

Taking A Disabled Theology Perspective of John Nine -- The Man Born Blind
The Rev. Debra Slade, St. Francis Church, Stamford, CT, March 26, 2017

When I was a young professor at Columbia Law School in my 20's, I thought I had the world by the tail, as they say -- an apartment on NY's West Side, engaged to be married, a job that was interesting, and in my field of study. And then, without warning, everything changed. I became very, very sick -- so ill, that it became impossible for me to leave my apartment, barely able to teach my classes, gripped by excruciating pain, with debilitating symptoms. The doctors I visited could not find anything wrong with me. I had test after test, many of them invasive. One suggested that the symptoms I had -- burning, abdominal pain, and urination of up to 100 times a day, might actually be in my head. After reading a letter to Ann Landers by a woman physician who had the same symptoms, I got together with this fellow sufferer in New York, and together we ran the Interstitial Cystitis Association. For the next fifteen years of my life, I am happy to say, I worked, along with many people, to change the face of woman's bladder disease, which back then was primarily a male specialty. We changed the description of the disease, interstitial cystitis, in the standard medical textbook from a "female hysterical syndrome" to a legitimate disorder with diagnostic criteria. But a lot of what I did had to do with supporting people, mostly women, with the disease, and helping them navigate the complicated world of medicine that had told them for years that they must be crazy.

I know what it is like to feel disabled, and with a bladder disease that is hard to talk about, even laughable to some. My disease, like many, is invisible -- I look healthy on the outside. I used to say that there are two worlds -- the land of the sick, and the land of the healthy. Some of us suffer with chronic illness, some of us with temporary illness. Some illnesses are physical, and some are mental. Some are invisible and some are visible. Most people, at some point in their lives will be disabled -- will travel to the world of the sick -- and many will incur stigma, ridicule, and even abuse for something that is completely out of their control, an unlucky combination of their genes and the world.

For the most part, a lot of the bible doesn't deal with sick or disabled people very well. And the same thing can be said in the bible for other big categories of the human race -- women, being the most obvious example. In many of the biblical "healing miracles," people with symptoms basically equivalent to mental illness are said to be possessed with demons, and those afflicted with physical ailments are cured because they have the right amount of faith. Unfortunately, this leads some Christians who believe in miracle healings to put too much stock on the size of one's faith as a criteria for healing. Some churches with healing services will have crutches strewn around the building as a sign that people were healed there, and didn't need their crutches anymore. In one of our most well known hymns, "O for a thousand tongues to sing" by Charles Wesley, there is the 5th verse, that makes me cringe every time I sing it -- "Hear him, ye deaf; ye voiceless ones, your loosened tongues employ; ye blind, behold your Savior comes; and leap, ye lame, for joy." Our 1982 Hymnal made only a slight correction from the original that read instead of voiceless ones said "ye deaf, ye dumb." No comment! I want to send a shout out to our hymn selection committee who choose this hymn to sing today but not the fifth verse!

Given this backdrop of prejudice against the disabled from time eternal, it should not be surprising that in John's Gospel of the healing of a blind man by Jesus, we see prejudice against

the blind person at the very beginning of the narrative. The disciples ask Jesus when they see him begging—“who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” This was a commonly held belief that physical ailments were a result of one’s sins, and if not your sin, the sins of your parents. In other words, it is a belief that if you or your children have physical problems, it is because of your sins. And from this can follow the prejudice against the disabled – you are like this because God is punishing you for being a bad person. Sadly, even today I continue to see this false belief in my ministry at the hospital. I sometimes hear from patients and their families, both a concern that they got sick because of previous wrong doings, and guilt when their prayers are not answered.

As a counter to this, the book, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberation Theology of Disability* by Nancy L. Eisland broke new ground in this area by describing the negative consequences of linking sin with disability, a theme that she and others, feel are perpetuated throughout both the Old and New Testament, and particularly in the healing narratives. Like other liberation theologies such as feminist theology, black theology, LGBTQ theology, from the work of Eisland and others in the disability movement, came disabled theology. The disabled, like other groups who develop a liberation theology, read the bible looking for clues about God’s purpose for them and the role their uniqueness plays in the world. A disabled theology looks at texts to see if they make a connection between the disability and sin or transgression, and when the physical healing takes place, so symbolically, are sins forgiven. And if so, a disabled theology would try to debunk this classical interpretation that can only continue to create unfortunate and harmful misconceptions of people whose physical impairment has no connection to their morality or their faith.

In John 20, when the resurrected Jesus appears before his disciples (John 20: 20), and before Thomas (John 20:27) it is his wounds that he shows them, his hands and sides which show the disfiguring injuries he received when he was crucified. Eisland says: “The disabled God is not only the ONE from heaven but the revelation of true personhood, underscoring the reality that full personhood is fully compatible with the experience of disability.”¹ The resurrected Christ comes back as the broken God who has a strong connection with those whose bodies are not perfect. By inviting people to touch his wounds, Christ also models for us the way we should all respond to those with disability, without fear and without disgust.

When looking at the story of the man who was born blind, a disabled theology would look for clues as to whether, as a narrative with plot, character and structure, it gives a positive or negative perspective of disability and disabled people. It is my belief that through a careful examination of character and character development, one may find encouragement in this story for all people of faith including the disabled. The man who was born blind shows others the true meaning of blindness; that sight is born of faith. Wayne A. Meeks, in his article, “The Ethics of the Fourth Evangelist” describe the man who was born blind as “the model disciple” who stands by the account of his healing and in doing so courageously reveals his faith despite the personal risks this may entail. In no other traditional physical healings by Jesus in the bible are we given

¹ Nancy L. Eisland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 100.

such a full characterization of the person who is healed. In almost every scene, the man who is born blind is the main character with, arguably, the biggest part.²

One important theme that can be derived from the elaborate details of the narrative is how the man who was born blind and his healing are not hidden in any way. As the narrative unfolds, the man who was born blind becomes more and more confident, and challenges the Pharisees by teaching them about the nature of God to the point where he is driven out by them. Like the example, where Jesus shows his wounds to people, the man who is born blind, does not pretend that he was not formerly a person with a disability, he openly discusses this with both neighbors and authorities without fear and without shame. The man who was born blind, is reborn as a seeing person, and, with this, reborn as a person of faith, but like Jesus who openly shows the evidence of his wounds, he is still the man who was born blind, the man who was shunned, the man who had to beg for food. He does not deny this when asked many times. And importantly, it is Jesus who rebukes the disciples for their suggestion that he is blind because of his own sin or that of his parents.

At the end of the narrative, the man who was born blind is both no longer physically blind and is also spiritually in the light. Whereas, the Pharisees who continue to insist that they do not understand where Jesus comes from, and do not recognize a miracle for what it is, are called both blind and full of sin by Jesus at the end of the story. The usefulness of this reversal in terms of disability theology is to show both that Jesus does not equate physical disability with sin, and that those who are without physical disabilities may be impaired in their own way and sinful as well. The characterization of the man who was born blind makes him a disciple of Christ and one who can be a role model for the disabled. Like Christ, he continues to assert his former disability which models a new view of wholeness that includes a disability that need not be hidden or disguised. John's depiction of the man who was born blind is useful in showing us God's affiliation with all people, but especially those who have been marginalized by the world. Although Christ's miraculous cure of the man's blindness is not available for everyone with disabilities, his story is a hopeful and positive one for all, and despite his cure, he still continues to be affiliated with his former life as a disabled man in an inhospitable world. And thus, his triumph is a metaphor for all the disabled that Christ, the disabled God, is there for them, truly knows and understands suffering, and calls all of us to welcome and include them. **Amen**

² Wayne A. Meeks, "The Ethics of the Fourth Evangelist" *Exploring the Gospel of John*, R. Alan Culpepper and C. Clifton Black, eds., (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 322.