

SCM's Disability, Faith and Justice



Devotional

Though we are all made in the image of God, people with disabilities are excluded from society throughout history, and especially since the rise of capitalism. In biblical times, disabled people were usually on the margins of society, seen as the products of sin, and shamed for who they were.

During the industrial revolution, disabled people were largely pushed into institutions, where they were cut off from their communities and often abused. These institutions have largely declined, however, many disabled people live without economic opportunity and they are excluded from society. This is perpetuated by a lack of affordable housing, a scarcity of accessible buildings, discrimination in education, and little community or economic support for those who cannot work.

And this still is the case, even with current legislation to protect disabled people in Canada. People with disabilities have high rates of unemployment and homelessness, and they are less likely to be educated. Many disabled people report that they do not get all of the supports that they need and feel excluded from society, community groups, churches, and movements.

We want to ask the question, how should our faith shape us in this struggle?

In the Bible, we see two different approaches to disability. The first perspective shows sick and deformed people as “unclean”. The second perspective tells us about the Jesus who released us from the purity laws of the Old Testament. In this perspective, God asks us to love the marginalized and the oppressed as we love ourselves. Jesus, who asked for consent before he healed the blind man, was also friends with those on the margins of society. He treated them with love.

This devotional is intended to help you reflect on what the Bible tells us about disability, and how we can work for justice for the disabled. This can be done in a group or on your own. Keep it simple. We encourage you to use the questions to help you begin discussion and reflection, and see where it leads you.

Forms of Meditation and Prayer

Many faith traditions and religious communities teach devotees how to pray. Prayer is an embodied exercise that centres believers, seeks to align our will with God's, relieves some stress, and rejuvenates us in our commitments to justice and peace. Jesus often sought out times of silent prayer during his ministry, and so did the earliest monks and nuns who fled the Church's accommodation to Empire in the 300s CE. Meditative actions like prayer can inspire people in the midst of a world that seems bleak, and can give us joy when we feel sadness or pain.

Prayer can have several components:

Sacred Space

In our hyper-productive culture of consumerism, it's hard to find spaces that speak to us of the Divine. When you find one, hang onto it! Create a spot that holds meaning for you; that can include candles, a comfortable chair or cushion, and music appropriate to the activity.

Time Set Apart

Set time apart for prayer. Prayer can happen at any time of day! Also, taking time for Sabbath—a day of rest from work and justice-seeking—can re-energize you for the week.

Embodied Action

Centring Prayer: sit comfortably in your quiet space. Read the passage for the day, and be still for up to, say, twenty minutes. Pay attention to your body. You can close your eyes if you need to, and set an alarm if that helps. Say to yourself, “I welcome God’s presence.” When your thoughts start to wander, redirect your attention to your breath.

Contemplative Prayer: Use a simple word or phrase to centre yourself. Read your word or phrase aloud, and then repeat it silently. When your mind loses track, return slowly to the word(s). You can use the mantras suggested in this devotional, or words like, "Love," "Joy," "Peace," or "Maranatha," which means, "Come, Lord Jesus," in Aramaic. Physical objects like stones, candles, or books can also be very useful.

Lectio Divina: Read the passage for the day aloud, slowly; then be still and reflect. Notice words or phrases that stick out to you. Then read the passage again, and observe whatever comes to you. Record your thoughts, or share them with a group.

But Moses said to the LORD, “Oh my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.”

Exodus 4:10

We all have our own limits and boundaries. Some limits are considered acceptable by our society, while some are looked on as unwanted, or even taboo or unclean.

A disability is when a person's body functions outside, or not as well, as what is considered “normal”. It may be physical, mental or emotional. It may be visible to others, and it may not be.

The word “disabled” may be used to describe someone who has a physical impairment, or who society has deemed to be “disabled”. It may also be used to describe someone who has defined themselves as disabled, because of how their body works.

Questions for Reflection

What are your limits and boundaries? What are the things that you're not very good at, that you think you should be? How does it impact how you interact with others? What do Moses' words tell us?

Mantra: God, teach me to love people who are different from myself.

The fear of becoming disabled makes us uncomfortable. ...We cling to the cultural norms of attractiveness, independence, self-sufficiency and productivity to avoid [facing] two of our greatest fears: we are not perfect, and we are not in control.

Jennie Weiss Block, Copious Hosting

As he walked along, he [Jesus] saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, neither this man nor his parents sinned, he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.

John 9:1-3

Ableism, simply, is the exclusion of disabled people from society, or from particular activities. In Jesus’ time, disabled people lived very much on the margins. It may different now, but this kind of exclusion still exists today.

Questions for Reflection:

How does the passage from John compare to how we treat disabled people in the 21st century?

Mantra: God, help us to understand how my community has excluded others without realizing it.

A sighted person sees as if seeing involves no effort, no decisiveness... Sighted people can choose to orient—or not—to the choices involved in coming to see what they do... Normalcy is the unmarked site from which people view the stigma of disability.

Tanya Titchkosky, *Disability, Self & Society*

In this climate, disabled people come under scrutiny on account of our very existence... In an ableist system that privileges human bodies that perform like perfect, impervious machines, we look like discarded, broken toys.

Julie Belser and Melanie Morrison, “What No Longer Serves Us”

Tuesday

Confronting Ableism, Part II

When [Bartimaeus] heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” Jesus stood still and said, “Call him here.” And they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.” So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man said to him, “My teacher, let me see again.” Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

Mark 10:47-52

The bible, especially the Old Testament, has been used to justify ableism, just as it has been used to justify sexism and homophobia.

People are often further disabled by the way that society treats them. For example, many of those with learning disabilities are denied the right to a higher education, and people with visible disabilities are assumed to be incapable of normal daily functions. We have all contributed to the attitudes that create this.

Radical disabled activists remind us that what is most important is that they are able to speak to their own needs, and justice will not be found until we listen to them.

Questions for Reflection:

Why does Jesus ask Bartimaeus “what do you want me to do for you?” What does this example tell us about how to interact with disabled people?

Mantra: God, help me to listen to people around me with disabilities.

He is nothing. He should not act as if he is someone who deserves recognition, let alone attention. He should melt into the crowd and make himself invisible, like a good blind beggar... Bartimaeus does not accept this role for himself... He takes control of his life once again.

Kathy Black, A Healing Homiletic

Courage and strength is not the absence of fear - it's refusing to assume the role of a victim.

Anne Wafula Strike

Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind, but fear your God. I am the LORD.

Leviticus 19:14

The biggest barrier to people with disabilities is that others do not know how to accommodate them, or they do not make it a priority.

Questions for Reflection:

What are the barriers that face disabled people in your community? Think about all the buildings that you entered today. Do they all have ramps or elevators? Do you know where to get sign language interpretation if you need it? How much do you know about how to include people with intellectual or learning disabilities? Are you willing to learn?

Mantra: God, help me to notice what barriers exist to those around me.

The church finds its identity as the body of Christ only by being a community of faith and witness, a coalition of struggle and justice, and a fellowship of hope.

Nancy Eiesland, Disabled God

Love recognizes no barriers. It jumps hurdles, leaps fences, penetrates walls to arrive at its destination full of hope.

Maya Angelou

Adversity isn't an obstacle that we need to get around in order to resume living our life. It's part of our life.

Aimee Mullins

Thursday

Working for inclusivity

The king said, "Is there anyone remaining of the house of Saul to whom I may show the kindness of God?" Ziba said to the king, "There remains a son of Jonathan; he is crippled in his feet." ... Mephibosheth son of Jonathan son of Saul came to David, and fell on his face and did obeisance. David said, "Mephibosheth!" He answered, "I am your servant." David said to him, "Do not be afraid, for I will show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan; I will restore to you all the land of your grandfather Saul, and you yourself shall eat at my table always."

2 Samuel 9:3, 6-8

Questions for Reflection:

What is David's attitude towards Mephibosheth? What can we learn from David? What does it mean to be inclusive?

Mantra: God, let me be a source of healing for others.

The life and ministry of Jesus testify that his mission is to bring God's justice and peace to all people, especially the victims of the world...solidarity is countercultural.

Paul J. Wadell, *Becoming Friend*

I don't believe in charity. I believe in solidarity. Charity is vertical, so it's humiliating. It goes from the top to the bottom. Solidarity is horizontal. It respects the other and learns from the other. I have a lot to learn from other people.

Eduardo Galeano

Walking with a friend in the dark is better than walking alone in the light.

Helen Keller

God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female, he created them.

Genesis 1:27

Sometimes, when a person becomes sick, or has a child who is disabled, the first question is “what did I do to deserve this?” It is helpful in these situations to remember that you, and your children, were created in the image of God. You deserve love.

Questions for Reflection

The passage in Genesis repeats three times that humans are created in the image of God. What does it mean that it was repeated three times? If people with disabilities are created in the image of God, what does that mean for us?

Mantra: Affirm me in my gifts, God, and help me to encourage gifts in others.

We ought to think that we are one of the leaves of a tree, and the tree is all humanity. We cannot live without the others, without the tree.

Pablo Casals

I am different, not less.

Temple Grandin

I argue that human being is defined not by one’s capacity for agency, symbol-use, or self-reflection, but rather by one’s participation in relationships of mutual responsiveness.

Molly C. Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability*

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot were to say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear were to say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.

1 Cor. 12:12-18

Questions for Reflection

What is the Kingdom, or the Republic, of God? What is the Body of Christ? Who is included in the Republic of God? How do we build Republic of God here on earth?

Mantra: God, help us to have faith and work for your republic.

Human bodies that are the temple of the Holy Spirit in this life...anticipate being hosts of the resurrecting power of the same Spirit in the life to come... The resurrection body is thus continuous and yet transformed...by the life-giving Spirit of God.

Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*

Jesus' resurrection is the beginning of God's new project not to snatch people away from earth to heaven but to colonize earth with the life of heaven. That, after all, is what the Lord's Prayer is about.

N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*

What if earth

Be but the shadow of heaven, and things therein

Each to other like, more than on earth is thought?

John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

Disability Etiquette!

From Jennie Weiss Block's Copious Hosting:

1. Do not make decisions that affect people with disabilities without their participation.
2. Use common sense. People with disabilities are just ordinary people and want to be treated in the same way you would like to be treated. Act in the same way that you would normally act, appropriate to the situation at hand.
3. Always speak directly to the person with the disability, not to the person accompanying him or her.
4. Be aware that a person with a disability sometimes needs extra time. Make this accommodation willingly, in a way that does not make the person feel uncomfortable.
5. If you are planning a meeting or event, try to anticipate what specific accommodations people with disabilities might need.
6. It is fine to use common expressions like, "See you later," or "I've got to run now." What is not appropriate is to use disability slurs or descriptions that have negative meanings.
7. Never pretend to understand what a person is saying. Listen attentively and be patient.
8. If a person uses a wheelchair, respect the wheelchair and the space around it. Do not touch the wheelchair, or lean on it, or push it without being asked.
9. If an individual has a developmental disability, keep the communication direction and simple. Stay focused on the person, and give them time to understand and answer.
10. Become knowledgeable about the different types of disabilities among the members of your own community, and offer the spiritual, moral, and physical things that are needed to offer these individuals access.

Betcher, Sharon V. *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007.

Block, Jennie Weiss. *Copious Hosting: a Theology of Access for People with Disabilities*. New York: Continuum, 2002.

Eiesland, Nancy. *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1994.

Vanier, Jean. *Becoming Human*. Toronto: Paulist, 1998.

Yong, Amos. *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining*

Theology in Late Modernity. Waco: Baylor, 2007.

Faith-Communities and e-Resources

Cerebral Palsy.org: <http://cerebralpalsy.org/>

Christian Horizons: <http://www.christian-horizons.org/churches/resources-for-churches/>

Disability and Faith: <http://www.disabilitiesandfaith.org/>. Check out their “Disability Resources Manual” in particular: <http://www.disabilitiesandfaith.org/resources/guidebooks/Disability-Manual-Churches.pdf>

Disability and Faith Forum: <http://www.disabilityandfaith.org>

L’Arche: <http://www.larche.ca/>

Ragged Edge Online: <http://www.ragged-edge-mag.com/>

Still my Revolution: <http://stillmyrevolution.org/>

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