

Easter 3B
The Rev. Emily Richards
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The Disabled God

“Are you hurt?” A question put to me by the four-year old flower girl after I had finished conducting a wedding rehearsal last Friday. The child had seen me standing throughout the rehearsal and then leaving in a wheelchair. Living with a disability all my life, I’ve become very experienced in these situations, responding both to the curious child and the apologetic parent. After a few minutes of conversation, the child skipped on ahead of me and out of sight, her question answered and her curiosity leading her in a totally, new direction. It’s interesting that at four years of age one can already equate a wheelchair with some sort of physical pain and be eager to know about the struggle associated with it. As this child grows up she will learn to stop asking these kinds of questions. She’ll be taught by well-meaning, but embarrassed adults that they are inappropriate and even rude. She’ll learn to stop inquiring about another human being’s wounds and work hard at hiding her own because we live in a culture where wounds are symbols of weakness and imperfection. How often do we ask the person sitting next to us in the pews, “How are you really feeling today? Tell me about your pain.”

Because my wounds and the wounds of many of my sisters and brothers living with disabilities are so visible, we feel the need to compensate for them. We accommodate to the desires and wishes of the able-bodied world, working tirelessly to make our neighbors and friends, family and fellow church members feel comfortable and safe around us. We embody the stereotypes of the brave and inspiring disabled person who has fought to overcome her struggles, becoming so conditioned to dismissing our wounds even to the point of discounting their existence. Rarely am I asked, “Tell me about your pain.” That’s why the four-year old’s question was refreshingly honest. She was not only curious about my wounds, but unafraid to get to know the real me. The church has been a place for me where I have felt most safe, affirmed and loved; and at the same time, I must confess, it remains a place that makes me, as a person with a disability feel not fully welcome and valued, a place that is afraid to embrace me for who I really am, to embrace others for who they really are as broken and beloved children of God.

Dr. Nancy Eiesland was a theology professor at Candler Divinity School in Atlanta and lived with a disability throughout her life. In her seminal work, *The Disabled God* she spoke about her struggle with the church, believing that this human expression of

Christ's Body had been complicit in the stigmatization of people with disabilities. "I have been part of congregations whose practice of receiving communion includes filing to the front of the sanctuary and kneeling at the communion rail. Often, because I am either in a wheelchair or using crutches, an usher alerts me that I need not go forward. Instead, I am offered the sacrament at my seat after everyone else has been served. The congregation is undoubtedly trying to be conscientious and inclusive in their own way. But in effect, they are transforming the Eucharist from a corporate experience to a solitary one for me, from a sacralization of Christ's broken body to a stigmatization of my disabled body. I am hardly alone. For many people with disabilities, the Eucharist—which should be the ultimate sacrament of unity of believers—is a ritual of exclusion and degradation. Access to this celebration of the body is restricted because of architectural barriers, ritual practices, demeaning body aesthetics, unreflective speech, and bodily reactions. The Eucharist becomes a dreaded and humiliating remembrance that in the church we are trespassers in an able-bodied dominion. For many disabled persons, the church has been a "city on a hill"—physically inaccessible and socially inhospitable. This Eucharistic exclusion is symbolic of a larger crisis. Sadly, rather than offering empowerment, the church has more often supported societal structures and attitudes that have treated people with disabilities as objects of pity and paternalism. The primary problem for the church is not how to 'accommodate' disabled persons. The problem is a disabling theology that functionally denies inclusion and justice for many of God's children."

It was when Eiesland had the epiphany that the risen Christ is also the disabled God, was she able to imagine a place for herself and those like her in the church. "The disabled God embodies the ability to see clearly the complexity and the 'mixed blessing' of life and bodies. This revelation is of a God who is for us, one who celebrates joy and experiences pain not separately in time or space, but simultaneously. This symbol offers us a liberating realism that accepts our bodily limitations as part of the truth of being human. At the same time, it offers hope, pushing us toward social and interpersonal transformation, toward a justice of access and mutuality that is free from barriers that exclude, constrain, and humiliate us. It affirms that our nonconventional bodies, which oftentimes dissatisfy and fail us, are worth the living."

When I first read Eiesland's book I realized why I always loved the post-resurrection stories in the Gospels. Jesus' wounds do not disappear with his resurrection. His pain and suffering are integral to his identity as the risen Christ. In fact, his frail body is the initial sign of the resurrection for his followers. Jesus said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see." It is through their knowledge of Jesus' wounds that the disciples first come to experience the power of their risen Lord.

In her latest book Anne Lamott shares a similar way of looking at our wounds. “The ancient Chinese had a practice of embellishing the cracked parts of valued possessions with gold leaf, which says: We dishonor it if we pretend that it hadn't gotten broken. We value this enough to repair it. So, it is not denial or a cover-up. It is the opposite, an adornment of the break with gold leaf, which draws the cracks into greater prominence. The gold leaf becomes part of its beauty. Somehow the aesthetic of it having been cracked but still being here, brought back not to baseline but restored, brings increase...”

The symbol of the disabled God can be a liberating one for us all. For, each of us have visible or invisible wounds that make us feel isolated and unloved. Each of us have scars that mark the struggles and pain we have endured. Each of us will one day, if not now, have to face bodily limitations. As many in the disability community like to say, “Most of you are just temporarily able-bodied.” But these cracked parts of ourselves may also be the very parts that add to the sacred beauty of our lives and our community. The church is beautiful and broken, wounded and powerful, complicated and gifted. It is this body that comes together every Sunday remembering Jesus’ broken body and in this Eucharistic act is made whole. It is this body, which incarnates the disabled God for our world and is called to follow in the liberating ways of the risen Christ. When we create a community in which all are unafraid to ask and to answer truthfully, “Are you hurt?” then and only then, will we embrace the salvation Jesus is inviting us to encounter through his divine and disabled presence. Amen.

This sermon is inspired by Dr. Nancy Eiesland’s *The Disabled God*. Parts of it is taken from an article written by an article entitled *Encountering the Disabled God*.