

Equity, Part One of ?

David Schilling - Old Meeting House

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But he replied, "The man who made me well said to me, 'Pick up your mat and walk.'

When I first encountered our Gospel reading, I was excited. Here's another example of an empowering, empire-fighting Jesus proclaiming the good news, that it's OK to break the rules, if what you're doing is the right thing.

Sure, the metaphor for how he got there is a little challenging...another example of a physical limitation seen as something to cure, but the message is so good. Besides, the bible is full of sketchy examples and metaphors, but we just have to dig in and look past them, right? The more I thought about it, the less sure I got.

The more I thought about it, the more I came to see the ableist perspective through which I had been viewing this reading, and how easy it is to make this mistake. How easy it is to erase the reality of the person and the disability, in order to get to the heart of the metaphor. The man, and his physical state become a simple pawn in a normative narrative about Jesus revealing his identity and his power. The man is useful to the common interpretation only insofar as he has a condition in need of curing. Likewise, in skipping over

Claremont theology professor Kathy Black sums it up perfectly, stating that

We tend to use the people in the biblical stories who are disabled or differently abled as objects to make some other point. The problem with this is that persons with disabilities today likewise find themselves treated as objects. Health care, education, employment, social services—all the basic institutions of our society often view persons with disabilities as objects to be dealt with, rather than as subjects that have something to contribute.

Black's point is so clearly illustrated through well known, yet problematic interpretations of this passage. English theologian B.F. Wolcott wrote, in the late 1800's, *the paralyzed man acquiesces in his condition by failing to get into the "stirred up" waters in time to be healed. Marked by apathy, he lacks willingness to "make any vigorous effort to gain relief."* Nearly a century later, professor Raymond Brown, widely held as one of the most influential writes on John, would go on to describe the man as marked by "obtuseness," an "unimaginative approach to the curative waters," "a chronic inability to seize opportunity," "real dullness," and "persistent naiveté."

Conventional wisdom blames the man's character, not the system that surrounds him. As a third equally qualified interpreter, dean of Theology at Fuller Seminary, Amos Yong points out, the fact of the man's actual physical disability, and the social, spiritual, political and economic realities or consequences of that fact are rendered invisible.

By linking disability with sin, or with a lack of faith unworthy of a miracle cure, we miss the bigger picture. We don't look at the full impact of the man living for 38 years in what was, at that time, the institutional healthcare system of an ableist society, cast aside to sit by a pool, monitored by religious authorities who ostensibly didn't provide much help, other than to pass judgement, and instruct him to follow the Sabbath rules. By not addressing the man for who he is, and what he brings to the kingdom of God, we actually turn against the core principles of our faith, which assert again and again that the body of Christ is composed of people with different functions, gifts and abilities.

Physical curing was only one part of the narrative...what Jesus was really doing here was healing. The people Jesus encounters experience healing socially, relationally, spiritually, and in many other ways. It is a whole life transformation, including transformation of how people perceive them, not just a quick fix of a bodily part.

After all, for some, the physical fix isn't even desired, it's the opportunity to fully live into a life of contributing their many gifts. Recall the beautiful imagery of today's hymn of preparation...

Visions of rapture now burst on my sight
Angels descending bring from above
Echoes of mercy, whispers of love

This hymn, one of my very favorites, was written by Fanny Crosby, who lost her sight at six weeks old, due to a botched medical procedure. Crosby, in a 1903 autobiography, disclosed that if she ever could meet the physician who took away her eyesight, she'd tell him *"Thank you, thank you—over and over again—for making me blind, if it was through your agency that it came about!"*

She went on to describe the loss of her eyesight as God's intention for her, asserting that otherwise, in her own words,

I could not have written thousands of hymns—many of which, if you will pardon me for repeating it, are sung all over the world— if I had been hindered by the distractions of

seeing all the interesting and beautiful objects that would have been presented to my notice.

Crosby also added:

The merciful God has put His hand over my eyes, and shut out from me the sight of many instances of cruelty and bitter unkindness and misfortune, that I would not have been able to relieve, and must simply have suffered in seeing. I am content with what I can know of life through the four senses I possess, practically unimpaired, at eighty-three years of age.

This is my story, this is my song, indeed.

How do we avoid fixating on the perceived necessity of a cure, and grow closer to Jesus through embracing true healing in our world today?

I believe the answer lies in today's responsive reading. Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth.

Equity is certainly quite the hot topic these days, and while our current federal government is frantically employing AI to erase as many references to it as possible, good luck scrubbing it from the Bible. It's been there a while. Even more telling, it shares a translation of the Hebrew word *meshar*, with righteousness, fairness, and levelness.

Embracing equity calls us to realize that instead of focusing on physical cures, God calls us to create a space in which everyone is valued, loved, and included, even if that means changing our perspectives, or breaking some of the rules, when the rules no longer make sense.

When I worked for the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, some local maintaining clubs would grumble about the need to build wheelchair-accessible privies miles into the woods. Our program director's answer was simple. : If they can get themselves there, they damn well should be able to have the dignity of using the bathroom. In the early 2000s, after Galehead, one of the most remote huts in the White Mountains was rebuilt to meet federal ADA standards, three hikers using wheelchairs and two using crutches, supported by their friends and family, made the grueling trek to prove it could be accessed. Nobody complained that they had a place to sleep.

If I lost the use of my legs tomorrow, I seriously doubt anyone in this space would fire me. I don't think you would tell me "it's been the rule of this building for 200 years that

ministers have to climb those awkward steps, tripping over their robe each time, to speak from this pulpit...so try to repent, be more faithful, or move on.

You'd modify the expectation, and we'd lovingly do the same from the beginning if we were to call a pastor, or gain a choir member who used a wheelchair.

How many times have you walked into the Parish House and thought "You know, I really wish there were steps to the front door, too?" My guess is that most people don't even notice the ramp entry, because it simply works for everyone. Likewise, I haven't heard a single complaint that we didn't really need two railings on the way up to the choir loft, a loop system so all can hear, or access via YouTube, for those who can't physically make the trek to this building. Those adaptive elements just become a part of who we are, because creating a more equitable environment is what we're called to do.

Creating a healing-focused, equitable environment also means continuing to keep all of our senses open to understand when we're not there yet, and what barriers we still put up, even inadvertently, to full participation by all members of this congregation. God is still speaking, and we always have room to grow. Who are the current Fanny Crosbys in our midst whose actual need to have their immense gifts fully realized and appreciated because of, not in spite of their abilities, is drowned out in a crowd jumping to helpfully seek a cure for what we don't fully understand?

Finally, promoting equity in line with the healing teachings of Jesus is resisting the growing trend in our society to relegate equitable practice and universal design as some sort of new age weak-minded reverse injustice.

Agents of an unjust empire, after all, know that the best way to keep a people down is to have them internalize messages of nonagency, weakness and worthlessness.

Scholar Yong reminds us of the good news - , where Caesar fails, Jesus can deliver. He can heal and save, and provide true peace through justice.

So.. When someone in power starts down the hypocritical road of declaring the only fair option is equality without concern for accommodation, ask them what their golf handicap is. I can nearly guarantee they will have one, and that it is just one of many tools they have been using to level their own playing field for years.

Our closing hymn is Amazing Grace.

Benediction:

May we leave today honoring one another in the stories and ideas we share,

And seeking to dismantle barriers that prevent the kind of communion God calls us to be as the church,

with a crowded table, and a place by the fire for everyone.