

Images of God Through the Lens of Disability

by Elsa (Jane) S. Deland

Editor's note: This article expands on an evolving theological paradigm for considering the role of people with disabilities in the community of faith. We offer it at the beginning of this section as a foundation into which we place the components of worship, liturgy, sacraments and other roads to spiritual growth.

People with disabilities and those who care for them emphasize the following principles which they believe are essential in creating a liberatory theology of disability:

- the experience of disability must be viewed as a wellspring of theological reflection, rather than as a curse or blessing, test or punishment;
- the concept of perfection as a theological norm must be rejected;
- images of healing and wholeness must be conceived differently in order to incorporate the experience of disability;
- oppressive language must be eliminated;
- no one individual can claim to be the image of God alone; and
- only an understanding of the vulnerability and interdependence of all human beings will help us discover what it really means to be human.

Theology belongs to the whole person—mind, spirit, and body. Therefore, the experience of disability inevitably influences theological perspective. Indeed, as Deborah Creamer emphasizes, “theological perspective is affected by and even grounded in [the] experience of disability.”¹ When the experience of disability is used as a source of theological reflection, it challenges us to experience God in and through bodies which are each differently-abled and forces us to acknowledge that the distinction between so-called disabled and able-bodied people is open to debate. Human disability is inherent in the created order and is a part of each life to a differing degree. When God is imaged through the lens of disability it becomes clear that God’s love and grace are not contingent on physical appearance or ability or on sensory or mental acuteness, but only on the capacity to receive God’s love and grace.

Disability is not only inherent in creation, it is an integral part of the history of God’s people. The very name of God’s people, Israel, is connected with human disability, for after Jacob wrestled with the angel he was left with a limp and a new name. Unlike the bodily perfection of the Greek and Roman gods and heroes, the patriarchs and prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures had numerous disabilities. These in no way excluded them from being agents of God’s redemption.

A liberatory theology of disability must reject the concept of perfection as a theological norm. Our culture operates on the assumption that we know what a perfect human being is, and refuses to accept the naturalness of aging, failing faculties, and death. However, life experiences make it clear that there is no such thing as a perfect or normal person. Therefore, we must abandon the myth that Adam was perfect and recapture a sense of the naturalness of human frailty, vulnerability, disability, and mortality.

Mary Jane Owen makes a strong case for the naturalness of human vulnerability. Recalling the words of 2 Corinthians 4:7, she points out, “We must constantly remind ourselves that God’s gift of life is placed in fragile earthen vessels to a powerful purpose....God tied the gift of life to the trait of vulnerability”² to emphasize humankind’s dependence upon God and interconnectedness with one another. When vulnerability is viewed as an essential part of God’s good creation, as both Genesis 2 and 2 Corinthians make clear it should be, it ceases to be something to be feared, or, like sin, something from which humankind needs to be saved. It becomes, instead, a bond uniting all God’s creatures.

Just as the notion of defining humanity in terms of perfection must be rejected, so, too, the commonly held images of healing and wholeness must be conceived differently in light of the experience of disability. As Deborah Creamer insists, people with disabilities “must claim the right to define wholeness for ourselves.”³ Wholeness must be viewed not as a matter of physical perfection but as a concept of relationship—relationship with God and with one another in community. Such an image of wholeness is not static but rather serves as a source of growth. As Frances Young notes, “It is a wholeness that can absorb and transfigure loss, brokenness, disability, failure, sin, hurt, death—all things that are part of the life we have been given to live.”⁴

Likewise, the concept of healing must also be seen to be about relationships rather than about the proper functioning of physical bodies. A clearer understanding of Jesus’ teachings and healings would illumine his deeper healing of the whole person. Jesus sought to minister to people at their point of need and responded to disability by acts of healing to create wholeness of mind, body, and spirit. By entering fully into human disablement and suffering, Jesus fully revealed God’s intention for wholeness of life. When Jesus sent forth into society those whom he had healed, he was stressing the essential communal nature of humankind. Overcoming alienation and separation, the inevitable corollaries of disease and disability, allowed for the healing of relationships, the most precious of all healings. Jesus’ healing presence among people with disabilities challenges us to realize that well-being is more than good health, and that the ultimate evil that can befall humans is not disease, disability, or death, but separation from the love and grace of God.

The healing stories make clear that the Bible’s main emphasis in accounts of suffering is on the person’s response, not on the cause of suffering. While God

permits suffering, God does not cause it, explain it, or apologize for it. Disabilities emerge from accidental, situational, and developmental processes of life which result from the exercise of free will with which God created humankind. How a person responds to these life processes serves as a kind of judgment, for it differentiates between those who respond positively and rise to the challenge presented and those who fail to do so through default or denial. Disability as judgment is not to be confused with disability as punishment for sin, for the latter is clearly rejected by Jesus' teachings.

Experiences of disability highlight the fact that society's negative attitude toward differentness can impose a greater handicap on people with disabilities than their own limitations. Negative stereotypes and labels which oppress and limit a person's ability need to be eliminated so that people with disabilities can be allowed to fulfill their potential. Disability is a fact of life for people with disabilities, an essential part of "who I am." But just as YHWH only served as a designation for God and did not define or name God, so, too, persons with disabilities must be allowed to name themselves and not be defined in terms of their limitations. "I am not what you see" is the cry of many people with disabilities. "I am what I am" is the proper reference both for YHWH and for persons with disabilities.

Just as the image of God is multifaceted, with no one image able to represent the whole concept of deity, so, too, the image of God as it is reflected in humanity cannot be represented completely by any one individual, but only in the corporate diversity of humanity. As Frances Young points out:

We are the 'image of God,' but that means we are reflections of God in different ways, and the whole image is never quite put together (except in Christ). The handicapped...reflect aspects of God which the rest of us do not, and we need the discernment to respond to, respect, and honor their unique witness.⁵

That unique witness derives, in part, from the experience of people with disabilities, who, like Christ, are marginalized and victimized as scapegoats by a society which fails to recognize their value. Just as Christ clearly affirmed that people with disabilities have a definite place in the Kingdom of God, as related in the parable of the Great Dinner (Lk. 14), so people with disabilities contribute to a more complete image of God.

Dean A. Bartel has stated, "To be created in the image of God is not a call to perfection but a call to mutual love and support of each other with God."⁶ This concept of interdependence is a central principle in a liberatory theology of disability. Our relationship with one another, however differently-abled, is a reciprocal relationship. Indeed, it is more often the case that we receive more than we give. Frances Young speaks eloquently to this point: "The handicapped may bring us our redemption. They can effect in us a change of heart, a new set of

values, a new perspective. They can show us what true humanity is.”⁷ Mutual love and support, respect and reciprocity are the foundation stones for relationships for all those created in the image of God, for just as God entered into a covenant relationship with Abraham and Moses and the people of Israel, so are we called to sustain that covenant relationship with God and with one another.

*Elsa Deland, Images of God Through the Lens of Disability,
Master of Theological Studies Paper, Wesley
Theological Seminary, Washington, D.C., (1996):19-25.
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Notes

1. Deborah Creamer. “Finding God in Our Bodies: Theology from the Perspective of People with Disabilities, Part II,” *Journal of Religion in Disability & Rehabilitation* 2:2 (1995): 73.
2. Mary Jane Owen. “The Wisdom of Human Vulnerability,” *Dolentium Hominum*, 172-173.
3. Creamer, 82.
4. Frances Young. *Face to Face: A Narrative Essay in the Theology of Suffering* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 222.
5. *Ibid*, 193.
6. H. Oliver Ohsberg. *The Church and Persons with Handicaps*, with a Foreword by Dean A. Bartel (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1982), 11.
7. Young, 182.