Encountering the Disabled God

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

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

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

This Eucharistic exclusion is symbolic of a larger crisis. Sadly, rather than offering empowerment, the church has more often supported societal structures and attitudes that have treated people with disabilities as objects of pity and paternalism.

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

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

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

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

Common in the Hebrew scriptures is the conflation of physical disability and "impurity." The "holiness code" of Leviticus 17–26 communicates a strong message that physical disability is a distortion of the divine image and an inherent desecration of all things holy.

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Bodily unwholeness is "unclean" and needs to be kept at the periphery of the community. Leviticus 21.18–20 prohibits anyone "blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes" from priestly activities or from entering the most holy place in the temple. These and similar passages have historically been used to bar persons with disabilities from positions of ecclesiastical visibility and authority.

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

New Testament texts have also been read to support a link between sin and disability. Several Gospel narratives and even Jesus's statements are ambiguous, sometimes upholding and sometimes discounting such linkage. Luke's account of the man with paralysis who is lowered through the roof of a house where Jesus is speaking has often been interpreted as a story of heroic helpers and a crippled sinner (5.18–26). Jesus's words—"Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Stand up and walk'?" (5.23)—suggest some association between forgiveness and healing.

In John's story of the man by the pool of Bethesda (5.5–16), Jesus follows his healing with an apparent affirmation of the link between sin and disability when he tells him, "Do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you" (5.14). In John 9.1–3, however, Jesus offers a different perspective. When his disciples ask whether the man's blindness is the result of his or his parents' sins, Jesus answers: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."

A different but equally troublesome biblical theme is the ideal of virtuous suffering. In passages such as Paul's account of the "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12.7–10), righteous submission to divine testing is upheld as a praiseworthy disposition for Christian disciples. Likewise, early interpretations of Job and the story of Lazarus (Luke 16.19–31) purported that physical impairments were a sign of divine election by which the righteous were purified and perfected through painful trials. Disability is seen as a temporary affliction that must be endured to gain heavenly rewards. While more subtle, this theology of virtuous suffering has been no less dangerous. It has encouraged persons with disabilities to acquiesce to social barriers as a sign of obedience to God and to internalize second-class status inside and outside the church.

The biblical theme of charitable giving has had equivocal outcomes for people with disabilities. In ancient societies, almsgiving provided a vital means of survival for people deemed outcasts or who were without the means to provide for themselves. Yet, as many of the biblical prophets proclaimed, the people of God forgot that such offerings were the rightful stipends of those who were socially or physically prevented from economic productivity; instead they pushed aside the needy and refused to establish justice "at the gate" (Amos 5.12–15). Hence the system of charity, which had always included a requirement of justice, soon failed to accord dignity or even adequate provision.

From its inception, the Christian community has acknowledged a special responsibility and mission to marginalized persons, including those who are physically unable to provide for themselves (Acts 6.1–6). Furthermore, several New Testament passages link the notion of charity to healing. In the account of the disabled man at the Beautiful Gate (Acts 3.1–10), for instance, Peter and John respond to a request for donations with miraculous action, restoring the man not only to an able-bodied state but also to social participation and religious inclusion.

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Subsequent church practice often lost sight of this broader vision. Historically, church-based charities have provided humane care, funds for medical research, and indispensable financial support. Yet this has often served only to segregate people with disabilities from the Christian community. While engaging in individualistic charity and healing, the Christian church has neglected the social and political needs of people with disabilities, failing to place as central emphases political engagement and social inclusion.

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

Note

A longer version of this essay appears in the Sept.-Oct. 2002 issue of the *Other Side* (theotherside.org/archive/sep-oct02/eiesland.html).

Work Cited

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Crip Eye for the Normate Guy: Queer Theory and the Disciplining of Disability Studies

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In "Seeing the Disabled: Visual Rhetorics of Disability in Popular Photography," Rosemarie Garland-Thomson argues that representations of disability in photography, over more than a century, have generally fallen into four broad categories: the wondrous, which places the disabled subject on high and elicits awe from viewers because of the supposedly amazing achievement represented; the sentimental, which places the disabled subject in a diminished, childlike, or custodial position, evoking pity; the exotic, which makes disability strange and distant—a freakish or perhaps transgressive spectacle; and the realistic, which brings disability close, potentially minimizing the difference between viewer and viewed. In the essay, which first appeared in print in the important disability studies anthology *The New Disability History*, Garland-Thomson reiterates some of the central disability studies insights that have transformed scholarship in the humanities over the past decade. Simultaneously, she takes disability studies in new directions, providing a critical taxonomy that those of us in the field can use as a foundation for countless other projects.

Disability studies projects are everywhere, it seems: classes and even programs are cropping up in several countries; hundreds of scholars are linked to the Disability Studies in the Humanities e-mail list; and disability is

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