

*“Our Disabled God”*

John 9:1-38

The Rev. Nancy Conklin

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The disciples see the blind man (nameless and faceless), and rather than looking upon him with eyes of compassion, they see just another blind man forced to beg on the streets in order to live. But to their credit, at least it provokes them to think theologically about his disability. “Who sinned — this man or his parents?” they ask Jesus. Their question is reflective of what their Jewish tradition taught — that physical illness or disability was caused by sin, either the person’s own or as an inherited punishment from their parent’s sin. Jesus tells them neither is true.

Instead, he tells them, “This man is blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” What exactly does that mean? The English translation makes it sound like the man was born blind so that one day Jesus would come along and perform a miracle for all the world to see the power of God at work in him. What Jesus is actually meaning to convey is that God is present in this situation as God is present in every situation — working for good. God is not necessarily the cause of all things as those onlookers have come to believe.

Enlightened as we disciples are, most of us no longer think that physical illness or disability is punishment for sin. But, we also know that’s not the only theological question we ask when we, or someone we love, is born disabled or becomes disabled. Why me? Why my child? What kind of God allows this to happen? That last one was posed to me by a participant at a women’s retreat I led last May. It was the first time I had seen her since she had become confined to a wheelchair two years ago after complications from a surgery for a spinal cord injury.

In the past two decades, a number of theologians have chosen to wrestle with those “why” questions. The most prominent of them was Professor Nancy Eiland, a theologian at Candler School of Theology. She was born with a congenital bone defect in her hips. By the time she was 13, Professor Eiland had undergone 11 operations, all to no avail. As a young teenager, she realized that chronic pain and limited mobility was to be her lot in life, creating her own spiritual struggle. Listen to how she described it:

Growing up with a disability I could not accept the traditional interpretations of disability that I heard in prayers in Sunday school and in sermons. “You are special in God’s eyes,” I was often told, “that’s why you were given this painful disability.” Or, “Don’t worry about your suffering now; in heaven you will be made whole.” This confused me. My disability had taught me who I am and who God is. What would it mean to be without this knowledge? Would I absolutely be unknown to myself in heaven and perhaps even unknown to God? I was assured by well-meaning adults that God gave me a disability to develop my character, but by age 7 I was convinced that I had enough character to last a lifetime. My family frequented faith healers with me in tow; I was never healed. People asked about my hidden sins, but they must’ve been so well hidden I misplaced them. The theology that I heard was inadequate to my experience, so as a teenager I became an activist.

Through her activism, Professor Eiland learned that the reason people with disabilities had such low self-worth wasn’t because of their physical limitations but, in her words, “because societies made us outcasts and treated us in demeaning and exclusionary ways.” That fueled her passion for working on the passage of advocating for more accessibility and civil rights laws. But her spiritual struggle to find some meaning in her disability raged on. Until, one day, she experienced an epiphany. The chaplain at a local rehabilitation facility asked her to lead a Bible study for persons with spinal cord injuries. One afternoon, she shared with the patients in the group her own doubts about God’s care for her. She asked them how they would know if God

was with them and understood their experience. After a long silence, a young man said, “If God was in a sip-puff maybe he would understand” — an image that left this esteemed professor of theology astounded and overwhelmed. God in a sip-puff wheelchair! The kind you maneuver by blowing and sucking on a straw-like device; not an all-powerful, self-sufficient God, but neither a pitiable suffering servant. This was an image of God as a survivor; as one of those whom society would label “unemployable” or with “questionable quality of life.”

Several weeks later, Professor Eisland was reading in Luke where Jesus appeared to his disciples after his resurrection. They were alone and depressed, and Jesus says, “Why are you afraid? Why do you doubt? Look at my hands and my feet. See that it is I myself. Touch me, see me.” It was Professor Eisland’s moment of enlightenment. This wasn’t exactly God in a sip-puff, but here was the resurrected Christ making good his promise that he would be with us, embodied both divine and disabled. The resurrected Jesus is a God those with disabilities can identify with because He himself was not cured, not made whole. His injury is part of him, neither as divine punishment nor as an opportunity for healing. This disabled God accepts all of us, comes to all of us, and works through all of us. Each of us are whole in body and in Christ.

Her epiphany led Professor Eisland to seminary, where she pioneered what has become a theology of disability. Her own questioning sparked a whole new wave of faith seeking understanding as people who are blind, mute, and disabled began writing theology in light of their own experiences with our disabled God.

Which brings me to what struck me in this familiar story of the man born blind, and why Stuart and I read it the way we did — to highlight all the dialogue going on about this man and his life; all the back and forth questions about his blindness and why God made him that way. Until the very end, rather than being spoken about as a labeled object of inquiry, the man was able to give voice to his own experience and then testify to his own encounter with Jesus, the incarnation of our disabled God. When we in the church talk about striving for greater inclusivity of welcome in all its varied forms, the paradox is we speak as a majority making room for some minority — a group defined by their difference or their disability. Or, as those in the majority in this case — the able-bodied — with all good intentions, attempt to speak on their behalf rather than listen to their own voice and hear what their experience reveals to us about our God. And, again, with all well-meaning intentions, we tend to welcome them as “special guests,” as if they don’t already belong in the church as members of the One Body of Christ. That One Body is made up of all parts of each of us — parts that are beautiful, broken, impaired, complex, gifted, powerful, limited, yet fully whole in God’s eyes. It is this body of Christ that incarnates the disabled God for our world; a body that grows healthier as we listen to voices long-silenced in our midst.