



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Many Bodies, Many Worlds
(*Disability*, pp. 18-24)

Suggested Article:

📖 Affirming God in the Midst of Disability
(*Disability*, pp. 79-82)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Many Bodies, Many Worlds

Disability is a mode of human experience that challenges our norms and reshapes our most basic understanding of reality as we encounter the rich diversity of what it means to be a human being in God's image.

Prayer

Almighty and Everlasting God,
who has created each of us in your image
and through the crucified and resurrected body
of a beloved Son made of us one body:
give us hearts and minds, we pray,
to know the wisdom of human vulnerability;
to see the beauty in bodies differently-abled;
to dismantle barriers erected by attitudes and architecture;
and to trust the Spirit's power to make us friends,
make us whole, make us one.
In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

Scripture Reading: 2 Corinthians 12:7b-10

Reflection

Asking "How can we richly include people with disabilities in the life of the congregation?" is an important question to ask, but not the right place to start. The key question, John Swinton suggests, is "What does it mean to be human?" because thinking about the latter question throws important light on the first one.

Swinton finds these crucial clues to our shared humanity in Scripture and the human experience of disability:

- ▶ *All bodies are holy and worthy of love*, for they are earth animated by God's *nephesh* (breath, or spirit) (Genesis 2:7). "Each person, each body is a place where God's *nephesh* continues to sustain life," Swinton writes. "Each body is holy" – not in the sense that it is perfect, or beyond sin, but "there is something of the divine within each person, and it is that which is holy and it is that which makes our encounters with one another holy. As we recognize the presence of God's *nephesh* in one another, we begin to realize that attending to God's creatures is a mode of attending to God." We begin to understand what it means truly to be with people who have disabilities. Their bodies, like all bodies, are holy places."
- ▶ *God uses disabled bodies to carry out key tasks of the coming kingdom*. In what Karl Barth called "the strange new world within the Bible" that is continually reshaping our thinking and feeling as disciples, human disabilities take on rich and varied meaning. For instance, God chooses Moses, a person with a profound speech impediment, to speak to Pharaoh (Exodus 4:10-12). The Apostle Paul – perhaps suffering from depression, epilepsy, or scoliosis – finds God's strength through his disabling condition (2 Corinthians 12:7b-10). In the disabled body of Christ on the Cross we encounter our redemption. Swinton summarizes, "In the strange new world within the Bible, human bodies and human disability have meanings that stretch beyond our simplistic biomedical assumptions that we need to fix what is broken and normalise what we consider to be abnormal. Disabled human bodies can carry powerful messages of redemption just as they are."



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- *The multiple worlds we live in help us understand what it means to be human and to live humanly.* Swinton describes how theologian John Hull's world changed as he went blind late in life: "His hands, which were previously used to *do* things, now became vital sensory organs that informed him of the way the world is. Sounds became primary informants, but he discovered that listening without seeing was quite different than listening with sight.... Hull became acutely aware that...our bodies construct and live in phenomenal worlds which may be quite different from one another, but which nonetheless reveal some of the richness and diversity of human experience." This leads Swinton to ask questions like "What might it mean to take seriously the world of a person with a severe intellectual disability – someone without words or 'normal' cognitive capabilities?" and "What could the experience of people whose wheelchairs have become extensions of their bodies tell us about reality?"
- "As we gaze upon our different bodies, rather than assuming that there is a need for healing and change, either now or in the future, we can recognize each one is a site of holiness and a place of meeting," Swinton concludes. As we begin to see one another as sustained by God's *nephesh*, called (even through disabling conditions) to serve God's kingdom, and knowing the world in rich and diverse ways, we will turn from merely *including* people with disabilities in our communities to longing for their presence in our life together. Then we will truly *belong* to one another within the body of Christ.

Study Questions

1. According to John Swinton, what is the difference between *including* people in a community and their *belonging* to it? Consider why it is so much easier to include people with disabilities in a community than it is for them to belong to it.
2. In what specific ways did John Hull's world change as he became blind late in life? Consider how this supports Swinton's idea that "There is no single phenomenal world somehow 'out there' awaiting discovery. All of us via our bodies construct and live in phenomenal worlds which may be quite different from one another, but which nonetheless reveal some of the richness and diversity of human experience."
3. Swinton describes the Bible as "the doorway into a strange new world." What does this suggest about the role Scripture plays in our discipleship?
4. Through the images in Terry York's hymn "The Twisted Form upon the Tree," consider the ways that God expresses love for us through Christ's disability.
5. What did Tom Graves discover when, from the perspective of his disabling condition of multiple sclerosis, he reconsidered God's power, creation, and purposes for humankind?

Departing Hymn: "The Twisted Form upon the Tree"

Many Bodies, Many Worlds

Lesson Plans

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

Teaching Goals

1. To grasp the difference between *including* people in community and their *belonging* to it.
2. To consider how we inhabit different phenomenal worlds through our bodies (with their disabling conditions), and thus how we require one another's perspectives to understand what it means to be human and to live humanly.
3. To understand what it means to inhabit "the strange new world within the Bible."

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 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.

Begin with a Story

"It began innocently enough as I stumbled and tripped while playing tennis.... My concern grew as I noticed a great deal of numbness in my left hand and my feet began to feel as if I were walking through sand," recalls Tom Graves, President Emeritus at Baptist Theological Seminary of Richmond, Virginia.

"I was thirty-six years old, at the prime of my life, with a loving wife and two young daughters. A few months earlier I was playing tennis, golf, softball, and jogging. Now I was scared to death, or I should say, I was scared of death. I wondered if I would live long enough to teach my daughters how to ride a bicycle. When the [neurologist] concluded lengthy tests and informed me that I had multiple sclerosis, I remember thanking him, knowing what else he was looking for.

"At that same time, the spring of 1983, I was teaching a course on the problem of evil. Suddenly I was no longer a spectator looking objectively at the many instances of chaos and suffering in human life. Now I found myself to be a very fragile participant in the game of life, wounded and afraid like so many others. One lives and thinks differently when one experiences the harsh limitations of human life.... My illness challenged and changed my thoughts at several points." (*Disability*, 79-80)

Tom Graves discovered he was living in "another world," to use John Swinton's phrase. What would he learn there? How would he communicate it to others? And who would listen?

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking members to read the unison prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 2 Corinthians 12:7b-10 from a modern translation.

Reflection

In this study John Swinton claims the experience of disabling conditions, both physical and cognitive, can become windows on perceiving the world, our humanity, and how to live well. He finds confirmation for this

idea both in the Bible and the human experience of disabilities. But the narratives of Scripture are normative for him: they provide the “strange new world” that reshapes our ideas about human disability and enables us to welcome and learn from the phenomenal “worlds” of people with disabilities.

Study Questions

1. “To be included, one just needs to be there; to belong, one needs to be missed,” John Swinton writes. “To belong, others need to long for us to be back among them like the father longed for the return of his prodigal son (Luke 15:11-31). To belong, people need to respect our world and take time to seek out its value. To belong, people need to listen to the challenges and questions that our world raises.” For a person to belong to a community, others need to sympathetically inhabit that person’s “world” and value the insight into reality that it embodies. “We are not talking only about things that need to be *done to* a particular group of people or even structural changes that need to be done within our communities,” he continues. “We are talking about developing the types of conversations, understandings, and relationships wherein our world of multiple worlds can be relearned and in so doing the Body of Christ can be re-membered.” With regard to which disabilities in your congregation are these conversations relatively easy? Which regard to which disabilities are they difficult?
2. John Hull noticed a fundamental switch in his relationship to other things: “for sighted people...the world seems to be ‘out there’...[and] is then brought within the boundaries of the world ‘in here’ as they use their eyes.” This mode of experience reinforces their assumptions that the body is “a passive processor of external facts and conditions” and blind people have a deficiency. As Hull lost his sight, “the world moved inward and became the size and shape of his body. Internal feelings and experiences he had never noticed before became primary as his ability to *look* outside began to fade.... Gradually he found himself moving outward, but this time the world ‘out there’ was different. For instance, colors and faces changed their meaning as their ability to inform him of the nature of the world shifted.” It is this shift in perspective, which was more dramatic and crucial than Hull could have expected, that is the basis for Hull and Swinton’s idea that Hull’s “world changed.”
3. This suggests Scripture cannot be reduced to “rules...for good living,” Swinton writes. Rather, “Its stories, images, rituals, and practices invite us to enter this strange new world. As we read the stories of Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Paul, we come to recognize that their stories are in fact ours. And as we find our place within these stories, they form a lens through which we re-examine the world we thought we knew, and thus begin to transform our understanding of what we previously assumed to be normal.” Consider how, for Swinton, the stories of Moses, Paul, and Christ suggest *patterns of looking at* (valuing, responding to, feeling with) people with disabilities rather than *moral rules* about how to live.
4. The verses suggest that Christ’s suffering on the cross is “God in pain,” “God in need,” “God confined,” “God alone [abandoned],” and “God with scars,” revealing God’s identification with and empathy for our suffering. The people who can see this most clearly are those who are in pain, in need, confined, alone, and with scars. They are not *projecting* their suffering onto Christ, but recognizing in him a form of their suffering. Swinton’s fine discussion of Matthias Grünewald’s *Isenheim Altarpiece* illustrates this point (*Disability*, 20).
5. “My encounter with personal disability brought me to a refined definition of divine omnipotence...[as] relational love, not manipulative power,” Tom Graves writes. “When viewed from this vantage point we understand the nature of God, the creation of the world, and the purpose of human life in a dramatically different fashion.” Graves concludes that “to allow human freedom, God accepts the agony and consequences of human sin; to provide an arena in which human creativity can be expressed, the natural order remains unfinished; and to provide meaning for human existence, persons are given responsibility to work with God in bringing the created order toward completion.”

Departing Hymn

“The Twisted Form upon the Tree” is on pp. 43-45 of *Disability*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.