accuser inflicts "loathsome sores" all over Job's body (2:7), Job mourns that his skin is "clothed with worms and dirt" (7:5), and he speaks of a pain in his bones that "gnaws" at him and "allows for no rest" (16:17). These ailments are accompanied by a trespassing of bodily boundaries. Job's skin "turns black and falls from him" (30:30), and eventually Job "wastes away like a rotten thing, like a garment that is moth-eaten" (13:28).

Although the definition of disability has not been completely settled within the field of disability studies, Nancy Eiesland suggests that a consensus has emerged around disability as reflective of a socially constructed notion of "ability." She suggests that, as able-bodied individuals engage in the "othering" of disabled people, disability becomes "a form of inability or limitation in performing roles or tasks expected of an individual within

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[4] René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 18.

[5] Scholars such as Mary Douglas speak to this sentiment. In her landmark work *Purity and Danger*, she reveals that "the body is a symbol of society" and that "the powers and dangers credited to social society are reproduced small on the human body." Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 1966), 115.

a social environment."[6] Rebecca Raphael builds on this understanding to distinguish impairment from disability, the latter of which has social implications. She argues that an impairment is a "biological fact"—for example, the loss of a limb. Disability, however, refers to the social context in which the impairment occurs, while also speaking to the implications of this impairment. It speaks to the "lack of fit" between the (impaired) body and society. Considering this definition of disability, Raphael argues that Job's ailments place him squarely within the realm of disability. As Job's physical body began to become "unwhole" or impaired, this would have resulted in a rift between himself and his social context, thus rendering him disabled.[7] I believe this rendering of Job as disabled helps us understand the attempt to scapegoat Job.

Job as scapegoat

In *Job: The Victim of His People*, Girard outlines several requirements that must be met to ensure the efficacy of the scapegoat mechanism, the "destruction of a single victim by a host of enemies."[8] In Girard's theory, this victim is the object of the "mimetic desire" of the community. Mimetic desire happens when humans subconsciously desire what others have *because* they have it. Since all cannot acquire what others already have, rivalry, hatred, and violence often emerge. For Girard, the scapegoat mechanism functions to quell the violence that results from mimetic desire and threatens to overwhelm society. When the hate and violence felt toward one another can be unanimously enacted against a carefully chosen (innocent) victim, that violence can take on a sacred character. Yet, for a group to perceive its own violence as sacred, there must be a "properly chosen victim."[9] Girard suggests that this must be a person who allows the group to embrace "unanimity" around their choice. Good candidates are those who have experienced a "fall from greatness" or are orphans (as there are no relatives to repudiate the choice).[10] Unanimity allows the scapegoat mechanism to become a source of social transcendence, one that functions as a unifying element and causes other conflicts to dissipate.

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[6] Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 27.

[7] Rebecca Raphael, "Things Too Wonderful: A Disabled Reading of Job," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 31, no. 4 (2004): 399–424.

[8] Girard, *Job*, 25.

[9] Girard, *Job*, 78.

[10] See Girard's discussion in *Job*, chap. 2, "Job the Idol of His People."

Girard argues that Job is an "ideal victim."[11] The same friends who once exalted and admired Job also harbored envy, rivalry, and hatred, which arose when Job enjoyed success. This desire, being mimetic, began with the elite (Job's friends) and then, at their urging, spread through the wider society. Girard also notes that the contrast between the "Job of the prologue" and the "Job of the dialogues" is "between the favor and the disfavor of one and the same public . . . towards a sort of 'statesman' whose career has been shattered."[12] Finally, Job also lacks relatives (or friends) to defend him. Yet, the scapegoat mechanism is only efficacious if the victim submits to the crimes against him. While Job's friends endeavor to make him responsible for his supposed guilt, Job does not submit to their accusations. In this, he offers defiance in the face of the scapegoat mechanism, becoming a "failed scapegoat."[13]

Job's bodily suffering would have functioned as the *ultimate* confirmation of Job as the ideal scapegoat candidate.

I propose, however, that the importance of bodily suffering is overlooked in Girard's application of the scapegoat mechanism to the situation of Job. Our earlier exploration into the nature of the body revealed that bodily suffering and its various manifestations threatened the societal order in the Ancient Near East. Job's community would therefore have ascribed great importance to his undeniable bodily suffering and disability; it would have caused the community to question his social and spiritual relationships, and his condition would have been seen as a threat to the social order. As such, Job's bodily suffering would have functioned as the *ultimate* confirmation of Job as the ideal scapegoat candidate. While the other factors in the scapegoat mechanism (such as fall from power, orphan status, guilt) are psychological and sociological realities, bodily suffering and mutilation has a tangible aspect that is communicated outside of language. Even those who were not in direct daily relationship with Job would have been able to witness the degradation of his body! The community would have viewed Job's bodily disability as a social threat that needed to be excised. Job's bodily impairment would have confirmed

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[11] Girard, *Job*, 78.

[12] Girard, *Job*, 18.

[13] Girard, *Job*, 35.

his guilt and therefore justified his exclusion from society. It would have validated his selection as a victim of the scapegoat mechanism.

The disabled body and scapegoat mechanisms

Sharon Betcher argues that, in the postmodern age, the conflation of advertising, the obsession with celebrities and sports figures, and the rise of the "branding" of the body in transnational markets have created a society where the ideal body has become conflated with the norm.[14] Today, the "wholesome self—brought to health by biotechnology, cosmetically augmented so as to achieve a 'more natural' look, and fashionably contoured in the global marketplace—has becomes normative."[15] Betcher depicts the wholesome self as a commodity sought after in the world market. The current economic system reveals that bodies are measured in light of their productivity and profit earning potential. The commitment to the ideal (healthful) body ostracizes those bodies who do not fall within its parameters, rendering them "a social disruption": inferior, pitied, and in need of rehabilitation.

The experience of disability today is also integrally connected to the experience of stigma. Eiesland reflects that although people experience a wide range of mental and physical impairments, what binds them together is "whatever the setting, whether in education, medicine, rehabilitation, social welfare policy, or society at large, a common set of stigmatizing values and arrangements has historically operated against us."[16] For Erving Goffman, stigmas are socially constructed relationships where people are "marked" as "other," either because of an outward visible sign or because of "something discrediting known about them."[17] Stigma enables the majority to engage in prejudicial actions against the stigmatized "other." Thus, interpersonal interactions, as opposed to psychological reactions, result in stigmas.

Goffman also stresses the importance of the visibility of the stigma. A visible stigma functions as a sign for others to approach this person differently in social interactions. This frequently results in strained or un-

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[14] Sharon Betcher, "Monstrosities, Miracles and Mission: Religion and the Politics of Disablement," in *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire*, ed. Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, and Mayra Rivera (St. Louis: Chalice, 2004), 79–99.

[15] Betcher, "Monstrosities, Miracles, and Mission," 83.

[16] Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 24.

[17] Ervin Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1963); quoted in Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 59.

comfortable interpersonal interactions, culminating in an attempt, on the part of the stigmatized individual, to "pass" as part of the dominant social milieu. This attempt often fails, resulting in embarrassing situations and causing the stigmatized to seek "secondary gains"—to see the stigma as a blessing or to rethink normality. Stigmatized individuals have sometimes "bought into" the values of the majority and can internalize culpability for their stigma.[18]

While recognizing the importance of Goffman's theory, Eiesland uses her own analysis of disability to critique it. Eiesland proposes that previous models that have attempted to explain disability (including Goffman's) are individualistic, ignoring the institutional practices that undergird social relationships. She advocates "the minority group model" instead, asserting "that the physical and psychological restrictions that people with disabilities face are primarily due to prejudice and social discrimination and are only secondarily due to the functional limitations or emotional disturbance related to our physical impairments."[19] Eiesland suggests that the minority group model accurately describes the position of people with disabilities because it allows disability to be viewed as a stigmatized social condition rather than a private, physical tragedy. This stigmatized social condition means that those with disabilities experience many forms of discrimination, including paternalism and social avoidance. In times of economic or social unrest, however, outright violence can be directed toward disabled people. Once disability is viewed as a social condition, it can be "redressed through attitudinal changes and social commitment to equality of opportunity for people with disabilities."[20]

Job and the disabled body

The conjunction of these theories allows us to draw parallels between the role of the body in the book of Job (and his subsequent scapegoating) and the role of the disabled body today, including its stigmatization and scapegoating. First, Betcher's theory of the "wholesome" body and the maintenance of current power structures resonates with the role of the body in the Ancient Near East, manifested in the relationship between Job and his friends as his body begins to experience degradation. Recall that "unwhole" bodies in the Ancient Near East were viewed as a threat to social

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[18] Goffman, *Stigma*; quoted in Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 60.

[19] Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 62.

[20] Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 66.

order. In the book of Job, we are reminded that Job's friends "helped" him while also reminding him of his place in society. Second, Goffman's theory supports the notion that visible bodily markers that signify lack of wholeness result in ostracism. Goffman reveals that those who are stigmatized can be labeled culpable for their condition, while stigmatized individuals sometimes adopt the mentality of the majority. This parallels Girard's assertion that the scapegoat must admit to the crimes against them, regardless of guilt, for the scapegoat mechanism to function properly. Third, Eiesland's minority group model also bears distinct similarities to Girard's scapegoat mechanism. During a time of societal strain, Job the victim is chosen, and violence is enacted against him. For Girard, the selection of the victim is never voluntary and is frequently a person with disrupted social ties. A disabled person, as Eiesland describes them in the minority group model, would fit Girard's characterization quite well.

> **In the book of Job, we are reminded that Job's friends "helped" him while also reminding him of his place in society.**

Viewing Job through these three theoretical lenses reveals how mimetic desire is integral to the scapegoating of disabled people. Betcher reminds us that the wholesome self is a commodity that is sought after—literally desired—in the world market. This wholesome self, aided by the system of globalized capitalism is, in the words of Girard, "venerated and imitated slavishly."[21] As the idealized self is positioned as normative, desire becomes mimetic. Spurred on by advertising and instantaneous global communication, members of society imitate one another in fanatical worship of the idealized body. Yet, this wholesome self, by its very definition, is unattainable for most, if not all. The unattainable self becomes an *obstacle*, prompting the dark side of mimetic desire—envy and hatred—to surface. In the absence of the tangible *idealized body* of globalized capitalism, the projections of desire find their way to that which is a visible reminder of this obstacle—the bodies that seem to be the opposite of the wholesome self. The scapegoating of the disabled body and all it entails, including notions of culpability, protects the capitalistic system that both depends and thrives on the commodification of the wholesome self.

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[21] Girard, *Job*, 49.

Conclusion

The book of Job raises many questions regarding suffering, yet I believe that the question of bodily suffering is one that should not be overlooked. Girard's theory of scapegoating sheds light on Job's situation. Yet his theory does not consider the importance of the role of bodily suffering and disability, and it therefore misses an aspect that is central to the process of Job being marked as the scapegoat of his community. Girard's lack of attention to bodily suffering and disability also has implications for today. Given Girard's theory, it follows that the stigmatization of disabled people could be classified as scapegoating. Greater examination of the role of the body in Girard's theory could allow disabled people to find their story in Job, the scapegoat. It would also provide yet another lens through which the disabled community could identify the societal dynamics that surround their community. Beyond that, as scapegoating is an inherently religious term, Girard's theory could aid religious communities in their own exploration of the ways that religion has participated in the exclusion and stigmatization of disabled people.[22] It would be interesting to explore whether seeing the disabled in light of Girard's scapegoat theory would enable religious communities (and society as a whole) to better embody the message of love and acceptance of all people.

About the author

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[22] Theologically, many argue that modernist Christianity has also read disability as degeneracy.

Disability theology

A journey toward liberation

Shana C. Green

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

> **My diagnosis caused me to confront years of theology that often centered healing as the ultimate form of liberation.**

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

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[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

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[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 societal 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.

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."

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

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[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

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[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).

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. 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.

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

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

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[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]

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[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!*

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[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

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[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 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.

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.

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

The unity Paul mentions is not about removing what makes groups unique but about breaking down the walls of hostility between them.

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 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!*

Disability contra Docetism

Following the disabled Christ

Daniel Rempel

Christology has material consequences. So argued Nancy Bedford in her 2019 lecture "The Problem of a Ghostly Jesus."[1] In other words, what we believe about the person of Jesus Christ affects the manner in which we live in the world and understand our place as creatures within God's good creation. Bedford chose an interesting place to begin her three-part lecture series on Christology. She turned not to constructive claims but rather to Docetism, the ancient belief that Christ only *appeared* human. While Docetism was officially condemned as a heresy during the first Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, Bedford contends that "in multiple ways much of Christian theology and practice has gone astray, distorted by a conception of Jesus that does not truly see him as a human being who fully took on our human reality."

Mennonites bear their own history with Docetism, most notably in Menno Simons's adoption of the Melchiorite belief in Jesus as one bearing celestial flesh—the idea that "Christ took no human flesh from Mary, who served only as a vessel, and instead possessed his own, celestial flesh."[2] Bedford's concern is not just that this is an awkward aspect of Mennonite history. Rather, she contends that in many ways Docetism continues to lurk its ugly head today.[3] Perhaps the contemporary impulse

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[1] Nancy Bedford, "The Problem of a Ghostly Jesus," J. J. Thiessen Lecture Series, Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, Manitoba, October 24, 2019, https://youtu.be/UKa61XxStu0.

[2] Christina E. Moss, "Some Reflections on Early Anabaptists and the Creeds," Anabaptist Historians blog, October 22, 2020, https://anabaptisthistorians.org/2020/10/22/some-reflections-on-early-anabaptists-and-the-creeds/. Melchiorites were followers of Melchior Hofmann, a sixteenth-century spiritualist and Anabaptist leader in northern Germany. For Menno Simons's account of the flesh of Christ, see Menno Simons, "Incarnation of Our Lord," in *The Complete Works of Menno Simons: c. 1496–1561*, trans. Leonard Verduin, ed. John Christian Wenger (Herald, 1974), 783–834.

[3] James Reimer noted something similar, suggesting that Mennonites have tended either toward Docetism or Arianism, the belief that Christ was either not fully human (Docetism) or not fully God (Arianism). Reimer does not delve deeply into a solution

Struggling against Docetism requires us to give up our desires for control and manipulation because we are dealing not with a principle reality but with a human person.

toward Docetism does not arise from an impulse to recreate Menno's ideas of celestial flesh but rather from a desire to control Christology. As Bedford suggests, it may be "no more than the projection of the values of a given dominant culture." This is an error made in both progressive and conservative circles, in which we attempt to conform Christ to our secular ethics, manipulating his person to meet our preconceived ends.

Struggling against Docetism requires us to give up our desires for control and manipulation because we are dealing not with a principle but with a human person. At some time or another, we have all tried to control another—a child, a friend, a family member, a coworker—only to leave frustrated because, as it turns out, dealing with humans means dealing with people who have wills and ideas other than our own. Attending to Jesus's person gives us precisely the conditions we need to live our life free from control and in response to the Word made flesh.

In what follows, I attend not to the whole of Jesus's human nature but rather to one particular aspect of it, what disability theologians have understood as Christ's *disability*. It is my contention that there is something about this focus on the disabled Christ—as understood in disability theology circles—that leads us to reject the allure of Docetism and move toward a more faithful *Nachfolge* of God incarnate.[4]

The disabled God

Nancy Eiesland's text *The Disabled God* is often credited with commencing the discipline we now know of as disability theology. There she describes the theological vision that illumines and orients her work:

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but merely gestures in a direction that takes seriously the dual nature of Christ's humanity and divinity. A. James Reimer, "Toward Christian Theology from a Diversity of Mennonite Perspectives," *Conrad Grebel Review* 6, no. 2 (Spring 1988): 157.

[4] *Nachfolge* is a German term that means "follow after" but is often translated into English as "discipleship." It is a word that was used both by early Anabaptist leaders and by more contemporary German theologians. What I like about the term *Nachfolge* that sometimes gets missed in its translation as "discipleship" is that following Jesus is just that: following after Jesus, letting him take the lead, while subordinating our place behind him.

> *I saw God in a sip-puff wheelchair, that is, the chair used mostly by quadriplegics enabling them to maneuver by blowing and sucking on a strawlike device. Not an omnipotent, self-sufficient God, but neither a pitiable, suffering servant. In this moment, I beheld God as a survivor, unpitying and forthright. I recognized the incarnate Christ in the image of those judged "not feasible," "unemployable," with "questionable quality of life." Here was God for me.*[5]

Lest we think this merely some disabled utopian fantasy, Eiesland quickly attempts to ground her vision in the scriptural narrative. According to Eiesland, the disabled God is best understood through the post-resurrection wounds of Christ (Luke 24:36–39). Just like Christ in a sip-puff wheelchair, the Christ who bears the scars of his resurrection is the disabled Christ. Eiesland explains,

> *Here is the resurrected Christ making good on the incarnational proclamation that God would be with us, embodied as we are, incorporating the fullness of human contingency and ordinary life into God. In presenting his impaired hands and feet to his startled friends, the resurrected Jesus is revealed as the disabled God. Jesus, the resurrected Savior, calls for his frightened companions to recognize in the marks of impairment their own connection with God, their own salvation. In so doing, this disabled God is also the revealer of a new humanity. The disabled God is not only the One from heaven but the revelation of true personhood, underscoring the reality that full personhood is fully compatible with the experience of disability.*[6]

The potency of Eiesland's provocative argument is that she leads us to a particular cruciform reflection on the woundedness of Christ—the one who she argues became disabled for us. A docetic Christ is one that can neither be crucified nor wounded. If Christ is not wounded, argues Eiesland, then Christ is not God for us—or, at best, if the docetic Christ is God for us, then it is a different Christ and maybe even a different *us* than the one we read about in scripture.

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[5] Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Towards a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Abingdon, 1994), 89.

[6] Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 100.

As John Webster has argued, the scandal of the statement "God with us" lies neither in the subject nor the object of the statement but in the preposition.[7] It is not scandalous to think of God or *us*, but to think of the manner in which God engages *with* humanity is scandalous indeed. To retain the force of the scandal, we need both parties at play. We need the fully divine God and the fully created human. What we believe about each matters.

It thus matters that Eiesland conceives of Christ as disabled because it informs which God is with us. As Eiesland notes, this is not the God who is removed from the trivialities of our creaturely condition but the God who incorporates human contingency into the life of God and, in turn, reveals a new humanity. It matters who this God is because who God is determines who we are.

Following the disabled Christ

As Karl Barth has argued, dogmatics is ethics. It is not just that what we believe is a precursor to what we do; rather, belief and practice are always inherently interrelated.[8] If Barth is right, then we cannot exhume our ethics from their dogmatic context. Anabaptists have come to be known for our ethics and our service, but if we detach these from our beliefs, we risk ending up with an ethics that is wildly different from the person we confess to worship. What we believe about the person of Christ thus sets the groundwork for our ethics, and the way we live is a visible representation of the things we believe. For Eiesland, "ignoring disability means ignoring life"[9]—or, stated positively, attending to disability means attending to life. Eiesland appeals to Christ's post-resurrection body to indicate that the woundedness of Christ is not reserved only for his death; it remains with him in his life. As Christ lives, Christ lives as the wounded one.

Eiesland's Christology has material consequences. Christians do not follow the dead Christ. We do not follow the *principles* of Christ or think of him only as a figure of history. Christians follow the living Christ, and, according to Eiesland, this living Christ is disabled. Christ is not someone who rejects disability or tries to eliminate disability, and neither should we. Following the disabled Christ thus means, first, recognizing

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[7] John Webster, "Immanuel, God's Presence with Us," Kantzer Lectures, Henry Center for Theological Understanding, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois, September 11, 2007, https://youtu.be/WjOeD_OThTM.

[8] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1957), 515.

[9] Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 13.

that disability is a regular feature of lived reality and not something to be eradicated. This posture toward disability affects every response hereafter.

Following the disabled Christ leads us, second, to embrace human contingency. As Eiesland argues, the disabled Christ incorporates the fullness of human contingency and ordinary life into God. Contingency is not something we need to flee from; it is something we can come to embrace. To embrace contingency means that we are not in control of our lives. It is to recognize that we constantly live in a state of need—in need of others and, ultimately, of the body of Christ.

Following the disabled Christ leads us to embrace human contingency.

In a world that seems obsessed with controlling our destinies, the embrace of contingency flies in the face of dominant trends. We desire to be in control of our careers, finances, fitness, and health. While control in and of itself is not sinful, it becomes sinful when our desire for control is the ultimate orientation of our lives. To live a life of *Nachfolge* requires giving up control because we are not to be leaders but followers after Christ. Embracing human contingency is the ultimate act of placing our trust in Christ, the giver of every good gift.

Following the disabled Christ means, third, recognizing in these wounds our salvation, which in turn paves the way for a new recognition of humanity. Christ's resurrection marks the reversal of our sinful state and the inauguration of a new way of being—a personhood not only compatible with the experience of disability but also found *within* the experience of disability. Dominant modes of being in the world often find no place for disability. The able-bodied experience is the normative experience, and those who diverge from these socially conceived norms are ostracized as a result.

In Christ's resurrection, we are saved from the need to conform to the norm and be the masters of our lives. In the living Christ, we find the one who meets us in our particular lived existence, not to remove our disabilities but to save us where we are, as we are. Following the disabled Christ leads us into our salvation as people redeemed by the one who embraces our humanity.

Conclusion

To believe in a particular Christ means to live in a particular way. While the fullness of Christ exceeds the context of disability, attending to the disabled Christ—the fully human Christ—does have material consequences. In attending to the tendency to overlook the humanity of Christ, we are drawn further into the mystery of the Word become flesh in the one who was born of a virgin and then wounded for us. It is in the wounds of this disabled Christ that we find life to the fullest.

About the author

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No exceptions

Baptism beyond inclusion

jason greig

Many congregations wish to compassionately include the marginalized in society, which includes people with disabilities, but fail to articulate what this inclusion refers to. When questions about inclusion remain unasked, a more troubling reality becomes possible—namely, that the theologies and practices of these communities may not be as inclusive as their members think they are.

In this essay I ask if many well-intentioned efforts at inclusion of those with intellectual disability founder, particularly regarding those labelled as profoundly intellectually disabled. I focus on the Anabaptist-Mennonite practice of believer's baptism, which demands capacities that may exclude persons from that core ecclesial practice. There are ecclesial attempts to respond to this challenge, but I claim them as insufficient and argue that churches need to go further in their theology and practice to be truly hospitable.

I acknowledge the risk of writing about people considered to be profoundly intellectually disabled.[1] Whenever one speaks of a group of persons as part of a distinct category, one risks objectifying those persons. While acknowledging this risk, I write as someone who has known and learned from such persons in my life, encountering them as fully human. In my experience, these persons, through their significant difference, offer the most profound challenge to norms of personhood in late modernity. I argue that, if our communities want to be truly inclusive, we must investigate the hospitable nature of our anthropological norms.

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[1] Two significant characteristics of profoundly intellectually disabled people are having (1) no apparent understanding of and access to verbal language and (2) a (near) total dependence on others for care. See H. Nakken and C. Vlaskamp, "A Need for a Taxonomy for Profound Intellectual and Multiple Disabilities," *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities* 4, no. 2 (2007): 85.

The problem of inclusion

Few contemporary words have such traction as *inclusion*, which stands as a descriptive adjective for the good society in the liberal West. The concept is ubiquitous in discussions of churches and disability. While there seems to be agreement on the need to include people with disabilities, it is less clear what is meant by the term *inclusion* in these discussions. Often authors assume inclusion as a good without explicating its meaning. For example, in his book *Disability and Inclusive Communities*, Kevin Timpe writes, "We are better off when we include rather than exclude individuals with disabilities."[2] Likewise, in *Disability and the Church: A Vision for Diversity and Inclusion*, Lamar Harwick writes, "The absence of the disability community from the church is not a matter of invitation; it is a matter of inclusion."[3] And in an article announcing the Mennonite Church USA's Welcoming EveryBODY Initiative, Jeanne Davies is quoted as stating, "Disability inclusion is central to the vitality of the church. When all people with their various needs and gifts are fully included in the life of the church, the Body of Christ becomes whole."[4]

While there seems to be agreement on the need to include people with disabilities, it is less clear what is meant by the term *inclusion* in these discussions.

Simon van der Weele and Femmianne Bredewold point out that most define *inclusion* through the narrow conception of "community participation" and relationships with non-disabled people.[5] While community participation and relationships are valuable, the question is whether these are goods in themselves for people with profound disabilities. The dominant non-disabled majority thinks so and thus usually assumes that people with profound disabilities would agree. Such a view often results

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[2] Kevin Timpe, *Disability and Inclusive Communities* (Grand Rapids: Calvin College Press, 2018), 17.

[3] Lamar Harwick, *Disability and the Church: A Vision for Diversity and Inclusion* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Press, 2021), 18.

[4] As quoted in the article, "MC USA Launches 'Learn, Pray, Join: Welcoming Every-BODY' Initiative," Mennonite Church USA, May 18, 2022, https://www.mennoniteusa.org/news/mc-usa-launches-learn-pray-join-welcoming-everybody-initiative/.

[5] Simon van der Weele and Femmianne Bredewold, "What's Good about Inclusion? An Ethical Analysis of the Ideal of Social Inclusion for People with Profound Intellectual and Multiple Disabilities," *Health Care Analysis* 32, no. 2 (2024): 109.

from a vision of equality based on the *sameness* of people with profound disabilities and non-disabled people. Thus, when people with profound impairments participate in society *like everyone else*, they are considered to be equal, and non-disabled people are thereby considered to be showing them inclusion.

Seeing people with profound cognitive impairments as equal persons is just and necessary after the sordid history of treating these persons as inferior defectives. Yet, when we emphasize our *sameness* at the expense of acknowledging our *difference*, we are liable of exhibiting sincere paternalism or of subjecting them to more subtle forms of exclusion. A common dynamic of inclusion then ensues. First, sincere non-disabled people feel bad that persons with intellectual disabilities appear excluded from faith communities. Then the non-disabled majority believe their well-intentioned attitudes of repentance and being or becoming an "inclusive" church solve the problem. However, too often the people being included still remain in relational isolation rather than experiencing true belonging.

Whenever the desire to include arises, we should ask ourselves at least three questions: (1) Who is being included? (2) Who is including them? (3) What are those excluded persons being included *into*? Arguably, this last question stands as the most important, for if excluded persons are being included into a milieu not hospitable to them, all the efforts at inclusion can wind up doing more harm than good.

The choosing self

A prominent theme in much theologizing around disability concerns questions regarding what it means to be human. Revealing the assumptions in our conception of persons helps determine not only anthropological norms but also which people count in our communities. Social groups often base their practices on their conception of the human, and churches are no different. Clarity on social understandings of the human can help to discern what kind of culture people with profound impairments are being included into.

A common understanding of what constitutes the flourishing human revolves around a lack of limitations or impairments. Such an anthropology presents a concept of a person as a self-conscious agent, possessing robust rational abilities to autonomously determine one's life or lifestyle according to one's own will. Such a vision of the human person has been adopted by some within the disability rights movement who are eager to show Western societies that just having an impairment does not make one "stupid" and that self-determination is a matter of basic justice.[6]

Hans Reinders names this anthropological norm the "choosing self." He finds that it may work well for people with physical and neurological impairments but portends to exclude people with profound cognitive impairments.[7] In Reinders's view, the two main characteristics of the "choosing self" are the capacity to have a robust "inner life" and the agency to choose from the options created by that inner self. Such interiority and agency reside not just in the professional philosopher. We engage in this reflexivity any time we think intentionally about any subject or task, whether it be theologizing about the Trinity or buying produce at the grocery store. Having the capacity to determine our own lives puts us squarely in the realm of the human who has access to the good life.

The problem is that many persons considered to be profoundly intellectually disabled do not have the capacities for self-determination (as far as others are able to tell).

The problem is that many persons considered to be profoundly intellectually disabled do not have the capacities for this kind of self-determination (as far as others are able to tell). Reinders writes, "It will be clear that this conception of the good life excludes all those incapable of purposive agency. It excludes those human beings who, because of their impairment, cannot affirm their own being."[8] People with profound cognitive impairments cannot choose their own lifestyle. Determining the inner lives of these persons is difficult, if not impossible, not merely because of their lack of oral or written communication abilities but also because of the severe limitations they face due to their significant intellectual impairments.

Some have tried to ameliorate this problem through the use of "supported decision making." Supported decision making (SDM) involves the use of friends, families, and colleagues of people with cognitive disabilities to assist in determining and actuating the good life for them. While I

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[6] See James I. Charlton, *Nothing about Us without Us: Disability Oppression and Empowerment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

[7] Hans S. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

[8] Reinders, *Receiving the Gift*, 137.

have seen the benefit of SDM for people with cognitive impairments, it arguably still holds to the concept of the choosing self. As long as a person has enough support from others, they can still autonomously choose their own life for themselves. SDM does not question the dominance of the choosing self but extends that category to as many people as possible, resting on the belief that everyone desires the *same* things—namely, autonomous choice and self-determination.

The choosing self's requirements of interiority and agency have two arguably exclusive consequences. First, they create an "anthropological minor league" for people with cognitive impairments, placing their dignity and worth in jeopardy.[9] At the same time, they create a boundary line for personhood. When one can determine their own version of the good life—with or without support—they are safely within the boundaries of personhood and can participate in social practices as an equal. However, without these capacities one lives outside the boundary line, completely dependent on the good will of those with the agency to include them.

Baptism as choice

Contemporary Anabaptist-Mennonite ecclesiology often assumes the norm of the choosing self, at least in practice. The Anabaptist-Mennonite practice of believer's baptism especially highlights how the norm of the choosing self can be problematic for people considered to be profoundly intellectually disabled.

In *Believing and Belonging: An Accessible Anabaptist Membership Curriculum*, Anabaptist Disabilities Network (ADN) executive director Jeanne Davies offers a curriculum written to make membership accessible to people with intellectual disabilities. In a chapter devoted to baptism, Davies presents the motivation for receiving baptism as residing in the individual will of the candidate. "In the Anabaptist church," she writes, "each person chooses to be baptized. We believe this choice is very important. Anabaptists do not baptize babies or young children. We baptize people who are old enough to make a choice."[10] The language of *choice* pervades Davies's treatment of baptism. For Davies, we know this choice is legitimate when candidates can express a "desire" for baptism and answer yes to some sim-

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[9] Hans S. Reinders, "Human Dignity in the Absence of Agency," in *God and Human Dignity*, ed. R. Kendall Soulen and Linda Woodhead (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 131.

[10] Jeanne Davies, *Believing and Belonging: An Accessible Anabaptist Membership Curriculum*, teacher's edition (Elkhart, IN: Anabaptist Disabilities Network, 2023).

ple questions of belief, agency, and commitment. Baptism without these signs of desire and assent represents “coercion” because the choice for the ordinance cannot be made by anyone other than the candidate.[11]

Davies’s explication of baptism aligns well with the norm of the choosing self. Reception of the ordinance demands the inner desire for baptism and the agency to choose it. Even God’s role in baptism is discussed in terms of awakening the interior will. Without a robust sense of purposive agency from the candidate, any admittance to baptism would presumably be a form of coercion. Davies discusses the church as a place of support, but the congregation she envisions is predicated on a covenant among individuals who have all made their own individual decisions to follow Christ. The candidate for baptism is one more individual choosing to become a member of the group. In Davies’s vision of Anabaptist, accessible baptism, it seems difficult, if not impossible, to imagine someone with a profound cognitive impairment being admitted to the baptismal font.

Responses to the challenge of profound impairment

There are two potential responses to the challenge persons with profound impairments raise for Anabaptist-Mennonite baptismal traditions. One way forward consists in performing baptism for these persons regardless of their capacities. For these congregations, an inclusive response requires acknowledging the equal dignity of all people and demanding the performance of baptism for these persons, regardless of ecclesial traditions.

While admirable, this option risks making people considered to be profoundly intellectually disabled as “exceptions” that prove the rule, a problem exemplified when churches refuse to investigate the theologies that make these persons an exception in the first place. The demands of interiority and agency stay firmly ensconced, even when SDM is used as an inclusive means of baptism.[12] The congregation supports the individual but never removes the requirements of autonomy and choice. The typical question of when someone should receive baptism—at the age of accountability?—becomes murky when discussing persons with extremely limited rational capacities. In addition, denoting a particular age for baptism assumes that these persons are like everyone else, exemplifying a view of inclusion based on sameness. One cannot leave the choice for

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[11] Davies, *Believing and Belonging*, introduction.

[12] For an argument on using SDM to include people with cognitive impairments in believer’s baptism, see Melissa Florer-Bixler, “Believers Baptism as Supported Decision,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 38, no. 2 (2020): 135–46.

baptism to those who know the candidate best because this contradicts the requirement for autonomous choice, representing an exception no other candidate would be subject to.

Another potential response to the challenge persons with profound impairments raise for Anabaptist-Mennonite baptismal traditions is for congregations to create alternative membership rituals for these persons. Davies writes that "baptism is not for everyone" and argues that baptizing anyone who does not express a desire for baptism and an ability to answer simple questions of belief is illegitimate.[13]

Davies includes a testimony from a Mennonite church that created a membership ceremony for a congregant with significant impairments—a ceremony that they viewed as an alternative to baptism that nevertheless serves as a symbol of belonging to God and the community.

> **Not baptizing persons with significant impairments coheres with traditional Anabaptist theology and practice, but it also means disqualifying certain persons from receiving baptism.**

Not baptizing persons with significant impairments coheres with traditional Anabaptist theology and practice. But it also means disqualifying certain persons from receiving baptism, due not to behavior or occupation but to capacity. One could argue that such congregations are making membership more inclusive by respecting the real differences between people with significant impairments and those without them. Yet if multiple ways toward membership exist, this raises the question of why *anyone* should choose baptism. It thus makes baptism look optional, which contradicts Davies's discussion of an early Anabaptist belief that "youth and adults *should* choose to follow Jesus and be baptized."[14] By making different requirements for different people, such congregations risk creating a two-tiered system of baptism: if you can choose, you can receive baptism; if you cannot, you receive an alternative ceremony. Those who adhere to such a view might respond that the real benefits of baptism come not only from those who can understand it but also to those who need it—that is, baptism as a cleansing from sin. Yet this kind of response reinforces the view of baptism as only for those with interiority and agency —in this case as the capacities that lead one to sin. Claiming people with

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[13] Davies, *Believing and Belonging*, introduction.

[14] Davies, *Believing and Belonging*, 30, emphasis added.

profound cognitive impairments as perpetual innocents might be well intentioned, but it potentially makes them more akin to angels—who are *not* like the rest of us, not only in capacity but also in *species*.

These two responses to the challenge persons with profound impairments raise for Anabaptist-Mennonite baptismal traditions are attempts to bring people with profound impairments into church communities in a spirit of compassion. However, the choosing self remains dominant as the rule to which people with profound impairments are the exception. In this kind of anthropology, such persons must either receive an alternative ceremony or be baptized as an exception to the rule. Either option reveals how a form of equality resting on such an anthropology requires seeing people considered profoundly intellectually disabled as the special ones on the borderlines of personhood.

Going further

Given the above problems with typical approaches to inclusive baptismal practices in Anabaptist-Mennonite communities, I propose that churches should consider extending the meaning of baptism beyond a practice that requires choice. The Christian theological tradition has been reflecting on baptism for two-thousand years and has developed various ways of understanding the ordinance—as a new birth or new creation in Christ, for example, or as the reception of grace. Integrating other theological emphases into current practice could assist in making baptism more inclusive for those considered to be profoundly impaired.

Indeed, I propose that Anabaptist-Mennonite congregations could go even further. Understandings of baptism can be expanded, but if qualification for baptism still demands a choosing self, baptising people with profound impairments still remains an exception at best. In order for baptism to have no exceptions, arguably the task is not just to expand meanings of baptism but also—perhaps more importantly—to expand our understanding of who can legitimately receive the ordinance. If people considered profoundly impaired can receive baptism, we might consider expanding the rite to other non-agential persons, like infants and people with severe forms of dementia. Doing so means that people with profound impairments would receive baptism not as exceptions but as fellow children of God. Admittedly, removing the demand for robust subjectivity offers a direct challenge to Anabaptist-Mennonite theology and practice. For a church identified historically with the "rebaptized," foregoing a requirement for choice can amount to heresy. However, when orthodoxy demands the disqualification of certain persons from the baptismal font, perhaps the real challenge is not for people with profound impairments but for the theology and practice that excludes them because of their lack of certain capacities.

The option exists to stay faithful to the Radical Reformers and maintain baptism as a choice for Christ and the church. But for those who wish to go further, let the presence of people with profound impairments not be special in your midst but be paradigmatic for an ecclesial theology and practice. Let there be no exceptions in the Body of Christ but only fellow children of God brought into fellowship with the Lord through the waters of baptism.

About the author

jason greig is the campus minister at the McMaster University Catholic Chaplaincy. He is the author of *Rethinking Intellectual Disability: L'Arche, Medical Ethics, and Christian Friendship* (Georgetown University Press, 2015) and has been the gracious recipient of friendships with people with cognitive impairments.

Respecting personhood in baptism

A response to greig's "No exceptions"

Jeanne Davies

I would like to thank jason greig for his article "No exceptions: Baptism beyond inclusion," which offers a spirited challenge to Anabaptists to consider how our theology, language, and practices of inclusion affect those with profound intellectual disabilities and their families.[1] At Anabaptist Disabilities Network (ADN), we know that the word *inclusion* has implicit power dynamics. We cannot talk about inclusion without considering such questions as *Who does the including? Who has the power to include? Does inclusion truly mean you are a valued part of the community or only that you are allowed to be present?* Because of this, I regularly teach about the paucity of the term *inclusion*. At the same time, *inclusion* is a word that people in congregations understand, and it therefore can be useful when educating congregations, particularly when we are asking them to examine their own collective behavior toward people with disabilities. ADN uses the word *belonging* whenever we can, but it makes for a lot of awkward sentence constructions. We sometimes use *fully include* to indicate belonging to a community where you are known, accepted, cared for, appreciated, seen as necessary, beloved.

In his article, greig does not explicitly argue that baptism leads to belonging rather than inclusion, but I can see why he might make that argument, as baptism is, essentially, a ritual of belonging—both to the community and to God. The *Believing and Belonging* curriculum that he discusses in relation to baptism was intended to expand access to baptism for people who are intellectually disabled.[2] It was created in response to pastors, parents, and teachers who repeatedly requested it. It is a resource for the many people with intellectual disabilities who have not been given the opportunity to make a choice for whether to be baptized because it is assumed that they do not know enough or do not understand enough to

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[1] jason greig, "No exceptions: Baptism beyond inclusion," *Vision* 25.2 (Fall 2024): 82–90.

[2] Jeanne Davies, *Believing and Belonging: An Accessible Anabaptist Membership Curriculum*, teacher's edition (Elkhart, IN: Anabaptist Disabilities Network, 2023).

make a choice and that, therefore, their choice would not matter. It is for people who have agency but have not been given agency in this decision.

The curriculum was intended to lower the intellectual threshold for making a choice regarding baptism. It asserts that we are *all* growing into our baptism. We make a choice and then continue to learn what that choice means and live into it. Therefore, if someone desires to be baptized, that opportunity should be offered to them, without the restriction of assumptions regarding their intellectual ability.

So many choices in life are made *for* people with intellectual disabilities instead of *by* them. Because of this, the freedom and power to choose, to have agency, seems especially important for them. It is a measure of respect for an individual's personhood that we honor their right to choose. At the same time, if we are unable to discern their choice, we respect them enough to not enforce baptism on them. A person can have intention and will, even if we do not understand it. We trust that God knows and understands that person completely and that our inability to discern their choice regarding baptism will not stand in the way of their embrace as a beloved, essential part of the community or of their embrace from God in eternal life.

So many choices in life are made *for* people with intellectual disabilities instead of *by* them.

In contrast to the approach presented in *Believing and Belonging*, greig's theological argument seems to be that we should respect the personhood of people with profound cognitive impairment by not making them special or exceptional through the use of rituals that are alternatives to baptism to include them in our communal life. Indeed, greig argues that they should be baptized, even if their ability to consent is unclear. This leaves me to wonder who makes the choice for the person with profound cognitive impairment (the family, pastor, or whole congregation?) and on what basis that choice is made.

In his conclusion, greig takes his argument a step further by stating that other people who are not able to make a choice, such as infants and people with dementia, should also be baptized. Acknowledging that this proposal "offers a direct challenge to Anabaptist-Mennonite theology and practice," he concludes that the theology and practice need to change to ensure that there are no exceptions.

It seems, then, that our main disagreement comes down to a fundamental theological difference. Ultimately, greig is arguing for universal baptism, although presumably not for those who express that they do not want to be baptized. In order to avoid making an exception for those with profound cognitive impairments, greig makes an exception to who chooses baptism for the individual; it is not their choice but the choice of their community.

In contrast, I would argue that it is out of respect for the personhood of people who are profoundly cognitively impaired that we do not choose for them, just as we do not choose for infants or people with dementia. And just as with infants or people with dementia, we know and celebrate that people with profound cognitive impairments are not only a beloved part of our community but also beloved children of God. I would argue that alternative rituals to baptism can profoundly express the will of the community in lieu of the consent of the individual.

By making this argument, I am adhering to a traditional Anabaptist theological, liturgical, and ecclesial practice of believer's baptism. It seems to me that greig is not merely offering an invitation to Anabaptists to consider how disability theology might affect this practice. Instead, he is arguing from disability theology for the elimination of an Anabaptist practice of baptism altogether in favor of universal infant baptism. I will leave it to Anabaptist theologians and historians to address what would be lost in doing away with believer's baptism altogether.

It is out of respect for the personhood of people who are profoundly cognitively impaired that we do not choose for them.

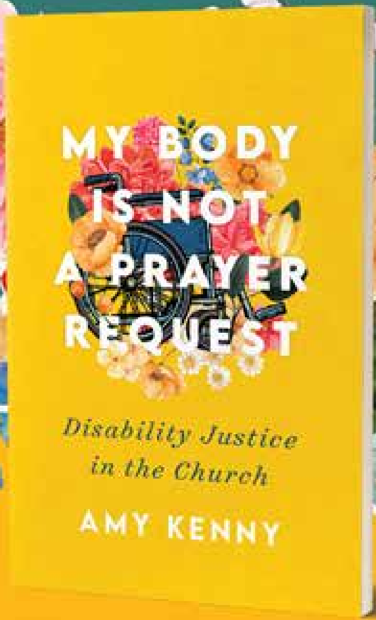
I will simply note that these are personal decisions involving faithful families who are trying to make the best decision for their loved ones. I therefore do not think it is helpful to criticize a family's choice to not baptize their daughter who has profound cognitive impairments. In the case that greig cites as a negative example, I do not believe greig knows all the details that led to that decision. In that situation as in others, ADN is simply offering the possibility of an alternative ceremony as a marker of belonging, without judgment or condemnation. ADN's goal is not theoretical but pastoral. We want to reduce family anxiety about their loved one who is significantly cognitively impaired. God loves us whether or not we are baptized. We can belong to a congregation whether or not we are baptized. Families are thus free to discern in their church communities what ecclesial practices seem best for their loved one.

I appreciate theological criticism of and reflection on our practices as Anabaptists. It is good for us to wrestle with these concepts together. But it is also good for us to disagree theologically in a way that does not disparage people's decisions for their families. At ADN, we will continue to offer education, resources, and support to such families, without judgment on their decisions. We appreciate the support of Anabaptist individuals and communities in our ongoing work of advocating for positive change in our congregations regarding how all people can not only be included but also experience true belonging.

About the author

Jeanne Davies serves as executive director of Anabaptist Disabilities Network, where she carries responsibility for outreach, advocacy, and development. She is ordained in the Church of the Brethren and has a Master of Divinity degree from Bethany Theological Seminary in Richmond, Indiana, a Graduate Certificate in Homiletic Peer Coaching from Vanderbilt Divinity School, and a Graduate Certificate in Disability and Ministry from Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan. Davies has a passion for disability advocacy and inclusion, and she believes that the whole church benefits when all the members of the body are actively connected. She lives in West Dundee, Illinois, with her husband, Joel. They attend York Center Church of the Brethren in Lombard, Illinois.

HOW CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES CAN BETTER ENGAGE DISABILITY JUSTICE



Much of the church has forgotten that we worship a disabled God whose wounds survived resurrection, says Amy Kenny. In *My Body Is Not a Prayer Request*, she exposes unintentional ableism in the church and casts a new imagination for Christian communities to engage disability justice. Kenny shows that it is time for the church to start treating disabled people as full members of the body of Christ who have much more to offer than a miraculous cure narrative and to begin learning from their embodied experiences.

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