

Pastoral Theologies Chicago October 9-11, 2024

Dear colleagues and friends,

Grace, peace, and holy impatience to you in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

The church we have come to know and to love—and to serve alongside for the sake of the gospel—struggles fully to include more than a quarter of the general population in the embodiment of its mission and ministry.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 28.7 percent of adults in the United States have some type of disability or neurodivergence.¹ Worldwide, the percentage of people with disabilities is estimated to be even greater, especially in regions where access to maternal/fetal medicine and other healthcare is limited.

Yet, not entirely unlike the worshipping communities of first century Judaism portrayed in the canonical gospel narratives, the church today continues in its trajectory of failing fully to include people with disabilities among those present and active in its pews, chancels, and pulpits. This exclusion is lamentable, for in denying full access to those with disabilities, the church has historically ignored the gifts of these members of the body of Christ who are called to all ministries of the church, including to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament.

Much of the discussion we in the church are willing to entertain on this topic centers around physical access to the faith community's sanctuary, restrooms, and other physical spaces. While this discussion is necessary and arguably a good place to start, providing a way for disabled persons to get into the building barely addresses the barriers that prohibit their full participation in the life of the church and its ministries. Barriers keeping disabled persons out of church leadership—and especially out of the pulpit—are proving difficult to dismantle, even when congregations voice a desire to make the way clear.

This problem is not merely a logistical one; it will not be solved by building an ADA-accessible ramp to the pulpit while washing our hands of the reality that most pastoral nominating committees will not seriously consider calling a pastor who has a known disability to be the spiritual leader of their congregation. This problem is *a theological problem*. It reflects our lack of a robust theology of disability. Furthermore, it is *an ecclesiological problem* that illustrates the absence of a shared commitment to more fully imagining and representing both the inherent brokenness and the promised wholeness of the Body of Christ.

How might we faithfully cultivate such an imagination? What process must we enact so that the diversity of church laity and professional leadership will more fully reflect the full spectrum of humanity that is made—abled and disabled alike—in the very image of God?

I invite you to consider a theology of incarnation as it pertains to increased disabled participation in the leadership of the church, especially as it pertains to preaching.

¹ “Disability Impacts All of Us” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Disability and Health Data System (DHDS) [Internet]. [Updated 2024 July; cited 2024 September]. www.cdc.gov/disabilities

In the foreword to *Performance in Preaching: Bringing the Sermon to Life*, Scott Hozee² writes: “Pastors must bring the Word to life by paying attention to their delivery of that Word as the Holy Spirit uses vocal chords, cadences, rhythms, and the preacher’s entire body to help the Word of God become flesh and blood Sunday after Sunday. Preachers take note: God has called *the entirety of your being* into the service of proclaiming the Word...”³

Literary and biblical scholars—and the Bible itself—insist upon the *embodied* Word. Yet, the classical separation of body from spirit, the disintegration of gesture and speech, even cultural and biblical skepticism regarding whether the body is to be considered “good” all stand in the way of integrating theology and practice in the process of preaching a sermon. The struggle for authentic integration of word and act is sufficiently challenging among those who are considered able-bodied.

Add to this inherent skepticism regarding the body discriminatory understandings of disability—theological and otherwise—and the challenges preachers face are compounded. Nonetheless, the existence of disability remains a part of the fabric of creation: not every preacher made in God’s own image communicates in normative ways; some preachers neither hear nor speak, at least not in the ways to which able-bodied worshippers are accustomed. Others are blind or neurodivergent or use mobility, speech, or hearing aids.

God’s call to bring the entirety of our being to the preaching moment is most fully realized when the Word of God is comprehensively embodied in the entire body of Christ, including in the bodies of preachers who are disabled. Preachers with disabilities embody the Word in ways that closely mirror the tradition of oral history and storytelling that first carried holy scripture from generation to generation. Their embodied preaching models re-incarnation, such that the Word takes on flesh again and lives, not only in the preachers’ own bodies, but also in the larger body of the gathered worshipping community. This embodied preaching also leads to the reinterpretation of Jesus’ healing narratives in the gospels as sacred texts that call the church beyond merely granting access to those with disabilities or even seeking justice as disability advocates, but also to hearing the Word powerfully proclaimed by those who have been systematically marginalized because of their disabilities.

Allow me to offer a few examples of proclamation I have witnessed that offer hope for the church’s thriving as it learns to be more hospitable to the gifts and insights of disabled preachers.

1. I have witnessed a Deaf preacher embody the story of the plagues of Egypt through his use of American Sign Language, the movements of his face and body, and the heartbeat of drums typically used in Deaf worship. As he re-told the story of the Exodus, a part of scripture I had previously intensely studied, the story came to life for me in a way it never before had. I was mesmerized—transformed—by the movement of the preacher’s body through space, by his sweeping movements imitating the wind and the creative forces of God, by the way he called forth from the congregation our physical participation in telling the story, too. The preaching was

² Hozee serves as Director of the Center for Excellence in Preaching at Calvin Theological Seminary.

³ Scott Hozee, “Foreword,” in *Performance in Preaching: Bringing the Sermon to Life*, eds. Jana Childers and Clayton Schmit (Grand Rapids: BakerAcademic, 2008), 5. (emphasis added)

more embodied than the way most of us tend to read the written words off of a page using little more than breath and voice—and even those in stark, measured moderation. This same Deaf preacher once proclaimed the good news he had found in the story of the healing of the deaf man in Mark 7:31-37. He shared that the real healing in the story is not the healing of the man's deafness but rather the healing of the community's exclusion of the man from the whole of the worshipping body.

2. Similarly, I have been made aware of fresh insights into scripture by a blind preacher who preaches on the stories of the healing of blind men in Mark 8 and Mark 10 and by a preacher who frequently uses a wheelchair on the story of Jesus' healing of the paralyzed man in Mark 2. These insights would not have been available to me without first learning of them from those whose embodied experience is similar to the experiences of the ones healed by Jesus in the Markan narratives.

3. My autistic brother leads me to believe that John the Baptist could have been autistic. John has a sensitivity to non-organic fabrics and a straightforwardness that sidesteps social graces. While it may not be helpful to place 21st century diagnoses onto first century prophets, might not the fact that the one sent to prepare the way for the Messiah give us insight into the gifts of the autistic community that we are likely otherwise to ignore?

All of these examples point to a fullness of the proclamation of the gospel that we are missing when we exclude disabled people and their lived experience from the pulpit. Doing so effectively silences a portion of the Body of Christ called to preach. When the proclamation of disabled preachers is not included in the church's overall witness to the gospel, the *good news for all people* ceases to be good news for *all* people.

May we as the church develop a broad theology of disability. And may we better learn and practice openness to the many ways the Word of God is made flesh. The disabled and neurodivergent preachers of our time are gifted by God to proclaim good news—and we will someday realize all the ways the church's witness was diminished by the long absence of their voices.

With hope for God's new day,

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