



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

- 📖 Jars of Clay: Disability in Intentional Christian Community
(*Disability*, pp. 34-42)

Suggested Article:

- 📖 Lowering Barriers for People with Disabilities
(*Disability*, pp. 89-93)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to
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Christian Reflection

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Jars of Clay

Living in an intentional Christian community offers a nurturing context to fully embrace the vulnerability that accompanies disability, to concretely enact our Christian beliefs with respect to the intrinsic worth of all human beings, and to affirm the value of all members of the community.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

Meditation 1

Of course, the brokenness and limitations of people with disabilities...is too evident to be overlooked. Much less clear, however, is that, in looking at them in this way, we may fail to see our own brokenness and limitations. To look at other people's brokenness and limitations without seeing our own is a gesture of power; to acknowledge our own brokenness and limitations in the face of theirs is a gesture of community.

Hans S. Reinders

Reflection

"As a person who has lived with incurable neurological disease (multiple sclerosis) for more than half my life, and with permanent disability for many years, I have been very aware of the many ways in which contemporary cultural values with respect to such things as independence, productivity, physical fitness, health, youth, beauty, and so forth, inevitably deepen the sense of vulnerability that accompanies debilitating illness and disability," Kay Toombs writes. "We live in a world that places inordinate value on autonomy and that soundly repudiates any signs of weakness and vulnerability. Thus the sick, aging, and those with disabilities find themselves isolated and marginalized, uncertain of their personal and social worth."

In an intentional Christian community where she has lived since 1998, Toombs experiences an "alternative culture with a radically different value system,...a nurturing context in which it is possible to fully embrace the vulnerability that accompanies disability." She highlights three elements of the community members' countercultural perspective on disability.

- ▶ *They affirm "INTERdependence and celebrate the unique place that each member of the Christian community occupies in the living organism that is the body of Christ."* This contrasts to the inordinate value our culture places on independence, which can poison relationships — making those with disabilities reluctant to admit vulnerabilities (they don't want to be a "burden" on others) and causing their caregivers to resent the loss of freedom they think is necessary for self-fulfillment.
- ▶ *They emphasize BEING OVER DOING.* "In our society a person's worth is judged according to the capacity to produce (to be useful) or the ability to achieve a certain professional status," which leaves those who are unable "to do" feeling as though they have no value, Toombs notes. The Christian community recognizes "that the assessment of personal worth has as much to do with 'being' (or character) as it does with 'doing' is a vital step in maintaining personal integrity and countering negative attitudes with respect to disability."



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► *They realize health includes vulnerability.* On society's view of health as "complete absence of disease and freedom from *any* physical or mental limitation" and achieving ideals of "beauty, physique, physical strength, fitness, and vigor," vulnerability is only weakness. But Christians embrace a paradigm of health grounded in covenantal relationship with God and one another. Toombs writes, by "setting aside selfish ambition, envy, and worldly success in favor of love, humility, and service to others, our lives in community are built upon a basis of trust that enables us to share our vulnerabilities and needs without fear of condemnation from others. As a result, the vulnerability that accompanies the reductions of illness and disability is less a negative life circumstance than it is an opportunity to share in the miracle of relationship."

Study Questions

1. How do the cultural ideals that Kay Toombs identifies – self-determination, doing over being, and health as the absence of disease – combine to devalue people with disabilities?
2. Consider how Paul's teaching on the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-27) stands opposed to those cultural ideals.
3. Explore how life together in your congregation exemplifies the body of Christ in opposition to those cultural ideals?
4. How does Carolyn Winfrey Gillette's hymn "When Hands Reach Out" depict the body of Christ flourishing through the sharing of human vulnerabilities?

Departing Hymn: "When Hands Reach Out" (verses 1, 2, 4, and 5)²

When hands reach out and fingers trace
the beauty of a loved one's face,
we thank you, God, that love relies
on gifts of grace not seen with eyes.

When fingers spell and signs express
our prayer and praise and thankfulness,
we thank you, God, that hands can sing;
you bless the silent songs we bring.

And when the ways we learn and grow
are not the ways that others know,
We thank you, God, that we have learned
your love's a gift, and never earned.

Your Spirit gives us differing ways
to serve you well and offer praise.
When all are joined as one, we'll be
your able, strong community.

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette (2001)

Suggested Tunes: O WALY WALY or TALLIS' CANON

¹ Hans S. Reinders, ed., *The Paradox of Disability: Responses to Jean Vanier and L'Arche Communities from Theology and the Sciences* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2010), 6.

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Jars of Clay

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand how the cultural ideals of self-determination, doing over being, and health as the absence of disease combine to devalue people with disabilities.
2. To consider how an intentional Christian community lives in contrast to those ideals.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Disability (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “When Hands Reach Out” locate one of the familiar tunes O WALY WALY or TALLIS’ CANON in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Report

“Rather than viewing ourselves as either dependent or independent, we affirm our *interdependence* and celebrate the unique place that each member of the Christian community occupies in the living organism that is the body of Christ,” Kay Toombs reports of the intentional Christian community where she lives. “Those ‘with disabilities’ are simply absorbed into community life and find a place of participation where their particular gifts are appreciated. ... I simply never think of these individuals as ‘disabled.’ Rather, I think of them only in terms of the irreplaceable part each plays in the relational context of our community life: the young man, paralyzed after breaking his neck, who has a pivotal role in the young people’s outreach ministry in nursing homes; the child with Down’s syndrome who joyfully participates in our children’s choir; the young woman with a congenital physical anomaly who weaves, spins, and cultivates beautiful flowers using one hand; the extraordinary farmer who works with the horses and who, in other contexts, would likely be discounted as a ‘person with an intellectual disability’; and the autistic child who comes to all meetings and gatherings and who is gradually beginning to reach out to others. I also realize that, since becoming a part of this community, I have not thought of *myself* as a person with a disability [of multiple sclerosis]. It is not simply that no one here treats me in that way but also, in sharing my life, all are sensitive to any barriers that prevent my full participation in community activities. As an example, if there is no ramp providing wheelchair access into a person’s house, arrangements will always be made for people to meet me there and carry me in and out of the premises.”

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to guide your congregation to fully embrace the vulnerability that accompanies disability.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

In this study we follow Kay Toombs into the intentional Christian community where she lives to discover how and why it responds in a countercultural way to disability and the vulnerability that accompanies it. Drawing upon the Apostle Paul's rich description of the body of Christ, Toombs traces her community's response to "the centrality of covenantal relationship...with God and each other."

Take this opportunity to review how your congregation responds to those with disabilities. In "Lowering Barriers for People with Disabilities" Jackie Mills-Fernald reviews resources that can help congregations learn from the vulnerabilities of persons with disabilities and incorporate their giftedness for ministry.

Study Questions

1. Kay Toombs writes, "There is a strong cultural message that we should be able to look after ourselves, make our own decisions, 'stand on our own two feet.' While personal responsibility is, of course, important, when radical independence is considered to be the ultimate value, dependence on others is negatively perceived as a form of weakness." Furthermore, we measure people's value to society by their work, and this emphasis on *doing* may carry over to how we measure their value to a family and congregation. Finally, the cultural "perception of 'health' and 'brokenness' makes it difficult for people to even see beyond the physical manifestation of disfigurement or disability. In the eyes of the 'able-bodied' there is the clear assumption that disability is incompatible with living a meaningful life." So, collectively these cultural ideals suggest persons with disabilities are weak, lacking in value to others and to society, and unable to find meaning in their lives; and these ideals suggest that their caregivers are burdened and restricted in caring for them.
2. Paul characterizes the members of the body of Christ as neither dependent nor independent, but *interdependent*. The "weaker" (more vulnerable?) are still valuable to the body. Indeed, "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it" (1 Corinthians 12:26a). All members contribute in some way to the well-function of the body, but we might extend the analogy in a natural way to say their contribution can be in their "being" rather than "doing"; after all, we would not amputate a weakened hand or an asthmatic lung that was "doing" less well, but would care for it. Toombs summarizes, "In this context, rather than being marginalized as they are in the wider culture, those 'with disabilities' are simply absorbed into community life and find a place of participation where their particular gifts are appreciated."
3. Form three small groups to discuss how your congregation is responding to each cultural ideal. How do members support one another emotionally, spiritually, educationally, economically, and in daily activities? How are members valued for "being" (having Christ-like character) and sharing their presence with others, rather than "doing" their roles in the congregation's work? How are persons' vulnerabilities acknowledged and their giftedness (perhaps refined *through* their suffering) shared in the congregation? "These reductions do not diminish one's worth as a human being," Toombs notes. "Indeed,...the most vulnerable among us – the dying – have been an incredible gift to all members of our community. In every case these individuals have pressed forward in faith and demonstrated that, no matter how burdensome the physical circumstances, God's grace is sufficient for every need."
4. The first verses illustrate how Gillette has been blessed by the worship of friends with sight and hearing difficulties. About the fourth verse, she writes, "I am grateful for the ministry of...Jessie Scanlon, a young woman with autism. She was a teenager when we were serving the church she attended with her family. Every Sunday, she and her sister and parents would sit near the front of the sanctuary, on the left hand side. She had her own ministry there. She reminded us that God's 'love is a gift, and never earned.'" Paul's image of the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 is interpreted in the final verse.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.