

Many Bodies, Many Worlds

BY JOHN SWINTON

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.

The world of disability is a strange place. Entering into that world (or better, as we will see, the worlds of disability), challenges our basic understanding of reality and what it means to live fully as a human being before God. Disability is not simply a space within our humanness where we try to enable people to conform to accepted norms. Rather, disability is a mode of human experience within which our accepted norms are challenged and reshaped as we encounter the fullness of what it means to be a human being in the rich diversity of God's image.

"How can we include people with disabilities?" is not the key question when determining how people with disabilities can be enabled to minister faithfully. As we shall see, inclusion is not enough. Rather, the key question is "What does it mean to be human?" I want to offer a perspective on the latter question that throws important light on the first question.

THE STRANGE NEW WORLD WITHIN THE BIBLE

Karl Barth has suggested that Scripture is not a place that we go to in order to gather rules, regulations, and edicts for good living, but is rather the doorway into a strange new world.¹ 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.

Within this new world that Scripture reveals to us, disability shifts its shape. It is no longer simply a focus for the outworking of compassion and healing; we quickly discover that God uses disabled bodies to carry out key

tasks of the coming kingdom. Moses, a person with a profound speech impediment, is tasked with delivering the very words of God. Thus Moses begs, "Pardon your servant, Lord. I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue" (Exodus 4:10, NIV).² God does not heal Moses's disability in order that he can carry out his vocation. Instead, "The LORD said to him, 'Who gave human beings their mouths? Who makes them deaf or mute? Who gives them sight or makes them blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say.'" (Exodus 4:11-12, NIV). Within God's providence disability has deep meaning. Disabilities do not prevent one from having a powerful ministry within God's coming kingdom.

The apostle Paul encounters something similar:

Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

2 Corinthians 12:7b-10

We cannot be sure exactly what Paul's disability was. Interpreters have suggested it was depression, epilepsy, or scoliosis. Whatever it was, God did not feel that it had to be removed in order for Paul to work powerfully for the kingdom. Presumably the reason Paul's prayers were not answered was not that he lacked faith! Rather than being healed, Paul discovered a great strength in the disabling condition. While he and perhaps those around him initially thought it was a weakness, God considered it to be a strength.

Surely the mysterious dynamic of God's intricate involvement with disabled bodies is hinted at in this psalm:

For you created my inmost being;
 you knit me together in my mother's womb.
 I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
 your works are wonderful,
 I know that full well.
 My frame was not hidden from you
 when I was made in the secret place,
 when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.
 Your eyes saw my unformed body;
 all the days ordained for me were written in your book
 before one of them came to be.

Psalm 139:13-16

This of course raises very difficult questions regarding God's role in disability. While such questions cannot be addressed in this short essay, the important point to note is that disabilities have meaning beyond the mere desire of human beings to eradicate them.³

It is not insignificant that the heart of the Christian faith revolves around a damaged body. It is in the disabled body of Christ on the cross that we encounter our redemption. This is wonderfully portrayed in the triptych that Matthias Grünewald painted for the *Isenheim Altarpiece* (c. 1512-1515). The monastery of the Order of St. Anthony in Isenheim (near Colmar in the Alsace region) was a hospice for victims of the plague, and Grünewald's powerful images for its altarpiece have been called "the single most important work of German Renaissance painting."⁴ Two things are quite startling about the centerpiece image that depicts the Crucifixion. First, the hands of Jesus nailed to the cross are curled into claw-like shapes to indicate the extreme pain he is experiencing. While earlier artists had focused on Jesus' impassivity, Grünewald indicated that Christ's suffering was real and unromantic, and by implication that God is not impassive. Second, the body of Jesus is pockmarked with red spots. This dying savior identifies not just with human suffering in general, but with the particular infirmity of the plague victims in the monastery. The image reminds us that in the broken body of Jesus we encounter what it means to be a human being before a God who enters into our brokenness, embraces our suffering and our differences, and through his body moves us towards redemption.

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 normalize what we consider to be abnormal. Disabled human bodies can carry powerful messages of redemption just as they are.

THE SOULFULNESS OF HUMAN BODIES

In order to understand the implications of such a suggestion, we need to think through what it means to be an *embodied* human being. To begin with, what exactly is a human body? In the biblical account of creation we find this statement about the constitution of humans: "then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7). God creates the human being out of dust and breathes his *nephesh* (breath, or spirit), into him. Augustine describes human beings as *terra animata*: animated dust. God's *nephesh* is that which makes human beings come alive, and it sustains them in living. When God decides to withdraw his *nephesh* there is no life. Each person, each body is a place where God's *nephesh* continues to sustain life. That being so, it is clear that human beings are ensouled creatures. We are our bodies as we are our souls.

This observation has important implications for the way in which we

view one another and the various bodies that we inhabit. As earth animated by the breath of God, human beings are, in the words of Wendell Berry, “holy creatures living among other holy creatures in a world that is holy.”⁵ Each and every body is holy. That is not to suggest that somehow humans beings are perfect, or beyond sin, or in and of themselves holy. My point is that 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 *nepesh* in one another, we begin to realize that attending to God’s creatures is a mode of attending to God. As the apostle Paul teaches, “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20, NIV). The key point in relation to disability is that all bodies are holy places. Recognizing that is the beginning of understanding what it means truly to be with people who have disabilities. Their bodies, like all bodies, are holy places.

THE WORLDS CREATED BY OUR BODIES

In his book *Touching The Rock: An Experience of Blindness* and a series of papers on theology and disability, theologian John Hull relates his experiences of going blind late in life.⁶ He not only explores what it felt like to go blind, but offers a challenging phenomenological perspective on what we consider to be normal and why we interpret the world as we do. Drawing on the phenomenology of the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Hull reflects on the ways human beings gather information and create knowledge.⁷

Hull notices that for sighted people who perceive the world primarily by *looking* at it, the world seems to be “out there.” The world “out there” is then brought within the boundaries of the world “in here” as they use their eyes. This mode of experience undergirds a general assumption that the dynamic of knowledge gathering is a movement from the outside to the inside, with the human body being a passive processor of external facts and conditions. When it is assumed this is the only way for human beings to know the world, then those who do not gather knowledge in this way are assumed to be lacking and in need of help from others to “see” the world similarly to sighted people. Blindness from this perspective will always and only be construed as a deficiency.

However, as he began to lose his sight Hull noticed that his knowledge of the world changed. Indeed, he argues, *his world changed*. As a sighted person he had perceived the world as external to himself. However, as his sight began to fade, so 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. At first he felt trapped within his own body, but as he began to adjust, his world changed. 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. Feeling a human face is quite different from seeing one; translating colors into words is quite different – though not necessarily inferior – from looking at color. 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.

As he learned what it meant to live in this strange new world of blindness, Hull's experience offered a new understanding of how all of us encounter the world. Our bodies allow us to experience and engage with the world in a variety of different ways. Hull became acutely aware that we all encounter the world through our bodies; they are our primary source of knowledge of the world. Because our bodies can be different in fundamental ways, we do not encounter the world in the same way. If that is so, then there is no point at which we can call our experience "normal." All of our perspectives are just that – *perspectives*.

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. If we assume there is just one "normal" way to encounter the world, then we will downgrade other phenomenal perspectives that do not match that one. We will try to make those persons' worlds into as close an approximation to our "normal" world as we can manage. Such colonialism of perspectives inevitably ends up constructing people with disabilities as abnormal and requiring some mode of medical or social normalization.

However, if it is true that our bodies generate phenomenal worlds in this way, and if these worlds of knowledge can help us to understand reality more fully and to live well together, then what is required is hospitable conversation and dialogue among us – not with a view to converting one another to our differing worlds, but with a view to listening and learning. For example, what might it mean to take seriously the world of a person with a severe intellectual disability – someone without words or "normal" cognitive capabilities? What could all of us learn by listening carefully to the ways in which their world is created? What would it mean to live well in that world? Or, to take another example, how might we understand the world of people with severe mobility impairments? What could the experience of people whose wheelchairs have become extensions of their bodies tell us about reality?

What can these strange worlds of disability tell us about the strange new world within the Bible, and vice versa? It is only as we begin to take seriously the multiple worlds we live in that we can, together, begin to understand what it means to be human and to live humanly. It is only as we learn to listen to all of our worlds that we can learn what it means to live well in that

strange new world within the Bible.

FROM INCLUSION TO BELONGING

If this way of thinking is accurate, it has significant implications for what might be meant when we talk about including people with disabilities. Beginning with the suggestion that all bodies are holy and worthy of love allows us to look at one another quite differently. 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. If we take seriously the suggestion that the knowledge different bodies offer to us is necessary for understanding the broad range of human possibilities, then our task is to better understand one another's worlds. As we enter into one another's worlds within the context of that strange new world within the Bible, the genuine inclusion of all people becomes a realistic possibility.

However, in this context the goal of inclusion quickly proves to be inadequate. It is relatively easy to include people: they just need to be there. To include people with disabilities or anyone else, we just need to open up a space where they can be in the congregation. But a person can very easily be *in* the congregation and not *of* it! Inclusion is not enough; people need to belong. To be included, one just needs to be there; to belong, one needs to be missed. 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.

Human beings are not simply included within creation, they belong there. Jesus' mission of redemption and reconciliation is all about helping people to know that they belong to God and that God loves them without end, just as they are. As the apostle Paul puts it, "Don't you realize that *all of you together* are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God lives in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16, NLT, italics added).⁸

Reflection on the strange worlds of disability as they relate to the strange new world within the Bible helps us to see that when we talk about ministry with people who have disabilities, 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. We are talking about seeing the world differently and rethinking disability in the light of our new vision. 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. Our task is to create holy spaces where the forces that seek to dismember human relationships are resisted and healed. In this way our minds can be renewed—no longer "conformed to this world," but "transformed" to "discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2). And our practices of

love for all people can become honed and offered to one another as gifts that reveal the fullness and the breadth of being human and living humanly.

NOTES

1 Karl Barth, "The Strange New World within the Bible," in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, translated by Douglas Horton (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 28-50.

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3 For more on this, see the essays in John Swinton and Brian Brock, eds., *Theology, Disability and the New Genetics: Why Science Needs the Church* (London, UK: T & T Clark, 2007), and Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007).

4 Christiane Andersson, "Grünewald, Matthias," in *Grove Art Online* (Oxford Art Online, accessed August 23, 2012), www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T035179.

5 Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, edited by Norman Wirbza (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2002), 308.

6 John M. Hull, *Touching the Rock: An Experience of Blindness* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992); "A Spirituality of Disability: The Christian Heritage as Both Problem and Potential," *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 16:2 (2003), 21-35; "A Broken Body in a Broken World: A Contribution to a Christian Doctrine of the Person from a Disabled Point of View," *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health*, 7:4 (2003), 5-23; and "Blindness and the Face of God: Toward a Theology of Disability," in Hans-Georg Ziebertz, Friedrich Schweitzer, Hermann Häring, and Don Browning, eds., *The Human Image of God* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill, 2001), 215-229.

7 For more, see Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Donald A. Landes (New York, Routledge, 2012 [original, 1945]).

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