Beyond Brokenness: Reimagining Disability Through a Sacred Lens

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Preachers: Tonetta Landis-Aina, Panel

[0:00] So today, it feels important that I am wearing this hat. This is my favorite hat. I definitely was raised to believe you should not wear hats in church.

So I'm feeling a little something inside. Hats are great. And I'm wearing it because, one, I'm feeling a little scraggly. I didn't get the haircut that I wanted to get this week.

But even more importantly, I'm wearing it because I think it represents something important. I got it a few years back when I was walking around the shops of Georgetown. I don't actually remember why I was down there, what errand I was doing.

But I do remember passing this shop that caught my attention. It was called Biddy and Bo's, Biddy and Bo's Coffee. And what caught my eye was that they had all this merchandise in the display window.

And there was all this apparel that said things like, leave your doubt and not broken. After stopping there only briefly to look at the items, I kept walking because I wasn't sure it was really worth it to spend money on something new.

[1:20] But in the end, I doubled back. I decided that I had to have this hat with its bold proclamation of radically inclusive. I went in to that shop, prepared for like a really mundane exchange as I was buying it.

But what I found surprised me. All of the people working in that shop, that coffee shop, were folks with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

I later found out that that coffee shop, Biddy and Bo's, sees itself, and this is how they put it, as a human rights movement disguised as a coffee shop.

Aiming to provide dignified work to a marginalized population, which is all too often severely underemployed. And I bought the hat because I knew that its message would always be a challenge to me.

I knew that when people saw it, they would associate it with my desire for the world to radically include queer folks. We expect people, after all, to kind of show up for their own interests, to proclaim those loudly.

[2:35] But every time I wear this hat, it reminds me to ask, whose neck is my boot on? I'm reminded to look for the intersections between struggles for justice that at first glance might not seem to go together, might seem different.

And I'm reminded that God is constantly drawing me and drawing us to draw the circle wider and to let the wider circle change us and free us.

Last week, we started a new sermon series called Embody, Disability Theology and the Justice of God. Dr. Amy Kinney came up, who's the author of My Body is Not a Prayer Quest, also a brilliant scholar.

And she started us off with some spectacular insight. If you have not read or listened to that sermon, please go back and find that on our website. It is brilliant. And I wanted to say a word before we continue to move forward in our series, that there are two reasons why I feel like it's important to do this series now.

The first is that in times of crisis, it can be easy to close down, to consider only your own survival. And that makes logical sense.

[3:57] But because of that tendency, we need each other to remember to raise our heads above our own narrow interests. As in all things, our inspiration is Jesus, a colonized Jew living in the Roman Empire, who instead of pursuing the programs of ethnic and religious purity of his own day, that others thought necessary for survival, he invited his own people to open up instead of closing down.

In our current political moment, this environment, I think we need the same reminder.

Like many other marginalized groups, disabled folks are being disproportionately impacted right now. And we've got to be aware of that. And we've got to stand in solidarity.

And then aside from opening up instead of closing down in times of crisis, we're also moving through this sermon series because it is the perfect fit in the Easter season.

Contrary to what our consumerist culture would have us believe, Easter is not one day. Eastertide actually extends from Easter Day until Pentecost, 50 days later.

[5:16] And during those 50 days, Christians around the world reflect on the meaning of the cross, reflect on the resurrection, and reflect on the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus in the gospel stories.

And it is precisely in some of these scriptures that disability theologians invite us to see and worship a God who is disabled. In her book, Dr. Kenney reflects on a cross in this way.

Jesus on the cross is disabled, physically impaired by sweating drops of blood while nailed to a wooden stake. Jesus is also disabled in a social sense.

A person who was crucified bore the weight of social stigma in the ancient world, highlighting the social model of disability. Jesus inverts all our shame and preconceived notions about what power looks like into a cross.

Jesus disables himself on our behalf. This goes directly against our notions of self-preservation and victory by demonstrating how God's power is self-emptying, radically forgiving and displayed through disability.

[6:31] The disabled Christ is the definitive revelation of God to humanity. The disabled body is the source of our redemption. Think about that and how we might treat disabled people differently if we really walked around with such an understanding.

And then I want to lift up the work of Dr. Nancy Iceland, one of the pioneers of disability theology, and her take on a post-resurrection encounter that the disciples have with Jesus.

You might remember this story. There are two disciples walking with Jesus on the road to Emmaus. They encounter Jesus and then they go and tell the other disciples that they believe they've seen the resurrected Christ.

And this is what Luke says. While they were talking about this, about the possibility that they had seen Jesus, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, peace be with you.

They were startled and terrified and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, why are you frightened and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and feet. See that it is I myself.

[7:41] Touch me and see. For a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have. This is a post-resurrection story that many of us are familiar with.

And Iceland points out something in it that we might have missed. Here, she says, is the resurrected Christ making good on the incarnational proclamation that God would be with us, embodied as we are.

In presenting his impaired hands and feet to his startled friends, the resurrected Jesus is revealed as the disabled God. Jesus, the resurrected Savior, calls for his frightened companions to recognize in the marks of his impairment, their own connection with God, their salvation.

In so doing, this disabled God is also the revealer of a new humanity. 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.

Now, I am a beginner on this journey. And my sense is that others of us are too. And yet, we've got to be showing up to our own disability and to the disability of our siblings.

[9:07] It is time to shift our imaginations. And one of the ways I think that we continue to do that is to pass the mic. So what we're going to do for the next 20 minutes or so is pass the mic to some folks in our community who have experiences with disability.

They are disabled or they have experiences with disability. And we're going to listen for their wisdom and try to attune to what the spirit might be saying to us collectively and individually.

So come on up, panelists. If you would, please give them a round of applause. All right. So the first thing that I'm going to do is just ask you to each just kind of introduce yourself.

Can we do name, pronouns, you know, if you're involved in a ministry or lead a ministry here at the church, and then something you do to relax.

There we go. Okay. You said name, pronouns. What do I do to relax? Okay. Any ministries you lead. Yes. So my name is Madison. I co-lead the disability affinity group with Gwiff.

[10:13] This is Frog, although I ask that you don't call her name while she's working. And she's my service dog. And she's going to be really fascinated by looking out at all the people at a different angle.

She's currently going through deconstruction. So if she turns around, I want you to just appreciate her piece. That's right. My pronouns are she, they. And I relax by reading.

If you ever want like a very niche book recommendation, or if you want to read anything on disability, I got the hookup. Hello. My name is Udum, or Dr. Udum.

Pronouns they, them, it, we. And to relax, I dance or draw. You will often see me with my remarkable or right. So, yep. Hi, everybody.

I'm Gwiff. My pronouns are she, her. I'm a Jesus-loving demisexual lesbian. And I co-lead the disability affinity group, the black affinity group, the queer Bible study.

[11:15] And I am a director of formation here at the table. What I do to relax. Relax. So many choices.

I enjoy listening to really good music while enjoying a really good story. Oh, okay. I love them. All right.

So, let's start with this first question. And I will just shout out, because Madison, along with a few other folks, I think, curated most of these questions. So, the first one is just, what's something the church has gotten wrong about disability, but on which you wish they would try again?

Everything. You know, I think we're making really good progress as a church. But I think especially about the idea of, in heaven, that disability will not be present.

Because I believe that my entirety is made in God's image and will be celebrated in life after this. And I think that that is a big point that I wish we would stop, you know, saying, everything will be better.

[12:26] It'll be different. And so, I think recognizing that our entire bodies will be whole as they are now, as they are disabled, also in heaven. And so, as somebody who's neurodivergent, physically disabled, and neurologically disabled, I wish and pray that the church would have a change of perspective on disability just being a part of difference and diversity and the holiness of God, creator's divine design.

And some birds fly in the sea. Some birds fly in the sky. Some birds don't. They're still all birds. And God looks at them and says, very good.

Okay. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I appreciate all of those. And just want to pull out. I think one of the things I've been thinking a lot about is the two of you hit on, like, really just lifted these things up perfectly.

Like, one, the way in which difference and disability folks have often in the church connected with the fall, which we can also just talk about the fall. Okay. But the ways in which, and then you talked about this, the ways in which that then means that kind of new creation also erases difference.

Right. And we all become the same versus, okay, maybe we can talk about actual experiences of suffering and complicate things versus just, like, disability and how does all of that work.

[14:16] So, really appreciate that. Yeah. Yeah. All right. So, the second question is, this is taking a page from Dr. Kitty, who, if you read her book, has a number of every chapter ends with kind of a list of things that have been said to her.

So, what's the weirdest or most unhelpful healing prayer, healing prayer someone has ever offered you? Okay. I have so many, but I narrowed it down to, like, one.

As someone who has been, I have been openly disabled since I was about 11, but it was, like, a process of getting diagnosed and everything. The one that I think is the weirdest is the people who say, can I pray for your parents' sins that have caused this in your life?

Okay. Okay. Don't say that to people. Not to mention, like, especially as, like, a 12-year-old hearing that, I was like, okay, maybe let's back up.

I don't know if I have anything to top that. I don't know. It's not a competition, but, man. I mean, people often, they say it jokingly.

[15:29] Why don't you sit down? I pray that you, like, find rest in being still. Okay. But for someone who has an ADHD autistic experience, sitting still is difficult.

And I know I may not look like someone, but invisible disabilities are real. And so it's hard to be like, yeah, I'm normal, but I'm not normal at the same time. And no, I can't sit still. And I'm always going to be doing something.

I think. So that was a weird one for me. It's just, like, story time. I thought about it.

And what came to mind initially was being in a prayer gathering and receiving prayer. And the prayer facilitator getting to a point being like, oh, you haven't received your healing, so that must mean God's given you anointing to impart healing to somebody else.

That was rough. But what really takes the cake is I was kind of put into a supposed courts of heaven kind of prayer program for my healing and deliverance.

[16:46] And it really just turned out to be a combination of mere cookie cutter incantations that were very transactional related to God.

And that essentially condemned me for not being faithful enough, for being demon afflicted and cursed. So, yeah, that was just don't do things like that.

That's not the way of Jesus. I'm not sure how to exactly transition after that.

Yeah. But I do want to know. So all of those comments come out of deeply problematic theology and they come out of ableism.

So can you all talk a little bit about ableism in your daily life? How it impacts you and how it's impacted your faith? I think there's a section in the middle of Dr. Amy Kinney's book that talks about go through and it talks about access things.

[17:58] Especially as someone with a service dog doing things like, are you able to sit next to your friends at a concert? Because I'm not. Because I have to sit in disability seating. Or are you able to access the bathroom everywhere you go?

Because I'm not. Because there's not always an accessible bathroom. And going through a list like that can be very helpful to think about every step of the way that you encounter ableism.

For me, I'm really thankful that my faith has been something that has carried me through the ableism of the outside world. And believing at the core that I am made in God's image.

And that God would not have made me, you know, imperfect or anything in a way that she wouldn't have loved me entirely the way that I am. And so that's something that has really helped me to cling to.

But I definitely think thinking about as you go through your everyday routine. Thinking like, could a disabled person also access this? Could a disabled person also do this? And you might realize that, you know, the metro is way more inaccessible than you think.

[19:03] Or it's way harder to get around. Just to think through those things. And for me, it is a lot of just access issues. I'm fortunate that I am surrounded by other disabled people. So I feel much more accepted when it comes to ableism not necessarily being a prevalent theme of my friendships.

But that is something that has taken a long time. So I think mostly just recognizing the daily access needs that I might encounter. This question is difficult for me because the ableism is tied around, like, my immigration story as well.

And immigrating here to the U.S. at three and then having to learn all of the ways that are different from me.

So it's like I don't really know this country that I left and then don't really know this country that I'm coming into. And you have to be perfect. I had to be perfect.

And in my family, I had to do things that were either in the STEM program. Like, it was science, technology, engineering, or mathematics. And if I didn't do that, then I was not good enough. And so my ableism was perpetuated at a very young age.

[20:17] So it took me a very, very long time to actually know that I was neurodivergent because I was so used to, like, shape-shifting. And I was conditioned early on to do things that were not mine.

And so I gave up my art or just what I do, my stemming, because I was told that's not proper. You can't do that in public. You can't.

You should sit down. And it's very much tied to just how I ground and how I maintain my sanity. I'm trying not to lose it, but it has impacted everything about me.

From, you know, where you go to church, where you go to school, specifically even going into the physical therapy field, a lot of people think that you go to a doctor and you are to be fixed, but you, you know, sometimes you can't.

And so I learned early on that, like, oh, this is how it has to be. Like, you have to try to fix you. You have to correct everything. And so because of that, I tried to hide. I tried to repress myself or just be as normal as possible because everything that I am is different and is not perfect.

[21:40] And I'm just grateful to be in the space, to be on this stage, to be able to have the conversations, because otherwise, I don't, like a year ago, I would just, there was no nerve. I would just oot them, you know.

So ableism is everywhere. And it's impacted my life through the way that its counterpoint, anti-ableism, has impacted my life and my faith.

And it's shown me really deeply how the love of Christ really is loving the least, the last becoming first, the marginalized being elevated and valued for who they are.

There is a verse in Corinthians talking about the foolish, weak, and marginalized and despised things of the world.

And I'll just read it really, really quickly. But God chose what the world thinks is foolish to shame the wise.

[23:02] And God chose what the world thinks is weak to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, what is regarded as nothing, to set aside what is regarded as something, so that no one can boast in their presence.

He is the reason you have a relationship with Christ Jesus, who became for us the wisdom of God and the righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that as it is written, let no one who boasts but boast in the Lord.

And I bring that up because although I have, God's been very gracious to privilege me to receive education, and I have a master's degree and a doctorate and a professional license, I've been called stupid, dumb, in public, incompetent.

I've been ridiculed as weak, foolish, bullied. I've been belittled in the workplace.

I've been discriminated against in housing. I've been despised. I've been despised as less, not even a human being, but more of an object, a thing, a pestilence, and despised.

[24:27] And through just God's wisdom, it's really shown me that God's holy and divine character and wisdom is revealed through individuals who the world regards as these things.

That's the paradoxical way of God, their nature, their love, and their justice. and so ableism is hard, but it's also quite revelatory in how it's really nurtured my walk with God.

That's so good. That's so good. Thank you, I think. Laura, I think I'm going to ask one final question that is a combo question, so feel free to answer any part of it you want or all of it.

But what are tiny acts or rituals of rebellion that you engage in to remind yourself that you are holy?

Are there larger resistance movements or things around resistance that you're involved in? And then if there's one thing you could tell us that we need, like one thing you say, if you can't think of anything else, do this to resist.

[25:45] Do this as your act of rebellion, what would that be? So I asked again like three different questions, but you just, wherever you want to go. I find a lot of acts of daily resistance in taking time for rest and rejuvenation for myself.

So making sure, because there are, I think as a disabled person, you often tend to have to take time to rest, to recharge and things, and recognizing that that is not the same as taking time for myself to actually rest and rejuvenate.

So I love reading, so taking time to read and enjoy. I'm also pretty actively engaged in disability spaces online and in person, and making a lot of spaces that I am in more accessible.

And that is something that I enjoy doing, and I think that that is something that we should all do. I think recognizing that we are all divine and made in God's image, and how can we all be present in spaces, I think my recommendation, obviously, as someone who reads a lot, is to read as much as you can, to gather a lot of information.

There are so many good books, and I have lots of recommendations if there's something that you're looking for. I think My Body's Not a Prayer Request is a really good starter, as well as The Future is Disabled is a really good book on just recognizing that disability is a large part of the population.

[27:07] In the U.S., 25% of people are disabled, and it will continue to grow. And if you're not disabled now, you likely will be in the future. So this is not something that only impacts disabled people.

It is something that will impact every person in this room. If you are fortunate to live long enough, you will encounter access issues. You will encounter disability. And what can you do now to make it a more equitable place for everybody?

Can you repeat the question? Do you have any tiny acts of rebellion to remind yourself that you're holy? Or any larger ways that you rebel?

And then is there one way that you recommend folks listening or hearing this, experiencing this rebel? It's wild to say that being myself is rebelling. I haven't worn my cat ears in a while, but I wear cat ears.

I dance randomly in the hallway. I have things that I do that I keep with me that are seemingly disruptive to other people for some reason, but I don't care anymore.

[28:15] And so by continuing to be myself and doing what makes me feel safe in all situations, that is how I rebel. And then educate other people by showing up.

I'm a teaching artist in DC PS schools. And so I had a kid walk up to me and ask me why I'm wearing cat ears. And I looked her straight in the eye and said, because I want to. And then we just continue skipping along during the lesson.

So it's like being a part of communities like the Table Church or Harriet's Wildest Dreams or Life After Release and doing advocacy work and showing that, you know, being neurodivergent or having all of these other intersectionalities is not, is truly not a disability for me.

Like that's how I live and these are my gifts in this world. And so spreading it to whoever will listen, that's what I do. Well, rather than trying to kind of overcome my disabilities or my weaknesses or eradicate my differences, I own and celebrate my thorns.

and that helps kind of guide my forms of resistance through tiny and large ways.

[29:46] Tiny ways is kind of the triple P, cause, play, and pleasure. large ways is just standing in solidarity with other people's differences and limitations.

like Madison and Udum, they can, they can tell you I've had a surgery and Madison was very helpful in my recovery process.

I had an injury and Udum just stopped by to check in and see how I was doing. and we've all stood in solidarity with each other in different ways and we're committed to that not only amongst ourselves but amongst so many other people who are different and celebrate the joys of limitations too.

In terms of what you can kind of, a practical step you can take away today is everybody has some kind of iota of privilege and so it's not a matter of privilege necessarily.

It's a matter of how you choose to leverage your privilege and we all have opportunities to do that to really reflect the heart of God.

[31:17] Thank you. Well, I just want to remind you all that Madison will be leading a class during May term to continue the conversation and it is, you know, a big ask to invite folks to share out of their own experiences so really appreciate your sharing and your honesty and just would love for y'all to give a round of applause for the witness.

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