

Body Talk: The Disabled Body

Genesis 32:22-32; John 9:2-3

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You have probably seen this image before. It's called "my wife and my mother-in-law" and is one of those optical illusions which two people can look at and see very different things. Some people see a beautiful young woman looking off to the side. Others see an elderly woman who appears to be looking down. Which do you see? Are you able to see the other? Here is a little help. The older woman's nose is the younger woman's jawline and the older woman's eye is the younger's ear.

A few years back, a group of scientists studied which image people see first when they look at this picture and discovered what they call "own age bias". In other words, at first glance, people tend to see first whichever image is closer to their own age. Our age also biases how we judge the ages of the two women and the value we assign to them, revealing our society's bias against elderly. People more readily see the faces of those in their social "in-group" and do so with more in-depth and holistic processing.

This bias toward people most like ourselves impacts how we read scripture, as well. As we read, we tend to imagine people of the Bible looking like us. Just like what we see in this optical illusion is biased by our age, how we read scripture is biased by our own social identity and what we have been taught about people different from ourselves - including people with different bodies. Which brings us back to our theme for this worship series called "Body Talk", in which we are exploring what scripture reveals to us about our bodies. Today, we will focus on disabled bodies.

We have all grown up learning which type of body is "best" or, at the least, "normal". In our country and much of the western world, that has been a young, white, fit, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied male. That body has been our starting point for assessing all other bodies. The further a body is from that definition of "normal" or "valuable", the more it is marginalized and its value diminished.

This has been true for millennia and shows up in our lives and in scripture over and over again. Historically, it has also influenced our theology. When theology is developed by people who are very much alike, it is biased toward their interests and values. One group of bodies that have been profoundly impacted by this are disabled bodies. For centuries, disabled bodies have been viewed as lesser. Our society centers the needs, wants, and interests of able bodies. Therefore, many of our institutions are not accessible physically, socially, intellectually, or spiritually to those with disabilities. We start with the assumption that able bodies define "normal" and disabled bodies are problematic, but what if we've got it backward?

Over the last few decades, a new area of theological thinking has emerged which centers on the experience of people with disabilities. So, I'll be sharing some of the insights from the Theology of Disability with you today.

One important voice in this work is Stephanie Hubach, a research fellow in disability ministries at Covenant Theological Seminary. She writes that we tend to think about disability in one of three ways. Number 1, disabled bodies are abnormal in a normal world. If we can only fix them, then they can be normal like ours. Number 2, disabled bodies are normal in a normal world. Disability is another form of diversity. But this view doesn't address the pain and suffering experienced by disabled people when the world is inaccessible to them. Number 3, disability is normal in an abnormal world. The problem isn't with disabled people. The problem is humanity and our bent toward sinfulness. If humanity lived as God created us to, with compassion and respect for each other, disabled bodies would be celebrated rather than de-valued and excluded.

But, what happens if we put aside these categories of "normal" and "abnormal" and begin instead with the understanding that all bodies, regardless of race or sexual orientation or gender or ability, all bodies are made in the image of God? What if we start from the assumption that God made disabled bodies as one expression of God's good and beautiful Creation and therefore, they deserve the same inclusion and acceptance as any other bodies?

The story of Jesus and the man blind from birth gives us a good example of this kind of shift in perspective. In his travels, Jesus encounters a man who has been blind his whole life. The disciples jump right into making assumptions. Their first assumption is that being blind is a bad thing and so the man must want to be healed. The second is that someone sinned - either the man or his parents - and his blindness is God's punishment for the sin. Painfully, we still hear that interpretation of disability among some conservative Christians today. What is important, though, is Jesus' response. Neither the man nor his parents sinned. Rather his blindness reflects the mighty works of God. God has created him this way with a purpose - that he might reflect God's image into the world.

If we were to set aside our biases and see disabled people as God does, we would celebrate their reflection of the radical love and creativity of God.

There is another scripture story that I didn't include in our scripture readings for today but also helps us to see how God views disability. This is the story of the call of Moses. Disabilities advocate John Stinton tells the story this way. You see, God had a very big job that needed to be done. Someone needed to lead God's people out of slavery in Egypt. And God chose Moses. Moses was really not keen on this assignment because he struggled to speak clearly. So, he told God, "I can't do it because I've got this speech impediment. Can't you find someone else?" But, God was having none of that and responds, "Who gives people the ability to speak? Who's responsible for making them unable to speak or hard of hearing, sighted or blind? Isn't it I, the Lord? Now go! I'll help you speak, and I'll teach you what you should say."

Here, God points out that God created disabled humans and they are good - just as God said in the beginning that all Creation is good. Good exactly as we are. When Moses wants to back down because of his speech impediment, God doesn't just say, "oh well, let me just fix you." Rather, God offers Moses help from others and from God's self.

Furthermore, God doesn't see disability as a barrier to doing God's work in the world. In fact, in Paul's letters to the Corinthians, when he speaks about the Body of Christ, he says that

“the parts of the body that people think are the weakest are the most necessary...God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the part with less honor so that there won't be division in the body and so the parts might have mutual concern for each other.”

So, our human tendency to think of disabled bodies as lesser is, in fact, the exact opposite of God's intention.

In fact, we can go so far as to see God assign covenantal meaning to a disability. When Jacob wrestles with God all through the night, there comes a point when Jacob's thigh is injured and he walks with a limp for the rest of his life. At the end of the night, God changed Jacob's name to Israel and then blessed him. And just as circumcision became a sign of God's covenant with Abraham, the torn thigh became a sign of God's covenant with Israel, both the person Israel and the people of Israel. And the Israelites never again ate the tendon that attaches to the thigh because that is where Jacob got injured.

All of this richness in scripture comes to light when we let go of reading it through the lens of what is “normal” or “better”. When we let the text speak for itself and reveal to us God's embrace of disabled bodies.

So, what does that mean for us as in society and the church today? God calls us to the ministry of reconciliation, which means that God calls us to teach and embody a fully inclusive community. Thanks to the good work of our trustees and our access team, our church has done many things to be more accessible to those with disabilities, but there will always be more we can do. As God's ministers of reconciliation, we should continue to frequently and intentionally evaluate how accessible our buildings, worship services, and programming are to all of God's people and lift up the needs, voices, and gifts of those with disabilities.

Individually, we need to do the internal work of recognizing that our biases, both the bias we have toward people like ourselves and the biases we have learned from society, cast a shadow on how we view others and influence our willingness to be fully inclusive.

On a personal level, when we recognize how we have learned to value some bodies over others, we can begin to look at how we view our own bodies. How does the idea of a “best body” or a “normal body”, impact what you think of yourself today? How do you judge your body? For those who are aging, how does it impact your sense of worth as your body can no longer do what it once did? How can you work to see your body, whatever its abilities and disabilities, as a beautiful expression of God's creativity and love rather than focusing on its faults?

As you go into the week ahead, I encourage you to consider your own biases about bodies - what is good and what is not, what has value and what does not. Also, look around you for evidence of the sin of exclusion - in the spaces where you spend time, in politics, in social discourse. How can you intentionally create opportunities for inclusion to welcome all the faces in the picture of God's creation?

May it be so. Amen.