Spiritual Issues in Chronic Illness and Disability

Theological/Clinical Reflection

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The first topic considered for this assignment was; how do non-verbal people with intellectual disabilities understand they are made in the image of God. How do they understand this concept for themselves? It did not take long to discover there is very little literature written on this topic. While it is a fascinating question, it is better suited for a longer research project. Another topic considered was to continue with the question from the goggle research assignment, “How people who are non-verbal experience their humanity.” These readings created an interest in the point of view of the temporarily abled-bodied Christian community toward this population. Reading Stanley Hauerwas and Jean Vanier’s book, Living Gently in a Violent World the question came into focus.

Jesus came to create a body. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 12, compares the human body to the body of Christ, and he says that those parts of the body that are the weakest and least presentable are indispensable to the body. In other words, people who are the weakest and least presentable are indispensable to the church. I have never seen this as the first line of a book on ecclesiology. Who really believes it? But this is the heart of faith, of what it means to be the church.¹

This struck my Covenant heart – this is where it is written. Scripture is clear that ignoring parts of the body of Christ is not what God desires or will tolerate. Paul explains that in Christ’s church there is no place for one part to dishonor and disrespect another. “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!’”² If our answer to Vanier’s question is yes, we believe in 1st Corinthians 12:22 that the weaker members are indispensable then why are they sitting on the margins, or worse yet, forgotten and ignored. Within the population of people with disabilities, those with intellectual disabilities are particularly overlooked. Hans Reinders suggests that one reason for this is that “People stay away

²1 Cor 12:21 (NIV)
from persons with intellectual disabilities because they do not consider them to be desirable as friends.\textsuperscript{3} If the church cannot find a reason to be their friends and soul mates, then we are in real danger of losing our identity as the body of Christ.

\ldots the holiness of God is itself at stake in this regard, the ongoing subjugation of innocent people with disabilities by the non-disabled world perpetuates the profanity of that world and desecrates the land, the people, and, finally, even God.\textsuperscript{4}

The people of the church need to understand and believe in God’s intended design for the body of Christ. Through Jesus and Paul, God explains the importance of unity, diversity, and love for each other within the Church.

As it is, we see that God has carefully placed each part of the body right where he wanted it. But I also want you to think about how this keeps your significance from getting blown up into self-importance. For no matter how significant you are, it is only because of what you are a part of. An enormous eye or a gigantic hand wouldn’t be a body, but a monster. What we have is one body with many parts, each its proper size and in its proper place. No part is important on its own.\textsuperscript{5}

We have to admit that what we see in our culture, and reflected in our churches, is contrary to this teaching. However, the Evangelical Covenant Church instructs that we are not to reflect our culture, but rather we should bear witness to it. So we return to Vanier’s question, do we believe “the weaker are indispensable to the body”, and we wonder, in what ways is this true? This brings us to the focus of this paper. How is the body of Christ enriched, strengthened, and transformed by members who appear to be weaker? How are they indispensable to the wholeness of the Church?

\textsuperscript{3}Hans Reinders, \textit{Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics}, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 26
\textsuperscript{4}Amos Yong, \textit{The Bible, Disability, and the Church}, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 45
\textsuperscript{5}1 Cor 12:24b-26 (The Message)
Before launching into the main purpose of this paper, we need to consider what our motivation is for seeking what the value and importance of the intellectually disabled is to the body of Christ. Kant warns us to never use others as a means for selfish gain, even if you feel justified in the ‘rightness’ of your goal. Is it a good thing to become more patient, to learn how to become a better listener or to exercise your heart muscle with acts of compassion? Yes, these are all worthwhile goals. However, if your primary motivation here, is to develop moral character, then you are in danger of objectifying this population of God’s creation. Defining any segment of humankind based on their contribution is pretentious objectification of that segment of our society. In fact, when we objectify a person, we are ignoring their humanity. Treating people with disabilities as not whole or fully human is already too often the case in mainstream society.  

…the fundamental work of each human being – and indeed of everything that exists ---lies neither in what a person achieves nor in what a person makes possible for others to achieve, but in God’s love for that person.  

Therefore it is essential to do a corporate and personal self-examine of your motivation so as not to be found guilty of objectifying another human being. Christians believe all people are worthy, have value, and no human being exists outside of God’s love. We will come to realize that many of the reasons God designed the church to function this way come down to the transformational power of mutually loving relationships within a diverse community uniting under Jesus Christ.  

Now we begin the discussion on how 1 Corinthians 12:22 is true. We will look to Paul, who is the ‘master pastor’ when it comes to speaking for and encouraging the church. In this first section,

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7 David Pailin, A Gentle Touch: From a Theology of Handicap to a Theology of a Human Being, (London: SPCK, 1992), 95. In this book Pailin shares the story of the transformational relationship he had with Alexander, the severely disabled son of close friends.
our focus will be on what Paul had to say to the churches regarding weakness. We begin with Jesus’s teaching that provided Paul, and the church, with a foundation for a theology of weakness.

At that time Jesus said, “I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants. Yes, Father, for this way was well-pleasing in Your sight.”

Paul understood this completely and worked tirelessly to teach 1st century Christians this core value. Yong builds a defensible case of the significant effect Paul’s physical infirmity had on his theology of weakness. Paul attributes the ‘thorn in his flesh’ as the thing that was able to keep his ego in check. He calls attention to the truth that God’s power is more apparent when we are weak. Think about times when we find that in our strength, skill, or natural gift, the ‘thing’ we need to do just cannot be done. Then when we turn to Christ and surrender to God, we see it being done. Story after story in the Old and New Testament and story after story in our own lives bear witness to this Holy experience. Paul taught us that when he begged God to remove the thorn, God was able to teach him the more profound truth and beauty, of weakness.

But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Through this, we learn to trust God more deeply, understand and deepen our relational bond with the Holy Trinity. Weakness is not something to fear, loathe, or reject. God embraces weakness and integrates it as a valuable part of his plan for creation. Throughout scripture, he encourages us to do the same. David and Goliath, Mephibosheth, Moses’s weakness of speech, are some of the stories that come quickly to mind. It is not from God that we learn our distaste for the weak,

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8 Matt 11:25-26 (NASB)
9 2 Cor 12:7 “…Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.”
10 2 Cor 12:9-10 (NIV)
or weakness; it is through our cultural values and our desire to be in control and grab what we want in life.

So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal. 11

Our faith, love, and trust in God grow stronger. People who build relationships with those who have intellectual disabilities report they experience the strength Paul describes. 12 This is one of the ways they are indispensable to us. John Vanier explains this holy mystery well.

When the poor and weak are present, they prevent us from falling into the trap of power – even the power to do good – of thinking that it is we who are the good ones who must save the Savior and his church. 13

Another way people with intellectual disabilities enrich our lives is to provide the possibility to slow down and pay attention to what is essential to God, or as John Swinton describes it; move at the speed of love.

God’s time is created, gifted, slow, generous, gentle, and designed to enhance the purposes of love. God’s time does not seek to burden people with schedules, deadlines, targets, and competition. The tradition of Sabbath reminds us that God is a God who rests and commands rest, not a god who thrives on busyness, anxiety, and exhaustion. God’s time dictates the speed of love; it refuses to race past those who are moving more slowly. It always finds time for people. In clock time people who are slow of thought or awkward in movement are likely to find others passing them by on the other side of the road. In God’s time there is always time to sit together and learn the meaning of love. When we begin to understand what it means to reside within God’s time, we are opened up to a whole new way of being in the world, a way that not only respects the differences that disability brings but, in a

11 2 Cor 4: 16-18 (NRSV)
12 Thomas E. Reynolds, Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 118 “So when we engage another human being at various levels of weakness and disability we confront in ourselves something of their weakness and need. This is not a source of shame. Indeed, I suggest it is the beginning of a moral conversion.”
sense, requires it. In God’s time the difference that disability brings is perceived quite differently.\textsuperscript{14}

Being in a relationship with a person who has an intellectual disability requires we slow down to a speed that allows for mutual communication and companionship. We could say this is true for all relationships. You are not relating to each other if one of you is constantly running ahead of the other. The mere act of slowing down requires we have knowledge and belief in the humanity of the other. Consider how we are with newborn babies. They have no words to express their frustration, pain, or happiness. To understand them we need to set our personal agendas aside, pay attention, desire to understand, and truly value who they are.

When my daughter’s second child was one-month old, I received a call from her that they were taking little Amanda to the emergency room. Dread filled me, and I asked what was wrong. My daughter told me the baby was crying and seemed to be in pain. I relaxed, figuring this was just an over cautious parent responding the best she could. I lived two hours away and said let me know if you need me for anything then, we hung up. It turned out Amanda had bacterial meningitis. After one month my daughter and her husband had already learned the difference in Amanda’s cries. Was it because she was feeling fussy or in actual pain. This is unconditional love in action. With two parents, paying attention to and learning from their child, who at one-month-old was of course non-verbal.\textsuperscript{15}

This is the love the Holy Trinity has for humanity. For some reason, God chooses us to be the physical expression of his love for his creation. If we can muster even a small amount of the love Amanda had wrapped around her, we might be able to care in the way Christ intended for the people God gives us as companions along our way. If we practice this love and live in this discipline, the body of Christ would have no people in the margins. Understanding this not only cognitively but also in our hearts is another way we are transformed through a relationship with a person with intellectual disabilities. It requires “our own conversion so that all of our eyes can

\textsuperscript{14} John Swinton, \textit{Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefullness, and Gentle Discipleship}, (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), location 407.

\textsuperscript{15} Kathryn Porten, Personal journal 2000
truly see, all of our ears can really hear, and our other senses can be fully awakened and activated to receive and be transformed by what each person has to offer.”

The relationship between time and disability is important to understand if we take friendship and the act of relating to each other seriously. To develop a genuine community of belonging, we most certainly need to understand how our society appropriates time to relationships in general, and specifically how this affects people with certain forms of neurological disabilities. John Swinton shares the transformational impact of spending time with people with intellectual disabilities had for him:

I often wondered what it might mean to encounter God without words and what it might mean to be wordless in a world where words seem to be central to most of what we do…being with people who have no words was the beginning of my conversion to the fullness of God’s love and the wonder of God’s communicational possibilities. 17

To invite people with intellectual disabilities out of the margins and into the core of the church family requires theological reflection on what it is like to live with an intellectual disability. This process brings clarity to our understanding of “what it means to be human and to live humanly”

This brings us to another way people with intellectual disabilities offer the church an opportunity to grow. They put a face to the issue of what we value in our fellow human beings. Stephen Post named this ‘hypercognitive culture’ in his book “The Moral Challenge of Alzheimer’s Disease”.

…that is, a culture that has a tendency to value individualism, autonomy, rational thinking, speed of thought, memory, and cognition over such qualities as love, connection, community, slowness, dependence, and vulnerability…The brain has come to acquire a quite particular cultural meaning, a meaning that assumes that

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17 John Swinton, *Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefullness, and Gentle Discipleship*, (Waco TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), location 334  
18 Ibid., location 380
this particular organ is somehow superior to any or all of the other organs of which human beings are comprised.\textsuperscript{19}

We are frustrated by people who cannot keep up. We ask ourselves if time spent on these relationships is worth the effort. “What ultimately prevents people with intellectual disabilities from full participation in our society is the fact that they are generally not seen as people we want to be present in our lives. We do not need them.”\textsuperscript{20} This thought process is supported by a culture that sends us clear messages that people with intellectual disabilities are not only less valuable but they are a burden on society.

Iceland introduced prenatal screening in the early 2000s. 80-85\% of pregnant women opt for the screening. Of that number almost 100\%, who have a positive test result that their baby will be born with a chromosome abnormality, terminate their pregnancy. “Other countries aren't lagging too far behind in Down syndrome termination rates. According to the most recent data available, the United States has an estimated termination rate for Down syndrome of 67 percent (1995-2011); in France it's 77 percent (2015); and Denmark, 98 percent (2015). The law in Iceland permits abortion after 16 weeks if the fetus has a deformity -- and Down syndrome is included in this category.”\textsuperscript{21}

When we sit with someone whose cognitive aptitude is considered to be significantly impaired we question the values of a hypercognitive culture. God never intended us to build our Christian communities around an arbitrary norm of cognitive superiority. Yet, we are willingly killing off ‘defective’ fetuses. How far are we from terminating people with Alzheimer’s or young people diagnosed with non-verbal autism? By blindly mirroring the values of our society we are ignoring the horrible truth. That the trend of our society is the devaluation of humanity. The demands of our culture too often push God’s plans, desire, and love for all of his creation out of

\textsuperscript{19} John Swinton, \textit{Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefullness, and Gentle Discipleship}, (Waco TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), location 350
the equation. Each of us need to intentionally bring God into this decision regarding how much energy we put into building mutually caring relationships with people with intellectual disabilities. Through this process, we will find that we build a growing dependence on scriptural truths regarding love for each other. This is certain to transform us. God honors and responds to the spirit of love that grows from true friendship. We must see how important the church is to confronting the direction our society is headed. Within our doctrine is the truth that removes barriers to the survival of people with cognitive challenges. The trajectory of our culture, on a global scale, is to eradicate people who do not produce at a speed and quality designed arbitrarily by cultural norms. This requires the church to step up and into this issue. God is calling.

This leads us to another way we find value in genuine friendships with people with intellectual disabilities and why God’s design makes sense. People who choose to engage in a relationship with someone with intellectual disabilities talk about the opportunity it provides to develop a more meaningful personal theology of Imago Dei, or the Image of God.

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22 Quotes about the importance of friendship.
Jenny Weiss Block, Copious Hosting: A Theology of Access for People with Disabilities, (New York, NY: Continuum, 2002), 158. “I am deeply committed to principles of advocacy, social justice, and inclusionary practices. However my experience has shown me that they are not enough. No laws, bishop's letters, human services paradigms, or parish accessibility committees will ever truly provide access to people with disabilities. Liberation and real access to the community will only be realized through personal relationships that develop into genuine friendships. Without true friendships, disabled persons will enjoy the new opportunities created by their equal rights most likely as 'strangers in a strange land.'... Christians are called, more than anything else, to friendship.”

Hans Reinders, Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 143

“Experiencing fellowship and friendship is important for people with disabilities not only because of their mental health, but also because to be friends with others, I will argue, is what we are meant to be. A convincing argument for friendship however, requires something entirely different, I need to change as a person. Particularly I need to change with respect to how I regard my own humanity. When I am convinced that the value of my life depends on what I make of it, the unaccomplished lives of people with disabilities must appear as defective to me, which is hardly a basis for being attracted to friendship with them.”

Thomas E. Reynolds, Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 118 “Only in relationship is human wholeness possible, a wholeness that comes not despite but through disability and vulnerability.
There are three basic views of the Image of God. First, substantive/structural; our human attributes mirror or reflect God’s. Second is relational, which is our ability to relate to God and respond to his love. It is through Jesus Christ that we understand the image of God, not through other human beings. Finally, the third view is functional: our image is an expression of what we do. Just as Jesus was God’s representative, we too were created to be God’s representation in creation. The image of God is ethical, an expression of God’s covenant with humanity and it is ‘inalienable’ for all human beings.\(^{23}\) It is only by the full inclusion of all who are created in God’s image that God can restore His complete image in a way that is transformative for a healthy body of Christ.\(^{24}\) These three views help us to understand that being created in the image of God means we measure according to the person of Christ. We do not align with cultural understanding of what humanity should look and act like. Being members of the body of Christ should grant us the secure knowledge of who we are to God, his beloved. “Our vocation or calling as human beings is to be the agents through whom the entire creation can reflect the glory of God, praising him and glorifying his holy name.”\(^{25}\)

What did God intend when he created us in his likeness? Are we all image-bearers of God? Does all mean all? How does a non-verbal intellectually disabled person bear God’s likeness? These are questions that will take us on a transformational journey moving us closer to God’s intention for his beloved family. Reinders suggests “The real problem is not that we need a concept of human nature that includes persons with intellectual disabilities; the real problem is

\(^{23}\)These 3 views of the Imago Dei or Image of God is from Armida Belmont Stevens power point deck slides 10-12, week 6: “What is the world and Who are we”, of Christian Theology course id: THEO 5110, 2018, North Park Seminary

\(^{24}\)Joni Eareckson Tada, *Special Needs Smart Pages* (Gospel Light, 2009), 287: “The image of God is the basis for human value and, therefore, the basis for respect-based relationships… As a result, we are doubly blessed—not only by individuals who are God’s precious creation in our midst, but also by the ways that God restores His image in our own fractured lives by developing character qualities that reflect His.”

\(^{25}\)Don Frisk, *Covenant Affirmations: This We Believe* (Chicago, IL: Covenant Publications, 2003), 55
that our ‘ableist’ culture is informed by views that are oppressive to people with disabilities.”

Expanding our understanding of humanity is what is needed. For centuries the powerful, core members of society have defined what is normal. Then everyone lines up to become equal to that image, or ‘better’ than it. When we contemplate and develop a theology of Imago Dei, we must consider if the image we have in mind and live out of, aligns to the standard God intended.

Swinton introduces us to Raymond Tallis’s concept of neuromania.

   Everything, including our sense of self, our identity alongside our perceptions of the divine, it is argued, is located within the brain. The explanatory power of this “big story” of the brain can easily leads us to succumb to the presumption that somehow ‘we are our brains’ or ‘our brains are us.’…the tendency to see the brain as the only path to understanding.  

This way of thinking results in us believing that the brain is central to what it means to be a worthwhile human being. Pressure from our society makes it difficult to not fall into this trap.

We need a way to confront this subtle message and stop it from seeping into our theology of Imago Dei. A way to counter societies pull toward valuing the intellect is to “displace the centrality of the brain as the essence of our humanness and replace it with the centrality of Jesus….Damage to the brain is not damage to our humanness.” Building a relational bond with someone with intellectual disabilities brings our understanding of what being created in His image means into a clear, sharp focus. All means all. All humanity deserves to be treated with equal love, respect, and value.

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27 John Swinton, *Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefullness, and Gentle Discipleship*, (Waco TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), location 359
28 Ibid., location 373
Finally, as individuals made in God’s image, how are we to form into the body of Christ?

Moreover, how do people with intellectual disabilities help us to do this well? Frisk explains how God uses his creation as a veil when He is in our presence.

Because God in his transcendence is such that we cannot see ‘his face’ and live (Exod 33:20), he must wear a ‘veil’ or ‘mask’ when he approaches us. Luther views the creation as just such a ‘veil.’ The creation is like a garment which both conceals and reveals the form of its Maker. In all aspects of our life within this created order, in its relationships, its responsibilities, its disciplines, its sorrows, and its joys, God is seeking to make his presence known in his ‘eternal power and deity’ (Rom 1:20).[29]

The body of Christ has the potential to provide a broad and colorful veil for God to use that meets our many needs. God designed the church to be a diverse community. A place for us to be enriched by people who are different from us, and to learn to value all of humanity, not just those who fit into our narrow definition of normal.

[This requires] undoing the tyranny of the normal and its confusion with a conventional good. It necessitates finding ways to make space for the different as something that augments a community rather than diminishes it.[30]

If we hang around the variety of God’s creation, our lives are enriched and strengthened by the diversity. We need to create Holy Spirit filled communities of faith where people with intellectual disabilities do not have to justify being included, but the faith community would have to answer why these people are in the margins. The profoundly disabled may not experience the liturgy or the Holy Trinity in the same way as those who are temporarily able-bodied, but they still need and have the right to be included in the community worship. The church needs to be sensitive and aware of how God is working in them. The same Holy Spirit is in each of us; this is

29 Don Frisk, Covenant Affirmations: This We Believe (Chicago, IL: Covenant Publications, 2003), 16
30 Thomas E. Reynolds, Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 69
a promise from God. We need to notice how they experience worship and try to incorporate that into the community fellowship.

[We must exercise inclusion in our] faith communities [by] being hospitable to, welcoming for, and inclusive of people with disabilities. Hence the goal cannot be just to minister to such people as objects of care, concern, or charity – although such ministry is precisely what is needed in many cases; the goal must be the full inclusion of all and the reception of each contribution, resulting in the enrichment and edification of others.31

In the Covenant Church, Pastor Jim Swanson was a strong advocate for services to people with disabilities. In September of 2007 he preached a sermon at North Park Seminary Chapel titled “Un-disabling the Church”:

People with a variety of disabilities are lost to much of the church. Far off, cast off, exiled. They are lost to the worship life of the Church. They are lost to the fellowship life of the Church. They are lost to boards and committees. And lost to the roster of the ordained and commissioned… God knows where they are, and to God the church is incomplete until all of us are found, and placed together in community. Without this completeness valuable gifts are also lost to the fellowship.

The wheels of change turn slowly for people on the margins. However, as with other groups of minorities, and as Pastor Swanson pointed out, God knows where they are. “God is in the present social-symbolic order at the margins with people with disabilities and instigates transformation from this de-centered position.”32

If one still requires convincing as to why we need to take 1 Cor 12:22 seriously there is one more compelling reason to propose. That is because our Father God said so. He told us to understand that the body of Christ, our Christian community, the Church, the Kingdom of God, is whole only when we include all of humanity in the full community all the time. He does not mind if we struggle with this, but it breaks his heart if we turn away and ignore his love for his creation.

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“Unwavering sincerity says that man should always recognize the fact that he lives always in the presence of God, always under the divine scrutiny, and that there is no really significant living for a man, whatever may be his status, until he has turned and faced the divine scrutiny.”

--Howard Thurman
Jesus and the Disinherited

33 Howard Thurman, Jesus and the Disinherited, (Boston MA: Beacon Press, 1976), 61
Bibliography