

Divine Wheelchairs: Reimagining Disability in Faith and Community

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Preacher: Amy Kenny

[0 : 00] So, last week we had an amazing time at Easter. The praise was high. Three people reaffirmed their baptisms in our community. Pastor Anthony preached this wonderful sermon.

! And we just had overall a really great time celebrating the resurrection of Jesus. But, in this Easter season, it's important to remember that we can't just talk about resurrection without talking about the body.

And, sadly, in our society, you can't talk about the body without considering the ways in which we place bodies into hierarchies of value.

Now, this is something that we talk a good bit about at this church when we talk about black, indigenous, and people of color and the issues that affect them. We talk about it a good bit when we talk about queer folks and when we talk about women.

But, if I'm honest, I think we don't talk enough about it when it comes to disabled folks. So, in this Easter season, as we contemplate the wonder of Jesus and his resurrected body, the mystery of Jesus and the way in which his scars mark new creation, we're going to turn our attention to the topic of disability theology and disability justice.

[1 : 19] And, like so many theologies that come from marginalized communities, disability theology is for all of us. It is a theology that offers, like, a wealth of wisdom in terms of thinking about what it means to be a faithful disciple.

It offers a wealth of wisdom in terms of practical things and how we, particularly, like, how we don't center our ableism. So, today, I have the privilege of introducing our guest speaker for the morning, Dr. Amy Kinney.

She's going to kick off the series. And, you may have seen her book on the table. It's out there on the guest table right now called *My Body Is Not a Prayer Request*. Dr. Kinney is a disabled scholar practitioner, writer, and advocate, and serves as the inaugural director of the Disability Cultural Center at Georgetown University.

Her work has been featured in *Teen Vogue*, *Huffington Post*, *The Mighty* Sojourners in *Shondaland*. And, her book mixes humor, personal narrative, and theology to invite communities to rethink their ableism and learn from the embodied wisdom of disabled people.

In addition to her academic work, Dr. Kinney has served on the Mayor's Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Task Force and as a facilitator for Freedom Road for Leadership and Justice.

[2 : 43] While co-leading a mutual aid group supporting neighbors experiencing homelessness for several years, she co-founded Jubilee Homes OC, a permanent supportive housing initiative in her community.

Originally from Brisbane, Australia, she is at home in the water where she'd always rather be. And, as I had the opportunity to talk to Dr. Kinney about this sermon, was just so impressed by her faith and took away a number of things to think about from my own discipleship.

So, if you would join me in giving a warm welcome to Dr. Amy Kinney. Thank you.

Thank you. And, thank you, Reverend Tanetta. Thank you for that introduction. And, thank you, everyone, for that warm welcome. As was said, my name is Amy. I use she-her pronouns. And, I'll start with a quick visual description for access.

I am a disabled white Australian woman. I'm wearing an orange dress with Greek pottery on it so that you think that I'm fun. I'm sitting in my mobility scooter that is bedazzled with a W for Wonder Woman so you remember who you're talking to.

[4 : 05] Thank you. Thank you. Throughout our time together today, I'll be sharing pieces of scripture and how those connect with my story. I encourage you to connect with the ones that serve you, to discard the ones that don't, and to consider how all of our experiences, while distinct, are all different vases of the same song.

I also invite you throughout our time together today to co-create a culture of access with me. So, we know that creating a culture of access takes all of us.

So, I encourage you to get up, get down, pace, stim, move, dance in whatever way is most accessible to you today.

Let's start with a story. I have a confession to make. He blurted out, bulldozing the conversation. I hold my breath as the words jolt out of his mouth, my lungs wrung out at the word confession.

I want to include disabled people, he claims. But the truth is, I just can't picture a good God allowing disabled people into heaven.

[5 : 19] Disabled people aren't God's plans for perfection. Breathe, I remind myself as I count. If I make it to ten, I know I can cut down on the finger wagging in my voice.

I get to nine before seeing him open his mouth again, so I choke out, if you can't picture disabled people in heaven, then I guess Jesus can't be there. I yank up the speed of my wheels from tortoise to hare before he can respond.

Ever since my book came out, I've become a confessional. People want to confess their ableism to me as if simply admitting it will make it go away.

They haven't done the whack. They want to skip ahead to the finish line. They want a participation trophy labeled disability ally. They want absolution, not justice.

Like the pastor who admitted without embarrassment that she's prayed for wheelchair users to have faith so that we can walk, before adding, that's what I was taught to do in seminary.

[6 : 26] As if that makes it any better. Or the church elder who told me with no signs of blushing that they hadn't realized disabled people even had opinions about God.

They didn't know we were capable of faith. Surprise! We're people too! Or the group who disclosed that their church isn't accessible, but it's not because they don't care.

It's because of budget. Accommodations cost money and they only help some people. But bagels and coffee are for everyone, so they can't cut that budget.

I understand that, right? Oh, I understand. Camel meet eye of needle. Or the colleague who told me just this week that I should stop focusing on ableism, because when it comes to including disabled people, look how far we've come.

Okay? Okay? I have been told that I represent the decay of humankind, that my disabled body mind is sinful above all else, that I can't serve communion at my church because it makes people uncomfortable to be confronted by disability, that I'm a heretic leading people astray with my wicked ways, that I'm disruptive and oversensitive for asking churches to please just let me in the building.

[7 : 55] But by all means, tell me how far we've come. It turns out I am everyone's one disabled friend, accepting their casual confessions about all the ableism they never knew they had.

They want to be cuddled into believing that they are different from the church folks who fought against the Americans with Disabilities Act. They want to be told that they're a good person.

And it's okay that they didn't know that in this country, disabled people still don't have marriage equality, minimum wage protections, or the right to attend any church.

They want absolution, not justice. But the truth is, it's not okay. It's not okay to demand our gratitude for doing the bare minimum of learning what ableism is.

Hello, Google. It's not okay if the way that you gather excludes us. It's not okay to heap the emotional labor on me as if I should thank you for realizing that disabled people are, in fact, people. We are 15% of the global population and 26% of the U.S. population. If you can't understand that one-fourth of your neighbors are human, then you might have lost the plot of church a long time ago.

[9 : 22] People think that they are doing something extra when they treat us like human beings. They want us to be grateful just because they suddenly recognize that folks communicate in diverse ways or because they now allow sensory tools in service or because there's a place for us to pee.

Ableism keeps us grateful. I want to tell casual confessionals all this. I want to tell them the pain of being dismissed, forgotten, or forced into performing gratitude. I want to tell them Matthew 25 from the ASV, Amy Standard Version. Depart from me, for I used a wheelchair and you gave me no ramp.

I needed an ASL interpreter and you said it was too expensive. I asked you not to say disability slurs and you laughed at me. I told you I was disabled and you doubted me. I said I didn't need to be prayed away and you said that's just theology. I just wanted to belong and you said it makes people uncomfortable.

Whatever you did for disabled people, you did for me. But I don't always tell them this because I don't think it smells like Jesus for me to tell strangers that all the time. And because we need non-disabled people to understand our humanity. Our survival depends on it. But I don't want to just survive.

I want to thrive. I want to share the joys of disability to revel in the ways that disability has added to all of our lives. I don't want to use the tools of ableism, white supremacy, xenophobia, heteronormativity, and misogyny to create our own exclusive community. I want us to dismantle them altogether. I don't want absolution. I want justice. I want community. Not a community centered around who we are against, as if the only thing that we have in common is that we hate the same people.

[11 : 41] Common enemy intimacy is not community. Not a community where we're all competing for gold in depression Olympics. None of us medal that way. I want us to recognize the divinity in one another.

I want us to learn from the disability wisdom of creation what it means to co-flourish. In fact, it was the trees that whispered my worth long before any church community did.

Crooked, the white coats told me on repeat. My leg is crooked. My alignment is off. But little in nature is straight. Creation is crooked. The bumpy trunks of redwoods, the snaking branches of elm trees, the ragged edges of maple leaves. Creation is vibrantly crooked.

It is human stuff that is orderly and logical. But the canvas of creation is wild, unruly, and exquisitely messy. Or, as Paul puts it, creators' invisible qualities are clearly seen throughout nature. And they are delightfully disabled. Everywhere I turn, I marvel at nature displaying its radiant disability. Crooked branches, real name, are hunched, sprawling their limbs outward in every direction, like Gaga's abracadabra video. Their branches are crooked, much like my crooked body, bent and beautiful in our distinctiveness. The hues of reds and oranges that sweep across the autumn leaves are due to cold temperatures, shorter days, and less chlorophyll. The vibrant color change we witness every autumn signals the lack of productivity of these trees. We might say that the trees are following their access needs, resting instead of producing. That sounds a lot like spoonie and disability wisdom to me. We can't always produce. We don't always have the energy to hustle.

And just like the trees, we are vibrant and worthy of care. People mock us for knowing our limits, but we know the disability wisdom of following the rhythms of rest. Deep beneath the ocean's surface, an octopus has arms growing out of their head and can camouflage to hide from predators.

[14 : 18] These masters of disguise change their coloring and texture to replicate nearby rocks and coral. Their physiological changes are much like the fluidity of dynamic disability, which describes the experience of access needs fluctuating from day to day. Some days I need help getting dressed, some days I don't, but all days I can knock your socks off. And more importantly, on all days I am worthy of belonging and care. No one claims kangaroos are too, are feeble because they cannot walk backwards.

No one mocks sharks for communicating without speaking. The sound effect you associate with shark is courtesy of jaws, not nature. The ostrich is not weaker than the robin because they cannot fly.

We do not dismiss the armadillo because they are deaf or elephants because they are born blind. No one claims lions have chronic fatigue syndrome because they languish almost all hours of the day.

They are fast and fierce. They just act more like us spoonies than workaholics. It turns out the community of creation is disabled. The twisty branches of the corkscrew willow, the blind mole, the flightless penguin. Nature is delightfully disabled and so am I.

Throughout creation, we value the biodiversity that disability brings. We are just out of practice applying it to humans. But what if we tried? What if we reconsidered the way we understand disability so that disabled people are not just tolerated but celebrated? What if we recognized that we are better together? What if instead of a symbol of sadness, we saw my mobility scooter as I do, an empowering throne that allows me access and agency? It was the community of creation that proclaimed my own divinity to me because I started to realize that if I could marvel at the radiance of disability in creation, then why couldn't I believe it about myself?

[16 : 39] And I started to wonder and allow myself to wonder, what if I too was divine? What if we created a community of care, not based on everything we are against, but affirming the dignity and divinity of each one of us just as we are? What if we recognized that we are better together?

Perhaps if we expanded our imaginations to understand the vibrancy of disability, we could experience the divine presence in our disabled neighbors. And I started to recognize that throughout scripture, we encounter disabled people at the forefront of the relationships that Creator cultivates with humanity. God takes credit for disabled people. When Moses doubts his readiness to go before Pharaoh, Creator says to him, who gives speech to mortals? Who makes him deaf, seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? God calls out Moses' internalized ableism and is having none of it.

God offers a divine accommodation to a disabled prophet in the form of Aaron and affirms that Moses' disabled mouth is, in fact, part of the divine design. Isaac is blind. Jacob walks with a limp and uses a cane in the cloud of witnesses.

His disability acts as a blessing, a revelation, and a prophetic witness to the community. It even becomes the mock of a covenant for Jacob, who becomes disabled at a crucial point in the narrative.

His disability acts as a catalyst for the radical transformation that is celebrated not just by him, but by an entire community. Elijah tells us about his depression. Many of our autistic siblings read Noah as neurodivergent. Timothy is chronically ill. Zacchaeus is a little person. His healing offers no unnecessary physical transformation, but one of the soul, where he does the holy work of reparation for his neighbors that he oppressed simply by participating in a system of their oppression.

[18 : 58] And who can forget about Paul's thorn in the flesh or Mephibosheth's disabled feet? Or that Jesus retains the socially disabling scars of crucifixion post-resurrection? Jesus can defeat death, but chooses to keep the scars. That's got to be significant. The image we receive of the imperishable of the people that he is. The people who are not in the flesh or the people who are in the flesh.

But the people who are in the flesh, who are in the flesh, who are in the flesh, and who are in the flesh. Who is more interested in hanging out with outcasts than oligarchs. In fact, in Luke 19, Jesus tells us to do the same. When speaking about the great banquet, Jesus instructs us to invite poor and disabled people to dine, and there will be enough for everyone.

Now, one of the guests tries to pull a fast one by saying, hashtag all banquets matter. But Jesus is having none of it. Jesus corrects the guest and emphasizes that none of the folks who refuse to invite disabled and poor people will taste Jesus's banquet. Generally, this parable is interpreted as eschatology or what we think new creation will be like. There is no talk of cure or condemnation. There is no embarrassment or erasure of disabled people. There's no excuse about why accessibility is too costly. New creation is accessible. And disabled people and poor people are a part of it. It's a metaphor, people are quick to assure me. Jesus doesn't mean disabled people, but folks who are figuratively in that category. Aren't we all just a little bit disabled?

Somehow my suggestion that we swap legs for a day isn't met with laughter. The great banquet is accessible, and it starts by inviting poor and disabled folks first, not adding us later out of cost or convenience.

Disabled people and poor people are welcomed and centered without condition, cure, or condemnation. What if our churches could do the same? Too often, we erase the disabilities that we know about in scripture because they make non-disabled people uncomfortable. But make no mistake, disabled folks are part of our spiritual traditions whether you erase us or not. We are not the before picture of a prayer makeover or the symbol of sin used to guilt others into repenting. We are a vibrant, whole, beautiful part of the beloved community, and we are divine. And I started to wonder if creator too could understand a life on wheels. And I found God there in a passage in Daniel sitting on a throne of fiery flames and its wheels burning fire. A chair with wheels sounds a lot like a wheelchair to me. And again,

[22 : 18] I found a disabled God in Ezekiel, where God is a radiant fire with a massive mobility device. This is lifted up by four angels with fused legs and colossal wheels, the wheels encased wheels that glisten like topaz. My wheels liberate me and grip the pavement, absorbing the shock waves my body would otherwise have to endure. I lean in as we go around the corner, like water caressing a riverbank as it flows. I feel the texture of the earth, the rhythm of the cement. I hear the symphony of vibrations as we drift from concrete to cobblestone. My physicality does not stop at the tip of my toes or the crown of my head.

It extends to the frame of my cobalt chair, able to transport me to new worlds. Just like Ezekiel's vision, I am fused with wheels that are my ticket to freedom. I am body, wheel, and fire.

My disabled body is made in the image of God. And creator's invisible qualities are witnessed in disabled nature. So it makes sense to me to understand God as disabled. God uses a glistening wheelchair, and so shall I. Being disabled isn't just a series of medical appointments, mobility devices, and can't do's. It's a culture and an embodied experience that shifts over time and can teach non-disabled people what it means to be human. Disability is apparent and non-apparent and everything in between. Our body minds and access needs morph over time, much like what we experience of creator in scripture and in our lives. God takes on forms outside the norm. God is burning bush and pillar of fire. God communicates in groans too deep to utter, outside of our verbalized language. Creator is the cloud that guides our way.

God is in the soggy fleece, in the whirlwind, and in the widow's empty jar. God can be found in the mouth of a donkey and in the great fish, in the gentle lamb and the descending dove. And if that's not enough, even the rocks will cry out. Creator is thunderclap and living water. God is the disabled, imperishable form of Jesus. God is in the still, small voice and the shining stars above. God is not in a hurry and moves at the speed of love. Creator transforms our understanding of divinity into places we don't expect. And to me, God is delightfully disabled. And so am I. And together we can create a community where we recognize the divinity of disability so that we can all flourish. You might not realize it, but you are probably already benefiting from disability culture. Everything from texting, to the touch screen, to the electric toothbrush, was invented by and for disabled folks.

The next time you use a potato peeler or put on a Snuggie, I want you to think about the ingenuity of the disabled people who created them. The next time you witness a team huddle, I want you to know that that that was devised by the deaf Gallaudet football team right here in DC who didn't want the other team seeing their signs, so they invented the huddle. The next time you think disability, I want you to think creativity. Disabled folks are uniquely creative because we live in a world not built for our body minds. Creator has instilled in us a divine creativity to solve problems non-disabled people didn't even know we had. Disability is a creative force that invites us to reimagine a new world. Imagine what we could create together if we stopped thinking of disability as a loss and we recognized it as a gain. Imagine if Brad Lomax,

[26 : 56] Judy Heumann, Patty Byrne and Alice Wong were household names and that we knew how much they had contributed to all of our lives. Imagine if instead of trying to change disabled people, we focused our energies on fixing the inaccessible society we have built to exclude people. In Mark 2, five friends raised the roof off an inaccessible building so that one of them can get to Jesus. Literally, they dismantle a house that isn't theirs, seemingly without permission because it's not accessible. Imagine if we used this passage as an example or a call to action to dismantle structures so that all can get to Jesus. If you don't yet consider yourself among us, let this image of tearing down inaccessible buildings be scripture's example to you of how to be a disability ally. Instead of asking disabled folks to be grateful, we can get into some buildings now, tear down the walls of inaccessibility until all can get to Jesus. Imagine the world we could create together if we were united, not by who we despise, but by who we champion. Imagine if we stopped demanding gratitude for one another, for meeting basic access needs so that we can roll, walk, stim, and sign our way to co-flourishing.

Maybe you too are wondering about your worth, or maybe you're wondering if you count, or if you are disabled enough. Well, I will not wait for the willows to whisper it to you. Let me be the one to tell you that you are divine.

You with so few spoons, you don't give a fork. You who want to believe, but you're not sure if you do anymore.

You who know how winsome words like inspirational and articulate can be weaponized.
You who feel too churchy for your activist friends and too activist-y for your church friends.

You who have had to fight for your pronouns to be respected. You who cringe at words like, God's throne. But deep down, you still want that to mean something.

[29 : 27] You who have more stickers on your water bottle than zeros in your bank account. You who don't yet have a name for your pain, but you know that it is real, despite what the disability doubters say.

You who are sick of performing gratitude for the bare minimum. You who aren't sure where you belong, but you came anyway. Whether you are in person or online, I am glad that you are here.

You are divine. No caveats, no cures, no condemnation. You who are divine.

You are divine. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Please, Please!

[30 : 44] Please! Please! Please