Limping Toward Liberation: Rethinking Disability

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`[0:00]` Good morning, everyone. My name's Matt. I'm a part of the preaching team here at the table.! And I've been here, I realized this the other day, for something like 10 years, which has been a while. So, this morning, we're continuing our series on Embodied, wrestling with this concept of ableism and disability theology.

For those of you who haven't been with us for the past couple of weeks, the first sermon right after Easter, Dr. Amy Kenney, who's a disability scholar, gave us an introduction to sort of the scope of this topic of disability theology and ableism in the church, where she asked us to wrestle with this idea of Jesus, when he was fully resurrected, still had literal wounds in his hands and his feet.
And what does that mean for our theology of resurrection, that Jesus' hands and feet were still broken or not healed? And then last week, we had a panel, both in the morning service and the evening service, with folks really introducing us to this idea of this social model of disability, which is distinct from a sort of a medical model, which says, like, there's something wrong, we need to fix you, to a social model that says, actually, it's society around you that is causing you to have these struggles.
So we're going to lean into that social model of disability a little bit further this week. And I really want us to think about how sort of society writ large, but also us as a community here at the table, can stigmatize and alienate people with disabilities, and how we can be guilty of ableism, and how do we create spaces that are truly accessible and welcoming.
So just a little bit of background. As I was researching this sermon, I kept coming across this stat that blew my mind, and that is that at any given time here in the United States, one in four people is suffering from a disability, either a temporary one or a permanent one.
`[1:51]` And basically, all of us at some point in our lives will experience some form of disability, whether that's through aging, whether that's through an injury, whether that's through something else that happens to us. So I want to stress, before we dive into this too deep, that a conversation about ableism and disability theology is not some niche topic that only impacts a very small number of people, but it needs to be central to our work of collective liberation.

What does it mean to seek the renewal of all things in the context of a quarter of people in our country having disabilities? So today we're going to start in Genesis chapter 32, and then we're going to dance around a little bit.
So if you have a device or a physical Bible, we're going to be in Genesis 32, starting at verse 22.
Before I read this passage, just a few words of context.
So Jacob, who is the grandson of Abraham, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, he is currently fleeing from his father-in-law, Laban.
So Jacob and Laban had had a pretty tumultuous relationship. Jacob was a little bit of a trickster, a little bit of a scammer, and then Laban kind of scammed him back, and then they had this kind of ongoing battle, and in the end it all came to a head and Jacob had to run away.
`[3:07]` So Jacob runs away, and he is running back to his brother Esau, who he has also scammed out of an inheritance. So he's kind of stuck between literally a rock and a hard place.

He is going to meet his brother, who has very kindly agreed to send 400 men to meet him. So that's the context of where this passage starts. So starting in verse 22.
That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his 11 sons and crossed the ford at Jabbok. After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all of his possessions.
So Jacob was left alone. And then a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched.

Then the man said, let me go, for it is daybreak. But Jacob replied, I will not let you go unless you bless me. The man asked, what is your name? Jacob, he answered.
`[4:05]` And then the man said, you will no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome. And so Jacob said, please tell me your name. And the man replied, why do you need to know my name?

And then he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, it is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared. Then the sun rose, and he passed through Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip.
Therefore, to this day, the Israelites do not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip, because the socket of Jacob's hip was touched near the tendon. So there's a lot going on in this story.
Yeah. But let's start with a few things that happen sort of directly at the same time and try and use those as a building block for what does it mean to create a disability theology.
So firstly, we don't know who this man that Jacob is wrestling with is. It tends to get read as an angel or even literally some embodiment of God.
`[5:07]` But Jacob is wrestling with this dude all night, and this guy can't overpower him. And then suddenly in some moment he realizes, well, if I can't overpower you, I'll just touch your hip, which sort of suggests that maybe he could have overpowered him.

But anyway, that's not really the point of the story. The key takeaway here is that Jacob loses his fight with this godly being, and as a result, he becomes permanently disabled.
In this moment, in this encounter with God, Jacob becomes permanently disabled. At the exact same time, he receives a blessing from God, and he receives a commission and a promise associated with his new name to become Israel, the father of a nation, which is the same promise that God made to Abraham, his grandfather, and to Isaac, his father.
So in this moment, three things happen at once. Jacob gets a disability, Jacob gets a blessing, and Jacob gets a promise. None of those things compensate for the other.
None of them negate the other. None of them happen because one of them had to happen, where you have to have a blessing, therefore you have to have a disability, because we have to balance some cosmic world. They happened at the same time.
`[6:17]` So Jacob leaves this battle with his new name, a blessing from God, and a permanent limp. The man who became the father of Israel, literally the lineage of Jesus, was brought about not just by Jacob's disability, but also Isaac, his father, who was blind.

There is a lineage of disability into the family of Jesus. And again, I want to stress this. Jacob, after he met with God, after he had an encounter with God, as a result, he walked with a limp.
And I keep wondering if there's a lesson here, and this is kind of what we're going to try and explore today, that when we think about encounters with God, and we think about this idea of sort of healing and wholeness and resurrection, we tend to assume that they're going to result in physical healing as well.
And so I want to explore some of that tension today, of like, what does it mean that Jacob had a real encounter with God and then walked away with a limp? Because I think if we take this narrow view of encounters with God lead to this sort of physical healing, we might be missing some deeper truth about our identities as individual children of God and the diversity of the collective of God's people.
So let me use a couple of examples from my own experience to try and highlight some of this tension, and then we'll explore what it means for us.
`[7:40]` So firstly, I have to wear glasses, as I see many other people doing as well. And the reason I have to wear glasses is because medically, I have a disability. My right eye doesn't work.

It's literally, it didn't grow right, or some of the lenses in it got all merged together, or it got misshapen. There's a medical term for it. It's called an astigmatism. But essentially, it means my eye is deformed, and I can't see properly.
And there's a solution to this. These things. There's no, the two I know of, there's no surgery to fix astigmatism.
There's no procedure you can do. There's no drugs you can take to realign the lenses in your eye. And no one's really invested in creating one. Why? Because for the small price of $500, or if you're lucky and have insurance, $480.60, you can get these pieces of plastic that restore your vision.

I said it was a somewhat silly example. So this is the social model of disability in action. This idea is what it means to talk about socially disabling versus physically disabling. There are places in the world where you can't get glasses.
`[8:55]` There are places in the world where I would not be able to see, and my life would be pretty severely impacted. If I take these off, I literally can't read these words in front of me. I had to memorize that section in order to continue this.

And like, I can see you all, but all of your faces are now very blurry. And if I do this more than about 30 seconds, I'm going to give myself a splitting headache. That would be disabling. That would mean that I could not engage in normal activities of daily life.
But here in the U.S., it's not disabling to need glasses. It simply accepts it. I mean, I'm just looking around the room. Like, a quarter of the people in here are wearing glasses probably. No one, when I walk into a church, is like, oh my God, man, let me pray for your eye.
Let me pray for you. Let me pray for you to be better. I'm not excluded from any activities except perhaps dodgeball, but maybe that's a good thing. And in fact, to bring this back to a slightly more serious point, wearing glasses has become a part of my identity.
I've been wearing glasses since I was like four years old. I have never had a time when I remember basically not wearing glasses. I'm an academic at a university. Glasses are really helpful for your credibility as an academic at a university.
`[10:08]` So there's something about this idea that I have this thing that is literally broken in me. It doesn't work, but it's actually helped me and developed my identity and helped me become who I am today.

And so I was struck in Dr. Kenny's sermon a few weeks ago. She basically said like, hey, I'm going to have my scooter in heaven. And I think that was jarring to a lot of folks, but having thought about it, I'm like, I hope I have my glasses in heaven.
I really do. I mean that genuinely seriously. And so I kind of see what Dr. Kenny means with like, she hopes she has her scooter. But, but, no matter how much we all want to lean into this sort of social model of disability, no matter how much we sort of relate to the somewhat silly analogy of wearing glasses, there is a part of us, me particularly, and I'm sure for many of you as well, that kind of wants to help people with disabilities have those disabilities go away.
And there's a danger in the church that we can draw our theology from that. If you think of Jesus' encounter with John the Baptist's disciples in Matthew 11, I won't read the whole thing, but basically John the Baptist is in prison.
He knows he's going to be executed by King Herod. He spent his whole life saying, the Messiah is coming. He is Jesus. Here he is, sitting in a basically solitary confinement cell. He has a moment of doubt.
`[11:25]` He's like, was that the Messiah? Is Jesus the person I was told to speak to? So he sends his disciples out to Jesus and say, ask Jesus, Jesus, are you the Messiah?

If you've studied the Gospels, you'll know Jesus is literally physically incapable of giving a straight answer to a question. So instead, he responds by saying, go back and report to John what you hear.
the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.
It sounds here like Jesus is saying that in the kingdom of heaven you can tell, or you can tell the kingdom of God is here because the blind can see, the deaf can hear, the lame can walk, and the poor, they got some good news.
which seems to be in stark contrast to what we just talked about. And if, like me, you hold none of the identities that Jesus references, this kind of sounds kind of reasonable, right?
`[12:29]` Like, as a picture of heaven, there's no pain, there's no blindness, there's no deafness, there's no people unable to walk. But what if you are blind, or you are deaf, or you are unable to walk?

A lot of disability theologians point out that what Jesus is describing as the kingdom of God, and by perhaps extension what we view as the kingdom of God, is one that those people are not a part of. And our gut reaction is to say, well, yes, you'll still be a part of it, but you'll be better, you'll be fixed, you won't be in pain, you'll be restored, you'll have this ability to live a normal life. Ouch!

No wonder the church has a rough time with disability justice. So this is the tension that I want to explore a little bit today. And I would love to give you a nicely parceled out answer at the end, but really all I can do is sort of lift up some tension and give us some things to think about.
So I want to start by telling another story about myself, because I'm up here and I get to do that. So about three years ago, I managed to break my right ankle in three places.
`[13:38]` There's apparently three ways you can break your ankle. I managed all of them. And over the course of basically a month, I had to have my ankle literally screwed and bolted back together by a surgeon.

And as you can imagine, having a broken ankle is literally a disabling injury. In our current medical context, it is likely a temporarily disabling injury, as you can see, because I can now stand on it. But it is disabling. And yet the medical team, myself, basically everyone, agreed that the solution was to fix my ankle so I could walk normally again.
That this surgery, that the recovery time, that all of this physical therapy, all of the expense and all of the pain was justified because I'd go back to normal. And I think as I've been sort of struggling with this concept of healing and normalcy, I think it's the normal part that can trip us up when we think about disability theology.
I think sometimes when we think about what it means to be normal or whole or experience the kingdom of God, we sort of think of it as meaning like me.
`[14:44]` This is the kingdom of heaven will look like me. But nothing, nothing about the ministry of Jesus or our faith does God say anything about people becoming normal.

And certainly he doesn't say people should become like me. And in fact, I think, and I'm not going to dig into this but just to put it out there, I think some of the most dangerous distortions of our faith historically have come because we have made God like us.
We have made God in our image believe that we are normal and centered our own image of God based on that. So let's talk about what this means.
In Dr. Kenny's book, which I thoroughly recommend you read, I think there's a couple of copies still on the welcome desk, she tells this story about when she finally lost patience with the medical establishment trying to make her walk normally.
So she was 16 years old, she was getting another round of steroid shots in her back, the doctor was massaging her hip trying to make it move properly, they ran a bunch of tests, these doctors were literally talking over her, ignoring her wishes, making disparaging comments about her, and eventually she sort of snapped and said, look, I don't want to do this anymore.
`[15:56]` This is not worth it. And the doctor addressed her parents, not her, and said, this is what we need to do so your daughter can walk again.

She'll regret it if she doesn't. And in that moment, Dr. Kenny realized something that I think is pretty common among people with disabilities, is that having a normal life, however we choose to define that, and getting treatment for your disability might be two polar opposite goals.
Having a normal life might not mean being yanked out of class as a 16-year-old three times a week for doctor's appointments. It might not mean doing homework in hospital waiting rooms.
It might not mean being unable to function in class the next day because you got steroid shots and they made you vomit all night the night before. The drugs, the tests, the work that the doctors were doing to make Dr. Kenny well were actually impacting her life in a negative way.
And I think this is the challenge. This is the piece that I'm trying to tease out, is that when we as a society, a medical community, a church, when we impose our perception of what someone's normal life should be, when we impose our ideas of what someone's normal should be, we deny their agency.
`[17:12]` We deny their humanity. And the fact that they are fully human and completely whole, they're not a deficit that we need to reach into and fix, but a person that just wants to live a normal life.

And I think that's the sin of ableism. It's holding fast to this sort of rigid, narrow definition of what a normal life or what a well or whole life is, and then forcing people to conform to our definition instead of allowing them, the agency and God-given dignity, to live their life the way that they see fit.
It's people with no experience of disability imposing their view on how we think renewal and liberation will come to pass in their bodies.

Fun fact that I also discovered, I mentioned at the beginning about one in four people in the United States are disabled. Anyone want to take a guess at how many in the medical profession are disabled? Very close.
It's about 3%. About 3% of folks in the medical field are disabled. So think about the power dynamics there. So I actually spend a lot of my time in the mental health world and I want to give you an example of how this dynamic of sort of power dynamics and an imposition of our own definition of normal can lead to ableism and tragic consequences.
`[18:35]` Is anyone familiar with the organization Autism Speaks? Anyone heard that name? Yeah. Even if you're not familiar with them, you've likely seen their Wear Blue for Autism campaign. So Autism Speaks is an incredibly controversial organization for good reason.

They were founded in the early 2000s as all the best things are by an old white couple with too much money who wanted to influence the world with their view of normal.
Their granddaughter had been diagnosed with autism and so her grandparents basically said that they wanted to create an organization to raise awareness about autism and ultimately to find a cure to eradicate autism.
And as Autism Speaks grew larger and more influential throughout the 2000s, a lot of folks with autism and other neurodivergent conditions and even some researchers started to push back on this idea of curing or eradicating autism.
A lot of folks with autism said we don't have a disease. autism is just a different way of experiencing the world. And while it is true that some people with autism may need care or have some special needs literally met, it's just a different way of experiencing and translating the world and we should be celebrating those differences not trying to cure them and make them normal.
`[20:03]` So finally in 2016, so about 11 years after the organization was founded Autism Speaks did remove curing autism as one of their goals. But to this day they're still led primarily by neurotypical people and much of the damage has already been done.

It's hard to undo 11 years of advocacy pushing for curing something. See Health Secretary Kennedy. So what does all this mean for us?
I'm going to try and ground it in what we can do as the table in the last few minutes. And I think firstly as I was thinking about this sermon and I was thinking about our vision as a table, as the table, we talk about collective liberation and the renewal of all things.
And I think part of the challenge of this disability theology journey that we're going on is that we need to interrogate what do we mean by collective liberation and the renewal of all things.
Is our idea of collective liberation a world where people are liberated from their disability or is our idea of collective liberation a world where disabled people are liberated to be everywhere?
`[21:13]` Are we seeking to liberate people from their chairs or create spaces, events, worship services and practices that are accessible to and honoring of people in wheelchairs?

Are we envisioning a world where people are liberated from their deafness or are we envisioning a world where liberating things like sign language interpretation and closed captions are normal?
Are we dreaming of a world where no one is autistic or are we intentionally making space for people who process differently and might be overwhelmed by a loud worship service with multiple sensory inputs? And as a part of this, I want to tell a little bit of a story about the history of the table.
It's not been around for an awful long time but we have a history. And so I think probably most of you joined after this happened but way back before COVID we used to meet in an ancient Methodist church in Columbia Heights.
It was a nice building. It has its charms. But one of the biggest barriers to this building quite literally was that like a lot of old buildings in D.C. there was no way into this building without climbing up multiple steep flights of steps.
`[22:27]` And then even once you got inside there were transitions between rooms that had steps up and down. And so a lot of people with mobility issues, not just people with wheelchairs but again, if you've got a broken ankle walking up a steep flight of steps can be challenging.

And so a lot of people were literally excluded from our morning service when we met in Columbia Heights because the building just wasn't accessible. And at one point I remember we tried to figure out like is there a way to build a ramp on the side of the building so that at least folks in wheelchairs can kind of get into the building and we can figure it out from there.

But essentially the conclusion was it wasn't possible. The way the steps were set up, the way the door frame was designed, it just wasn't possible to build this ramp. And that was that.
That was the conversation. Cool. We'll continue to meet in one accessible space and one not at all accessible space. And collectively as a community we were okay with that. I think we've grown a lot since then.
I think thinking about collective liberation is something that has come out of our growth from that. But it's also recent history. And I think it's important that we own that.
`[23:39]` So I want to leave us with a challenge in closing. I want us to think about how the good news of Jesus might actually look more like joining with people who have disabilities, joining with disability advocates in their work of breaking down barriers that are both literal and figurative that disable them.

Collective liberation promised by God is a world where scooters and sign language are a part of the complete kingdom. And our work here is to listen to people who have disabilities and follow their lead in what they want, not waste our breath praying for a cure or holding out for a miracle.
When Jacob met with God, he emerged with a blessing, a promise, and a limp. And none of those three invalidated the other. And I'd be willing to bet that if we do meet Jacob in heaven, he goes by the name Israel and he leans on a cane and walks with a limp.
Let's pray. Jesus, we pray for our community here to reflect on what it means to be agents of collective liberation.
What does it mean to bring your good news that all people are welcome in your kingdom? Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.