

Many Members, One Spirit

John 9:1-12

1 Corinthians 12:1-27

We were living in Quebec when our son Bastian started daycare and we received a phone call on his first day there that he wouldn't be able to continue at the daycare because he was too dependent on help for a variety of basic activities. We panicked for practical reasons because we both had to work and were relying on childcare, but it was also a deeper panic as we had to come to terms with something that had been creeping up on us but that we didn't quite want to admit - the fact that our child had some sort of a disability.

We eventually got some government funding for an assistant to come help out at the daycare and we started driving almost 2 hours each way to Montreal to see an English-speaking speech therapist since Bastian wasn't speaking and was already 3 years of age. I lacked confidence in the local French-only options available to us in Sherbrooke. For example, the name of one place translated to The Centre for Intellectual Deficiency. When we moved back to Toronto, Bastian got into a wonderful special ed kindergarten program and began to see a speech therapist at Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital on a regular basis.

After many tests, Bastian was diagnosed with Global Developmental Delay which is a bit vague and basically means that he is delayed in two or more areas, but we are grateful for this label because it gets him the services he needs. He is still a mystery to us in terms of who he'll become, but I don't think it's bad to afford a little more mystery to all of our children instead of just pegging them as this or that early on. What we do know about him now is that Bastian is a funny, loving, musical, happy, gentle boy who loves swimming, building forts, looking at books, eating snow, and watching Dora the Explorer. His giggle is the best sound in the world and he doesn't like it when people cough.

The Bible is really tricky when it comes to the theme of disability. There isn't one word in scripture that covers all manner of what we might call "disability". The Hebrew word *mum*, which is associated with things like blindness or lameness, could be translated as "physical disability", but these afflictions are usually called "blemishes" in the Bible. The word "blemish" means a flaw or defect. Sometimes,

the Bible associates these disabilities with the natural aging of the body like when Isaac grows old, becomes blind and cannot recognize one son from the other. At other times, disability is associated with impurity.

Consider Leviticus 21:16-21, which lays out some instructions for the Israelite priesthood for Moses' brother Aaron and his descendants. This is from the New Revised Standard Version.

“The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to Aaron and say: No one of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the food of his God. For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles.” (You should read the King James Version – it says “anyone who hath his stones broken”.)

The rule is that only someone without physical disability or illness is qualified to perform priestly functions, such as offering a burnt offering to God. If someone who is blemished performs these functions, then he defiles the sanctity of any offering to God. And, the sacrificial animal itself must be without defect.

Deuteronomy 17:1 says, “You shall not sacrifice to the Lord your God an ox or a sheep which has a blemish or any defect, for that is a detestable thing to the Lord your God.”

In the New Testament, Jesus is referred to as the sacrificial lamb “without blemish.”¹ Now, those of us who don't read the Bible *literally* might say that the Bible doesn't really mean that Jesus never had acne or a limp or pink eye. When this passage says that Jesus is a lamb without blemish, it is a *symbolic* way of saying that Jesus is without sin. But is it any better to use disability or illness as a symbol of sin?

In an essay on disability in the Bible, Jeremy Schipper argues that the blind, the lame, the deaf, the paralyzed, the sick, and so on, often appear in biblical texts as signs or symbols of spiritual and political realities. For example, in Isaiah 56:10, the prophet says, “Israel's lookouts are blind, All of them do not know; All of them are mute dogs that are not able to bark; dreaming, lying down, loving to be

¹ Hebrews 9:14; 1 Peter 1:19

drowsy.” These passages are not about people with disabilities. Schipper writes that “Blind” and “mute” are “metaphors to criticize the ineffective efforts of Israel’s leadership. Similarly, several other biblical prophecies or curses use disability imagery to describe the moral or ethical conditions of a presumably nondisabled audience...they tell us very little...about the actual living conditions or everyday experiences of disabled people in ancient Israel.”²

While metaphors can aid us in understanding complex truths, using disabilities or illness as symbols can “invisibilize” real people with real disabilities. Susan Sontag writes that “illness is *not* a metaphor, and that the most truthful way of regarding illness – and the healthiest way of being ill – is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking”. It’s good to be aware of how we sometimes erase the identities and lived experiences of real people by using them as literary props to represent something else.

Throughout the Bible, disabilities and illness are not discussed as biological or medical phenomena as much as moral or religious problems associated with sin.³

When Jesus sees a man who had been sick for 38 years, he heals him and says, “See, you have been made well! Do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you.”⁴ Does this ominous warning mean that the man’s sin was the cause of his illness and that if he sins some more that there will be physical consequences?

This kind of karmic understanding of consequence doesn’t only apply to the sins of individuals, but to the sins of former generations. In today’s scripture reading from the Gospel of John, Jesus heals a blind man and his disciples ask him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”⁵ This is an understandable question because the scripture sometimes states that people can experience suffering as a punishment for the sin of their parents or parents’ parents.⁶

² https://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/TBv2i8_SchipperDisability.pdf

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ John 5:1-14

⁵ 9:2

⁶ Exodus 20:5; Exodus 43:7; Numbers 14:18; Deuteronomy 5:9. Each of these verses is referring to the breaking of the second commandment concerning idolatry.

But when the disciples ask Jesus whose sin caused the man's blindness, Jesus gives them a surprising answer. He says, "neither this man nor his parents sinned."⁷

As the mother of a child with a disability, Jesus' answer brings me relief. I know that my mind has traveled to some dark places in the past, asking myself if I did something wrong during my pregnancy. Was my sin the cause of my son's disability? I'm sure other mothers have had similar torturous thoughts. I don't think this way anymore; not only because I trust that I took care during my pregnancy, but because I don't believe for a minute that God punishes people in this way.

When God calls Moses to be God's prophet and to lead the Israelites, Moses protests, saying, "O Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue." The Lord said to him, "Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak." But Moses still protests and God becomes angry. So Moses' brother Aaron is appointed to speak all of the words that God had originally spoken to Moses, while Moses performs non-verbal signs so that the people would believe.⁸

What's interesting about Moses is that he refers to himself as being "slow of speech and tongue". Unlike the Leviticus passage wherein anyone with a disability or blemish is kept away from priestly duties, God does not discriminate against Moses as a potential leader based on his disability. In fact, it is Moses himself who doubts his ability to speak God's word because of his disability and this angers God.

One explanation that comes from the Jewish Midrash, or commentary on the Hebrew scriptures, says that it is important that Moses has a speech defect so that the Israelites would glorify God as the source of truth rather than glorifying Moses for his charisma and oratorical skills.⁹ I'd like to think that God also chooses unlikely leaders to show us truths that break the status quo.

⁷ John 9:3

⁸ Exodus 4:10-31

⁹ Midrash, Shemot Rabbah 1:26

Our scripture passage from John says that Jesus spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva and put it on the man's eyes. He then told him to wash in the Pool of Siloam. When the man did this, his sight was recovered.¹⁰ Real people with real disabilities are not usually magically healed. Every Monday, I go with Bastian to speech therapy. Week after week and year after year, Brenda Fox, Bastian's speech therapist, patiently touches his mouth and face to manually help him form sounds that slowly resemble words and sentences more and more clearly and we are able to glimpse his inner world with more and more depth over time.

Brenda has been a painstaking healer for us, and with Bastian's cooperation, his speech has improved even though he will never be "normal", whatever that is. God has placed in him a spirit of perseverance and enthusiasm, equipping him with the coping mechanisms he needs to guide him through life. And he has many loving hands and hearts who also guide him, particularly his Aunt Rachel, Uncle James and his cousins Nadine and Ellie Cressman. Through our life with Bastian, Jesus has rubbed the mud on our eyes so that our vision may be healed and we can see more clearly that there are many members of infinite worth in the body of God.

Did some of you watch Oprah Winfrey's rousing speech at the Golden Globes when she won the Cecil B. DeMille lifetime achievement award a few weeks ago? It was masterful. Oprah has become one of the wealthiest, most successful people in the world despite any disadvantages she's had as a black woman. It's hard not to admire her for her tremendous influence, her strong feminist voice, her incredible talents, and for her charitable generosity.

But I don't agree with Oprah's self-help model or her image as a self-made individual. For Oprah, the individual is the fundamental unit of existence. The individual is an autonomous agent with limitless potential to achieve if he or she just puts his or her mind to it. Championing a stream of self-help gurus, Oprah's message is clear - the key to life is the triumph of the individual through self-love. External, systemic circumstances don't determine your life. You do.¹¹

We get a radically different message from our reading from 1 Corinthians 12 which says, "God has arranged the parts of the body, every one of them, just as

¹⁰ 9:6-7

¹¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2015/may/09/oprah-winfrey-neoliberal-capitalist-thinkers>

God wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honour.”¹²

The multi-membered body of Christ thwarts the extreme individualism at the heart of philosophies like Oprah’s.

In some societies, persons do not think of themselves as autonomous, self-contained units apart from their relationships. Bhikhu Parekh calls persons like this “overlapping selves” whose identities are formed by and contribute to the formation of the others in their midst. I believe that this fits beautifully with our passage from Corinthians. We cannot equate ourselves with the whole body. We are a part of an interconnected body that inhabits us as we inhabit it.

To conclude, I’d like you to participate in a thought experiment. You may close your eyes if it helps. Now picture yourself for a moment. If you were to draw a self-portrait, what would it include? Would it be of your face? Your whole body? Would you be with your best mate or your family? Would you be somewhere in one of Doreen Martens’ photographs of our TUMC family? Would you be wearing a to-remember-is-to-work-for-peace button on your t-shirt? (I’ll bet Michele Rizoli would be wearing red shoes.) Are you laughing? Contemplative? Are you knitting or cooking or listening to music or running? Where is your self? In your home? Canoeing? Playing Ultimate? Now think of yourself as part of the body of Christ. Are you the foot? The ear? The mouth? The eye? The funny bone? Wherever you are, whomever you are, whomever you are with, and whatever your gifts and abilities, know that you are all honoured members of the body of Christ and that we’re in this together.

¹² 21-23.