

Even The Resurrection Bears Scars: Introduction to Disability Theology.

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This will be a very short introduction to some of the sort of principles of disability theology. My aim was to generate thoughts and insights from between us and within us. It wasn't, I'm going to tell you lots of things and you have to remember them. One of the most important bits, about disability theology is the acknowledgement that disabled people are also theologians that we know best about our experience of God and our voices on that are valuable, and therefore, from within us, we can create ideas. Anything I say is once again kind of caveated with the truth that there are as many experiences of disability as there are disabled people. Some of what I'm going to say, therefore will draw on my own experience as I'd rather talk personally than talk for you or generalized. Some things will be general, and you have every right to challenge them.

Some of you may have read more disability theology than me. I think Paul has sent me a file, a million articles, which I thought I would get to read, but I haven't and for some of you this might be the first time you're putting those two terms together, disability and theology. So, I hope that this is aimed correctly for today. Hopefully, it will be good and interesting. I'm going to lay

out some of the main starting points of disability theology and some thoughts about the Bible.

I'm a biblical scholar by training. I have this doctor title on the page. My PhD is in Bible and translation actually, but I've ended up in a world where I now mainly talk about disability, equality and inclusion in the Bible most of the time. So that's why there's some Bible stuff in it. I'm going to end by raising the things we might want to talk about in our groups. Again, if actually none of this is interesting to you, you can bring up what you want to do in the groups because this is your day.

Let's get a starting definition out of the way, always nice. A nice quote. So, John Swinton says,

“Disability theology is the attempt by disabled and non-disabled Christians to understand and interpret the gospel of Jesus Christ, God, and humanity, against the backdrop of the historical and contemporary experiences of people with disabilities.”

It has come to refer to a variety of perspectives and methods designed to give voice to the rich and diverse theological meanings of the human experience of disability. Disability theology isn't merely writing and thinking about disabled people, but thinking about the gospel, who God is, and what our responsibility is to one another in light of the experiences of disabled people. So, a day like today, for example, isn't about learning in a kind of didactic way. Me at the front with all the knowledge and you just listening and

taking notes. This is about us encountering one another's stories, our experiences, and therefore encountering words about God. Literally theology just words about God.

Theology isn't something we merely learn either. It's something we do, that we create. It doesn't come about just because some men sit in dusty old rooms somewhere thinking grand thoughts. Though there have been plenty of dusty old men and dusty old rooms, I'm sure. Sometimes criticizing theologians' doctrine or interpretations of the Bible can seem a bit scary for us as though we're pulling on a giant kind of thread on a big sweater that might unravel. But the church has been debating theology since the first biblical texts were written. In fact, right in the middle of our Bible is Paul critiquing the theology of Peter. Our very texts in our religion say, it's all right to have an argument about these things. Everyone has them and there isn't kind of one pure theology that's not influenced by the person that's writing it.

A person's context influences how they feel about God and life, and then what they say they think God is all about. Theology is born as a weird combination of belief that God exists, experience of life, encounters with scripture and our own understanding of ourselves and then some dusty old men in rooms write it down.

All theology therefore has a context. We are here in a disability context, all of us capable of thinking about theology and constructing theological ideas because we're all able to experience God and we all have lives. In fact, this brings me to my first kind of point about disability theology. The voices of

disabled people have changed and challenged theologians to think in better ways, particularly about bodies.

Theology about disability isn't new. There have been people who have sickness, impairments and bodily difference as long as there have been people and they have been written about in the Bible, in theology books, in sermons. But that has been the problem they have been written about. Most theology in the Western church, especially in the Protestant church, has been done by those at the centre of societal power.

Those who are non-disabled, white male, straight. The challenge from disability theology, building on other theologies from the margins is the challenge that I mentioned earlier. Nothing about us without us. Disability theology holds fast to the idea that those of us who are disabled by society and those of us who endure illness in other ways, should have a clear voice in the writing and speaking about illness and disability.

Disability theology then seeks to amplify the voices of those who, for the majority of modern Christian theological development, have been on the margins of the discussion, excluded either by circumstance or because people have felt the need to hide such things. It tries to amplify or find the voices of those who have been completely silenced or worse removed from view. Methods of disability theologians are diverse, denominational backgrounds of those theologians, diverse and theological disciplines are diverse. So, from biblical scholars like me, to ethicists, systematic

theologians, people who do pastoral theology, it's almost as if disabled people are all over the place in every walk of life.

Once the door has been opened for us, we've found, we don't want to shut up about it. The inclusion of these voices has been a challenge to many theologies, which involve the idea of the body. In particular ones which ignored the place of the body in religious experience and thought. Much theology has been done from the place of prioritizing the mind. The body therefore has been thought of as something to either be controlled, used for glory or subdued. In many places, the body is an accessory to true spiritual experience. It is a place where things happen, but nothing more. For many non-disabled theologians, they could deny that their physical situation, particularly if they were white male, really had any influence on the interaction of the person with the divine at all.

Just as white people can often think that race doesn't influence them in their thinking, non-disabled people could write about bodies as one homogenous experience. Disabled people, however, tend to know that the body and the mind can influence worship, experience of God without being told. Our body minds talk to us all the time about what is possible or what not, what works, what doesn't, and we are acutely aware of it in a way that maybe non-disabled people aren't. But non-disabled people do understand that bodies have a place in worship. Depending on your tradition, you may be asked to stand or kneel or raise your arms, to sing or to be quiet. But we know what it is to be excluded from an act of worship due to our bodies, our

connection, therefore, may be more obvious.

We may know if we have cognitive impairments, what it is to just not grasp the language being spoken or the meaning of something that everyone else is joining in with. Disability theology then highlights the complexity of the human body. But also uses the disabled body to do this. I know, and we talked about this interestingly on our table, I know I'm neither defined by my bodies and abilities, but I also know I'm not separate from them.

It's really complex being a disabled Christian. I don't want to say that I am my illness, but to ignore the part it plays in my understanding of myself, my personality, or my development. I've been ill for a long time, it's definitely played a part in how I've developed as a person, feels like an erasure of part of who I am. I neither want to be entirely defined by it, nor do I want somebody to say My body doesn't matter, because how I relate to God has been defined in some ways by this body. Disability theology challenges us to embrace the complexity of our human experience and how it relates to religious experience.

I'm going to try and talk about important critiques to standard theology, that disability has developed. But they're both basically governed by this idea, this one idea that I'm going to mainly focus on.

That is the idea that we are made in the image of God just as we are. We called today Even the Resurrection Bears Scars. This statement is there to disrupt ideas of the perfect body being one that has no damage and no wounds. It's a key part of many

disability theologies and many biblical engagements with disability. If we are made in the image of God, what does God look like then and could they be considered disabled? In her groundbreaking book, the *Disabled God*, Nancy Eiesland, quotes from Luke's Gospel.

While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, peace be with you, and they were startled and frightened thinking they saw a ghost. He said to them, why are you troubled? And why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet it is I myself, touch me and see a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see, I have.

she writes,

“Here we find the disciples encountering the risen Christ. The Startling thing is that the risen Christ still carries the wounds of the resurrection.”

In other words, the risen Christ is disabled. If this is so, then rather than being associated with limitations of personhood, beauty, or perfection, or desirability, human impairment as it is now, is found to be fully equitable with our present and eschatological hopes. More than that, such impairment is incorporated within the life and the body of the divine. Disability not only does not contradict the human divine integrity, it becomes a new model of wholeness and a symbol of solidarity.

This comment upturns, theologies, which equate bodies that are not considered whole with fall or sin or deficiency. Eiesland asked

the question, could God be disabled? what that did was it highlighted the vast ableism in theologies about God and bodies. Maybe it's shocking for you to even think of God as disabled. It certainly wasn't something I'd thought about until I read her book, and I'd been disabled for quite a while by then. An easier place to start, therefore might be, what does it mean for a body to be made in the image of God for you? Can disabled bodies be included in that? This is the starting point of much of this early disability theology, and it was there to critique how theologies about bodies, disability and illness had been constructed to and used for the exclusion of disabled people.

For example, the equating of physical impairments with sin, the interpretation of certain miracles as being about a medical condition, which then equates that illness with being demonic or language, which uses disability as the worst problem. To be blind or to be lame as ways that people can't access God. These were all commonplace without much reflection being done on how a disabled person in the room might feel or the effect on how we would treat them. To accept disabled people is not merely then about physical access to a space which has been a major exuding factor and cannot be minimized, but also to accept their bodies and minds as they are in the first instance. Affirmation of how someone is and how we understand ourselves is really important.

This was radically inclusive, right? Disability theologians challenged the church to be a place where all people would be welcome because all bodies carry the image of God. It now includes all ways that minds work also. Neurodiversity is much

better understood as are people with intellectual disabilities and varieties of cognitive impairment.

But actually, disability theology goes one further than this because it contends that the idea that we're all made in the image of God demands action of belonging, not just inclusion. You are made in the image of God is a radical concept. It fits with the social model of disability. Because if I look at you and I know you're made in the image of God, then I have every impetus to create a world in which you can be celebrated exactly as you are. If I look into your eyes and I say that you are made in the image of God, I cannot mistreat you. I can't say with all of the honesty, you are made in the image of God and then exclude you, bully you, and make you an outcast. I cannot look at you and say, you are made in the image of God, and then ask you, yeah, but what else do you bring to the table?

Instead, if I look at you and I say, you are made in the image of God, I should see something remarkable reflected. Two things happen when we recognize someone else is made in the image of God. The first thing that happens is I'm forced to see you and all that you are, whatever's going on with your body. Whatever you've brought today, whatever stress is there, I have to recognize that God is in you. I have to start to change how I feel about the world knowing that you are in it. The other sneaky thing that happens is this. If I recognize that you are made in the image of God. I must also recognize the image of God in myself, and for disabled people, this can be really hard. The world has spoken to us about everything that is wrong with us for so long

that it's hard to recognize the image of God. But God made us, and they said that we were good. So, is the image of God in the autistic brain? Yes. Is the image of God in my brain when it's foggy? Yes. These are all aspects of God and how God works. So, if I recognize it in you, I must recognize it in myself. For me, that was incredibly difficult once I got sick. I had prided myself on so many things that I thought were things God had given me to perform and put my identity in those and suddenly some of them were taken away. Recognizing the image of God in others forces us to recognize the image of God in ourselves and believe that we too are worthy of love, acceptance and even celebration. Recognizing the image of God in others should also force us to change the physical world around us because why would we not want God to be welcome everywhere?

This is important for churches because we, and I'm saying we, because I'm guilty of this, sin myself a lot in my younger years. Consider disabled people only as consumers of the gospel, congregants' members of the church, and only those with something to teach us in that kind of quite patronizing way from the religious model I introduced earlier, a warning or a sign or something to be grateful that we aren't like, or someone to be inspirational. But disabled people are also those with gifts to teach and serve in ways we may not even understand. Exclusion through forgetting to consider all bodies as worthy of effort to get into our communities has robbed the church of the gifts and the service of disabled people.

I'm here today honestly because of the pandemic I had all given up on doing any ministry things due to my illness. Everything was so inaccessible. I'd taken a break from work, and I'd been out of work for eight months nearly before I got the bursary with LCI. But suddenly in the pandemic, a church allowed me to speak to them from my bed using Zoom. I hadn't been able to get into church and I pretty much felt like that must be over because I just couldn't be present at 10 o'clock, 9:30 on a Sunday morning dressed and also with things to say. I can do one or other. I can be dressed, or I can have things to say, but two things, just not possible. But suddenly somebody allowed me to preach from my bed because they were all at home anyway, and I was able to remember my talents and my skills and my gifts. I felt like a whole human again, not just a burden, but I wouldn't have been able to get back into working if people hadn't been forced to change their minds about whether I needed to be physically in the room. So, the idea of the image of God, Especially, as a disabled or impaired body can shake things up in a few other ways as well. The ways we're going to talk about in our breakout rooms. The ways we're going to talk about in our breakout rooms are another way that the image of God shakes things up for us as disabled Christians.

One is the idea of perfection. The other, the idea of healing and the other, what on earths going on with the Bible. Which is always a good question. I start all my work there. What is going on with the Bible? The idea of the body of Christ being made perfect in the resurrection and therefore our bodies being made perfect, is a prevalent theological idea and this idea gets then

read backwards onto our bodies now. I call this theology, no wheelchairs in heaven.

When Steven Hawking died, there were just all of these bits of art that came out with him walking away from his wheelchair, which was just super offensive as though he hadn't done amazing things. But the only thing we could still think of was at least he's not in a wheelchair now. The man changed the face of science, but okay. It conflates the idea actually of no pain and suffering in the new Heaven and the Earth from Revelation. With this phrase of being made perfect in Christ, and it reads that back onto disabled people's bodies, because in the resurrection we will be perfect. Our bodies must be defective in the present. But Christ's risen body has open wounds, it's porous, it is not removed from the life he had before the resurrection, but rather carries that experience through into the resurrection. Just this simple reading shows that the phrase being made perfect does not necessarily mean a body that is without blemish.

How then might we reconsider our own bodies and their place within this image of God? When I've mentioned this before to people, one reply is, but your body has nothing to do with who you are. But for many of us, we know that is not true. Our impairments or the way that our brain works go along with our conditions, directly affect how we experience ourselves and how we relate to other people, our moods, our thoughts, our identity, our way of thinking, our way of encountering and processing our encounters with the divine and like Christ, they are the markers of the things we have done, the amazing things we have done, the sad things we've been through, how we relate to the world

around us. Without them, we would be different people. So, disability theology challenges us to rethink what is perfection in Christ, what does that look like?

Similarly, it disrupts theologies of healing. Let's assume all bodily difference or difference in the mind is something that needs to be corrected. Many of us will have encountered healing prayer in damaging ways where aspects of ourselves that we value have been considered undesirable or worse, sinful. Healing can sometimes be considered a necessity that disabled people should seek, rather than a spiritual blessing that we might choose to pursue. Healing also often assumes a perfect body somewhere that we are falling short of. Keeping the wounded body of the risen Christ at the centre helps us change the question of what is healing to maybe what is wholeness for us? How can a church help a person pursue wholeness without a narrow view of healing to mean physical or mental correction? Christ is definitely whole in the resurrection, but maybe not healed.

The last thing we'll talk about is disability theology in the Bible. The Bible is as complex as theology, and because many of us have read healing miracles of Jesus with explanations of sin causing illness or words conflating demon possession with mental illness, we may be afraid of the Bible and that's okay. We can talk about some of those in the breakout room or in some follow-up work. But disability readings of scripture can be useful in many ways. Firstly, when someone reads a passage about physical weakness or illness, say in just to name a few, Jesus, Moses, Jonah, Paul, Job. We might not want to necessarily see

those straight away as bad and negative things because we don't relate to ourselves as bad and negative.

We can also take Jesus's weakness as it is. We can see Jesus's risen body for the glorious thing it is with its wounds. Disabled people can take Paul's phrase, when I am weak, then he's strong. Not as metaphorical or some nice platitude, but a challenge to what does God's strength actually look like. Many modern Christian interpreters use this verse to mean that when they are weak, God will turn up in strength in some sort of, and then enable them to run a marathon kind of way. But disabled people know that God can turn up in the smallest parts of our lives as strongly as in the biggest and we remain weak in those moments. I don't magically become physically strong. But God's strength is a very different type of encounter for us.

It's not a great team building strategy or slogan to have on the wall when I'm weak He is strong. But we can challenge people then to take Paul at his word, to see an apostle who is weak and embrace that and know that somebody who considered themselves physically weak still did brilliant things, not as just inspiration, but just as simple reality. A disabled reading of this passage is not to see Paul as kind of just an inspirational goal, but as honest. He's allowed, to his communities that he's writing to, to be weak, and that's okay. There is no detriment in Paul's confession of helplessness or weakness or needing support to read or write, which is another thing that he needs help with. We can reread this as a genuine need for help and support. It's not

negative, but a positive attribute of an accessible God that is present wherever we are in whatever state we are in.

Disabled readings of the Bible seek to find disabled people in the text on their own terms instead of trying to build one reading of disability or sickness from them. We might want to take Moses' declaration that he cannot speak well to be the real impairment and God's offer of support as a model for inclusion. As an example, God does not heal him, but says it's okay. There is a friend who can help you. This is inclusion in action.

The Bible also provides us with evidence of the social nature of disability. The social model is in the Bible, so that's all good, you can tell people it's in Luke five. So here it is.

Once when he was in one of the cities, there was a man covered in leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he bowed with his face to the ground and begged him, Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean and Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him and said, I do choose, be made clean. Immediately the leprosy left him, but he ordered him to go and tell no one. Go he said and show yourself to the priest and as Moses commanded make an offering for your cleansing for a testimony to them.

A small side note on leprosy here. We hear leprosy and we always think that that definitely means Hansen's disease, which is contagious. But actually, medical historians have realized for a long time that the physical leprosy and the word leprosy in the Bible really just is a generic term covering all sorts of skin

diseases, loads of them, things like psoriasis and eczema, come under that. This man is not unclean and kept outside of things because he necessarily is contagious, but he's ritually unclean. The issue's not his disease being one that requires isolation because it's contagious in a modern sense in a medical sense, and it could be psoriasis. But we wouldn't consider that particularly to be a kind of massive, like impairment necessarily, depending on how bad, it is to his life or a disability. But the illness makes him ritually unclean. It makes him socially unclean. Socially a problem. Damage to the body in Levitical law is a problem and until you undergo the correct rituals to be certified as clean by a priest, you are ostracized. So he may not be able to lay with his spouse. He couldn't cook food; he couldn't take part in anything religious.

Jesus' healing here, I'm sure you've been told many times, means the man can go back to the community and live fully. But we need to take note of the fact that it is not the healing necessarily that is just enough for this. It's not just about his skin. The disability and the exclusion are socially constructed. They aren't the fault of the man's bodily illness, but the rules the society has about what to do with that illness. Similarly, his healing is not merely a matter of his personal life and him saying, oh, well, look, my skin is fine, but his ritual and religious life too.

So, the social model is fully acknowledged in this text. Jesus instructs the man to do what is necessary to be communally restored, as well as physically restored. Restoration, as most of us know in this room, to a Christian community, is not just personal. It's not necessarily about how we feel about God. It's

communal, about how we feel amongst one another. I relate kind of hard to his religious exclusion because of my experience with churches and I like to think of him as being restored in social terms.

There are larger issues with the Bible, and I'll talk about some of those in the groups. But just that passage shows us that culture and beliefs about bodies have moved on hugely since the first century and are varied. Understandings of mental health, menstrual cycles are vastly different now than then. What we have to do when we read the Bible is to know this and try and understand what the text is saying in its context to people who are suffering from those conditions and exclusions. So what example is that setting for us? What message can come through?

When we see people in the gospels disabled, they're often dealt with in unique ways. Jesus doesn't heal anybody twice the same way. Which, if nothing else models to us that every person should be treated as an individual and given what they need to be whole, not what we want them to be. Sometimes he even asks them if they want to be made well. So, Jesus is an advocate of consent. Disabled readings of the Bible, seek to find disabled people in the text on their own terms. Instead of just making it about what we want them to look like.

This has been a very quick intro into parts of disability theology, but I hope enough to get us talking to one another and thinking about our own interpretations of our bodies and our minds and how they work with God in the mix.

We belong in church, in biblical interpretation, in worship, because we are here, and we are here because we are all parts of life, and therefore all parts of God's interaction with creation. For me, disability theology has given me this challenge. That you are made in the image of God should be the starting point of any theology we build, not just a final hopeful goal.