



DISABLING LENT

AN ANTI-ABLEIST LENTEN DEVOTIONAL

UNBOUND

ASH WEDNESDAY

LETIAH FRASER

GENESIS 3:19B (CEB)

A Public Confession: You were made out of soil, and you will once again turn into soil.

On this Ash Wednesday I would like to make a public confession. Those of you who will read or listen to it, will serve as my priest. Thank you in advance. These words that are on the page, screen or reverberating in your ears. This is consecrated space, we create together for me to be honest and vulnerable. So, here it goes. I hope you have open hearts and hands to receive it.

O God, Father and Mother to us all, I confess that I have a stigmatism in both eyes. I confess that it is difficult for me to stand up straight, that I lean forward as I walk and that my butt protrudes out more than perhaps it should. I confess that I cannot straighten my legs because my muscles are too tight and my body too stiff. And yes, O God, this includes my toes too. I confess that both my feet turn outward at an angle (out-toeing) and I absolutely cannot stand still without assistance. One last thing God, I confess that I am a spaz; that's right, there are times when my body makes uncontrollable movements. Medical doctors have examined all my sins and have given them-me a fancy diagnosis. Cerebral Palsy. Let me answer the question you may be too polite to ask before I continue with my confession. Yes, I was born this way. While I am being honest, let me also say that the older I get, the stronger my internal ableism gets. If I am not careful, it is harder for me to like my body, let alone, love it. It feels good to tell the truth about myself aloud. I think I may engage in this customary Lenten practice in the future.

My words are raw. You may be tempted to break the awkward silence. Do not. Not yet. Do not rush to offer me absolution. Not until your own ableism is acknowledged. Whether your body is abled or (dis)abled like mine, you cannot offer me what you have not yet received yourself. After you have acknowledged your own ableism and are engaging in the hard work of becoming an anti-ableist, the deeper work of acknowledging and eradicating structural ableism must be done.

Before you pronounce that disabled bodies, my disabled body is not a sin, perhaps it's time for you to exegete and confess your theology around disability. Conduct an accessibility assessment of your church's building and programs and be proactive about welcoming into all your spaces those with disabilities, particularly welcome them into the life of your congregations and hiring/extending a call to ministers with disabilities. Do an inventory of your verbal and written language. While you are doing that, ask yourself the following questions: what do my words communicate about my beliefs about people with disabilities? How are people with disabilities depicted in my sermons and in the songs that my congregation sings? In what ways are people with disabilities a part of the Liturgy of the Church, your church? In what ways have you left us out? Now that you are aware, what are you going to practically do about it? This kind of confession that is awakened is ongoing and it is long, hard work. It may take the whole forty-day Lenten journey, or more realistically, it may take a lifetime.

Although it is true that the church lobbied to continue to oppress disabled bodies after the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act and continues to engage in the systemic oppression of disabled bodies nearly 27 years later, being an anti-ableist, just like being "anti-racist" (Abram Kendi's term) is not the church's work alone. We must be willing to evaluate the whole of our society and root out ableism wherever we find it. In the educational system, on the job market, in

health care, media, television and on the dating apps, where disabled bodies often get swiped left without a second thought. The ableist idea that my disabled body is a sin is part of the very foundation of society. And that is a sin that needs the Spirit's deeper work to awaken us and then enable us to work the long and hard work of being "anti-ableist" in the Church for the life of the world.

There is hope! Ash Wednesday offers (dis) abled and abled bodies alike a path toward absolution. By living into the truth of the last fourteen words found in the latter half of Genesis 3:19. "you were made out of soil, and you will once again turn into soil." If/when I receive the imposition of Ashes, today, Ash Wednesday, I begin to practice the truth of those words, I imagine that I would grow in awe of my disabled body more than I am frustrated by it. After all, "my body is not an apology!" (Sonya Renee Taylor).

It is in this body made of soil that I experience the world. Both the chronic pain and the way my whole body is engaged when I laugh are a testament that my body experiences the full range of human emotion. My thick glasses help my eyes to see, what my mind already perceives; the world is full of horror, but it also bursting with beauty. My legs assisted by my crutches make a rhythmic sound that announces my presence even before I enter the room. And my bent knees and angled feet set a slow pace for me that enables me to engage in conversations and enjoy the kindness of strangers. This body that comes from soil and is diagnosed with a disability is the way through which I am in relationship with God, people and with creation. The body I inhabit is what makes me human because that is where God lives. Yes, the disabled body is human; crutches, leg braces, communication boards, white canes, wheelchairs, walkers, and all other assistive devices included. The shared experience of being human is where disabled and abled bodies can offer solidarity to one another.

To remember that humans "were made out of soil, and we will once again turn into soil" is to make space for both the fragility of abled and disabled bodies. And it invites all to befriend our mortality. We will all die. It will not matter whose bodies are abled or disabled. All our bodies will provide nutrients for the earth.

Perhaps this Lenten journey is an invitation to love God who made our bodies out of soil and gives our bodies back to Mother Earth—God's very Body. It is an invitation to love the disabled bodies of our neighbors. The Lenten journey is also an invitation to love our own bodies, abled or disabled. All of what was written and now being written in the law and the prophets proclaims the truth of God's two commands.

The truth is Ash Wednesday is a way in which to have imposed on our bodies the sign of the cross to visibly mark our mutual journey toward the eradication of Ableism in whatever form it takes. The words of absolution are for me and for you, the disabled and the able-bodied.

May almighty God have mercy on us, and having forgiven our sins, lead us to eternal life. May the almighty and merciful Lord grant us absolution, and remission of the sin of ableism, in all its forms. Send us out into the world awakened to anti-ableism for the life of the world. Amen.

1ST SUNDAY OF LENT

HEATHER LANIER

GENESIS 9:8-17, PSALM 25:1-10, 1 PETER 3:18-22, MARK 1:9-15

Seven people sat in a dimly lit circle in an otherwise empty sanctuary, ready for weekly catechism. On tonight's agenda was the flood, when Noah's family of eight boards a massive boat and holds out for forty days as God destroys the earth. After we read aloud from Genesis, a palpable anger arose from the red-headed senior citizen to my right. She was an excommunicated ex-nun, now committing to the Episcopal Church. From those details, I assumed she'd already known her own personal apocalypse.

"How could God do that," she said to the group. "How could God wipe out all those people?" She shook her head. It wasn't right.

The week before, this same woman had explained that she was a caregiver to her disabled son. In describing herself, she used the term "temporarily able-bodied." It was 2008, the first time I'd heard the phrase. She emphasized that her life as a nondisabled person was impermanent. She explained that we would all be, at one point or another, disabled. Like water itself, the identities of nondisabled people like me were fluid. I took note, just as I did on the night of the flood discussion. When she raged against the Earth's water apocalypse, it was the first time I realized that a person could be both very angry at God and still in a relationship with God. Like Jacob wrestling with the angel, you could wrestle with the Scriptures. You could look at them, and at God, and say: I'm not convinced!

I did wrestle with the Scriptures three years later when I became a mom. My daughter was born with a rare chromosomal syndrome that led to significant developmental disabilities. Walking, talking, eating by mouth—these would not be givens. They would each require long roads of therapy and support. In loving my daughter, I realized I'd been raised in an ableist world. I'd been taught to value ability, to see bodies in a hierarchy. I'd been taught to know my place on the ladder of achievement and to constantly strive upward.

Learning to be my daughter's mother meant I unlearned much of what I'd previously held important. Instead, I held my girl—a gorgeous, luminescent baby half the size of her peers. At the same time that doctors voiced their concerns, sometimes seeing my daughter as "abnormal" and a "problem," I heard a voice in my heart's own pulse. It shared the same sentiment Jesus hears after his baptism: "This is my beloved... with you I am well pleased." Loving my daughter helped me get just a little closer to seeing the world, and every ounce of life, as God sees it: as inherently good, as marked with God's fingerprint.

But as I became a disability advocate, I struggled with the redemption narrative of disabled people in the Bible. Namely, Jesus kept healing them. This meant that disabled folks were seen as "redeemed" only when they became nondisabled. Like the ex-nun, I pushed back. Where were the stories about the blind man who was divinely touched by God and remained blind? Couldn't that be a thing? Instead of saying to the paraplegic, "take up your mat and walk," why couldn't Jesus change the ableist hearts of a culture that didn't find reasonable employment for its paraplegic citizens? Was my God incarnate ableist? A friend of mine, an ex-Catholic wheelchair-using disability rights activist, said yes. (He'd been accosted too many times by strangers eager to "fix" him with prayer.)

Something seemed amiss, though, in this take. In seeing God as ableist, I was crafting God in

humanity's image. Whenever we design God in our own image, we've tried to contain God in too small a shell. And God is not a hermit crab. Neither is God a thing we can hold, nor just a man who holds things. So God also likely did not need that rainbow as a supposed reminder to himself, like a bow around a finger, to never destroy the earth again by way of a flood. I suspect God remembers everything, holds in every atom a blueprint for the ages. It is we who forget.

For a time, I raged a little at Jesus. I heard the healing stories in church and huffed. I encountered the stories during my morning Bible time and scrutinized. Please stop 'fixing the cripple,' Jesus, I thought while my daughter's walker wheeled across the sanctuary floor.

Eventually, though, I started noticing something surprising. Jesus heals a lot of people, sure, but he also becomes pretty secretive about it, even frustrated by the demands of it. "How long must I put up with you?" he says after someone asks him to heal an epileptic boy. "Don't tell anyone," he says to the man who takes up his mat, the same man who then goes straight to his people and tells. "Don't tell anyone," he says again and again to the one he heals. Jesus seems to lament that "Unless you people see signs and wonders you will not believe." It's almost as though Jesus is telling us, "these corporeal healings? They are not the thing!"

Perhaps Jesus saw that the signs were misdirecting people. God's glory was looking to them like human glory, like bulging biceps flexed on top of an award podium, like ableism. We cannot expect God's work, and God's glory, to look like human work and human glory. This is why I think Jesus is often insisting people keep mum that he healed. Healing is not the point. Don't get distracted.

In time, they would witness their savior hanging dead from a tree. God would be killed. And when days later he'd pronounce that he was resurrected, it would not be from a podium to a packed amphitheater. It would be to just a handful of old pals, from whom he'd wonder where he can grab a bite to eat. To be fully human, Jesus has to know hunger. He has to know the body's limitations, its vulnerabilities. He has to know the precarious, fluid state of the so-called "temporarily able-bodied." He has to know disability, too.

As Nancy L. Eiesland argues in **The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability**, the scars in Jesus's flesh are profound symbols that annihilate our false equation between a nondisabled, "perfect" body and a spiritual, redeemed body. Jesus still has his wounds. "In presenting his impaired hands and feet to his startled friends," she writes, "the resurrected Jesus is revealed as the disabled God... [T]he disabled God is also the revealer of a new humanity....[F]ull personhood is fully compatible with the experience of disability."

God is not ableist, just as God is not forgetful. The rainbow is not God's reminder; it is ours. More than a mythic memento that a flood will never annihilate the globe again, the rainbow is the sign that the world is never unredeemable. But it can also be a reminder that redemption often comes through fluid and surprising means, bringing results that don't necessarily look like human glory. Jesus' death and resurrection illustrate that.

I appreciate that the ex-nun dwelled on her rage and grief. Too often, we're encouraged to move past it. "But look! See that!? He is risen!?" It bears remembering that the road to resurrection was ratched, filled with thorns and whippings and even, from Christ himself, a brief sense of abandonment. Why have you forsaken me? Even Jesus felt, in a moment, forsaken. Just as the ex-nun felt forsaken.

But we are never forsaken. And that is what we cannot let our grief or our rage let us forget. Wrestling with God is a healthy indication that we have not (yet) seen the larger scope. Wrestling with God is also our admirable, defiant striving for a glimpse—or a touch—of it, for a sniff of the greater kingdom.

2ND SUNDAY OF LENT

ERIN RAFFETY

MARK 8:31-38

I always like to say that my daughter, who is seven and disabled, is extra-verbal: her actions, her eyes, her smile, her vocalizations, though not words, speak volumes. In fact, over the last seven years of her life, she's patiently ministered to me as a non-disabled person in helping me to become more aware of my ableism.

But is patience really her virtue or is it mine? It's all too easy for me as her mother and the Church as her community to ignore what it's like for her to live her life in world replete with ableism simply because she doesn't speak. Because she also goes through life in a wheelchair, she often can't even get into the sanctuary, she can't get to the bathroom, or come forward up onto the altar for the children's message.

I would never say that the Church is waiting patiently in ministry for her: rather, I worry that they are hindering her from accessing the grace that she needs. And that also speaks volumes.

A few years ago I created a Twitter account and began connecting with a new kind of community online. Because I'm an academic who studies disability, I was instantly connected with a number of my non-disabled and disabled peers. But over time, I also began to follow disabled activists, writers, and artists, like **Alice Wong, Andrew Pulrang, Imani Barbarin, Lydia X.Z. Brown, Talila Lewis, Mia Mingus, and Vilissa Thompson.**

Especially during the pandemics of 2020, these disabled activists helped me perceive and experience the world in new and important ways. Among these disabled activists on Twitter, ableism wasn't an afterthought or even a question like it still is in the Church. Instead, ableism was a fallen reality against which disabled people resisted and created flourishing lives of protest.



Image description: Tweet from Imani Barbarin, MAGC/ Crutches..., blue check certification @Imani_Barbarin to the left profile photo of black woman with long hair in pink blazer

Text reads: "Ableds: ableism only effects disabled people *pandemic starts with public told not to panic because only disabled and elderly people would be affected leading to mass disablement and 400,000+ deaths.

Disabled people: how do you feel about ableism now?"

6:07 PM 1/30/21 Twitter for iPhone
351 Retweets 1 Quote Tweet 1,295 Likes

But disabled activists were also pissed off, heartbroken, frustrated, tired, and indignant at the world's obliviousness to their injustices, concerns, and suffering. They were constantly fielding threats against their livelihoods, their employment, their healthcare, their necessary accommodations, and even their dignity. Even though their lives were living proof of the injustices plaguing

this country, they were still frequently questioned and scrutinized. Their angry “call outs” definitely didn’t make people happy.

But they also sounded kind of like Jesus.

In the eighth chapter of the gospel of Mark, on the way to Cesarea Philippi, Peter emphatically declares that while others call him John the Baptist or a prophet, Peter says to Jesus, “You are the Messiah.” But when Jesus begins to teach about his immediate future of suffering and persecution, Peter dissents. The Message version says in Mark 8:32 that Peter “grabbed Jesus in protest.” And Jesus’s rebuke is sharp. In Mark 8:33 the gospel continues, “Turning and seeing his disciples wavering and wondering what to believe, Jesus confronted Peter. ‘Peter, get out of my way! Satan, get lost! You have no idea how God works.’”

No idea? This is Peter, disciple extraordinaire, follower of Jesus, declarer of Jesus’s Lordship!

But he doesn’t get it.

Peter wants a Gospel that avoids suffering. He wants a Messiah who avoids discomfort. He tells Jesus that he shouldn’t talk about his suffering, the cross, or the Christian life in ways that are so extreme. Somehow Peter thinks he knows better than Jesus. He doesn’t think Jesus’s suffering is real or warranted.

Sound familiar?

In a Church that fetishizes crucifixion, we have surprisingly little tolerance for the injustice, the suffering, and the humanity that comes with it. How often have able-bodied people, like Peter, spoken over our disabled siblings in Christ or purported to know better than them, even though, especially during Covid-19 and police violence against Black and Brown people in 2020, it is their very bodies who are on the line? In a Church that emphasizes truth and speaking truth to power, has it never occurred to us that we are the ones that may need to hear from Jesus?



Image description: Tweet from Vilissa Thompson, blue certification check, @VilissaThompson to the left profile photo of black woman with black hair, white short-sleeve top
Text reads: “Black Disability History IS Black History. Get into it.” (blue text): #BlackHistoryMonth (three brown circles) Black background with white text reads “Why Black Disability History Matters During Black History Month—Ramp Your Voice; rampyourvoice.com”
1:11 PM 2/1/21 Twitter Web App

Friends, the rebuke can’t come soon enough.

It’s easy to listen when we’re not being implicated, and it’s easy to preach Jesus when that Jesus conveniently doesn’t preach back. But the scriptures tell us plainly that our God is not one to shy away from conviction. And if we’re not feeling uncomfortable these days, I’d venture to say we’re not listening to the Spirit, probably because we’re likely too busy trying to plead our own case.

“But there aren’t any disabled people in my Church.”
“But we don’t have the budget for those types of accommodations.”

"But it's not like those people can even understand worship, Sunday school, or serve on committees."

"Get behind me, Satan! You have no idea how God works," Jesus says.

One of the unlikely promises of returning to the season of Lent year after year is that we have new opportunities to listen and to follow God differently along the way. Coming to terms with ableism is not a one off moment, but a fluid journey of confession, repentance, and growth that requires that I take up my cross. That comes down to learning to perceive myself and my sins more clearly, and what if rebuke is an invitation to do just that?

It is downright holy that disabled people continue to cry out, when they are beat down, exhausted, sick with COVID, oppressed, and stuck in their homes. That they are willing to engage with able-bodied people by so passionately offering their rebuke, when it would be so much easier to just sever ties with the society, the people, and the Church that have hurt and wronged them over and over and over is nothing short of a miracle.



Image Description: Andrew Pulrang Retweeted Alice Wong, certification blue check mark @SFdirewolf, to the left Asian woman wears respirator, drinks coffee out of cup through a straw, wears black hooded jacket

Text reads: "Ableism in healthcare leads to rationing of treatment & discrimination in hospitals during the pandemic (and way before). Also relates directly to high risk disabled people not prioritized for vaccinations
(blue text): #HighRiskCA #CripTheVote #NoBodyIsDisposable #COVID19 #HighRiskCOVID19

Are you willing to follow Jesus even if it is you who has no idea how God works? Are you willing to follow Jesus if it involves truly listening to those whom the Church has ignored, harmed, and oppressed? Are you willing to listen even when prophecy and conviction comes in the form of holy rebuke?

I confess that I have often mistaken my daughter's silence and the absence of few like her in the pews as evidence that ministry can and should just go on as usual. I confess that I have been unwilling to get out of my church bubble and to receive the cries of my siblings with disabilities for the indictment that they are. I confess that I have been unwilling to name my complicity in the structural sin of ableism in this country and our institutions, including our churches.

But I can think of no better time and no better way to listen up and listen in for the voice of Jesus, even when I don't always particularly like what it is he has to say.

3RD SUNDAY OF LENT

TIFFANY JONES

Cleansing the Temple of Performative Allyship

13 The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 14 In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. 15 Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. 16 He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" 17 His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." 18 The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" 19 Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." 20 The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" 21 But he was speaking of the temple of his body. 22 After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken. – John 2:13-22

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. – Psalm 19:14

As we continue our Lenten journey chronicling the life and ministry of Jesus, I invite you to quiet your body, allow oxygen to fill your lungs, and to hear anew the story of Jesus cleansing the temple.

In Jesus' time, the Passover was one of the three times a year that Jewish people were to report to Jerusalem to participate in religious festivals. The feast of the Passover, the backdrop for our story, is one of these festivals and commemorates God delivering God's people from slavery in Egypt. During this festival each year, Jewish people came from far and wide to sacrifice animals in the temple in remembrance of the very first Passover.

In our scripture, as Jesus approaches the outermost part of the temple, he sees what our modern sensibilities might have interpreted as a barn of fine animals alongside people who were bartering and negotiating their exchange. Then, as quickly as we see Jesus approach, we see his face grow red and his fists clench. He raises his voice, flips tables, and drives the animals out with a whip of cords in a flurry of movement. In response, the Jews who were present question Jesus' actions, asking "who are you to do this?" His response was simple, but coded, "destroy this temple – this body – and in three days I will raise it up."

Now that we have the whole story, let's pause for some more context. Put simply, the gospel of John's purpose is to further convince those who already believed in Jesus that Jesus is, in fact, the Messiah. So, Jesus probably isn't upset that the fancy animals are in the only place where gentiles could potentially come to pray and to know God. Instead, it appears that Jesus is exercising his authority over the temple in a different way.

You see, the reason these people and animals were in the outermost part of the temple to begin with, is because it was most convenient for those traveling from afar. Instead of figuring out how to get from home to temple with an animal fit to sacrifice for such an auspicious occasion, they were treating the temple as a one-stop-shop... walk in, select animal, negotiate a good price, sacrifice and done.

It seems to me that this is what Jesus was angry about. People who were only willing to do just enough, the bare minimum, to honor God without the sacrifice of giving their actual personal best and journeying with their own animals from home. Or, of a broader stroke, people who emptily went through the motions of a deeply meaningful spiritual practice without the willingness to do the hard, messy work of lugging their best selves from wherever-they-came-from to the temple for sacrifice. I imagine Jesus might have seen this as cheap, or perhaps feigned, worship.

As Christians, called to participate in God's kin-dom, our involvement in process of disability justice, education, and awareness is both an exercise of spiritual practice and an act of worshipping the same God for whom Jesus travelled to Jerusalem to honor. As such, I think an awful lot about performative allyship and its implications for faithful praxis and living.

I have been blessed to be in relationship with many people of varying abilities and disabilities over the course of my life. And to tell you honestly, when it comes to being an ally, I've made a lot of mistakes. In

fact, I've probably gotten more wrong than right, but I have learned a lot along the way.

I could tell you story after story of my mistakes and the grace that was extended to me, what I learned, and how I am constantly striving to be a better person and ally to the disability community... but I am quite verbose, and I was only given 1200 words (give or take, most likely give). So instead, I'd like to offer you five condensed lessons that my friends with disabilities, as well as allies to the disability community, have offered me along the way. May they bless you as much as they have blessed me.

1. **Listen. Educate yourself, and then educate others.** If you think you know something about someone with a disability and have not heard it directly from them, you're probably wrong. While many people with disabilities are happy to tell you about their lives and experiences, it is not their job to educate you, nor do their singular experiences represent all of the disability community. Look for materials from writers, artists, activists, and professionals with disabilities. Look for mentors in the ally community. Visit disability advocacy resource hubs. Read and give yourself time to sit in wonder and curiosity and to formulate questions that you want to explore. Then, as you learn, educate others.

A few places to begin:

- o The Disabled God by Nancy Eiesland
- o https://www.abdn.ac.uk/sdhp/content-images/Who_is_the_God_We_Worship.pdf
- o <http://www.poconlineclassroom.com/disability-justice>
- o <https://thebodyisnotanapology.com/magazine/this-is-disability-justice/>
- o <https://accessculture.wordpress.com/2012/07/06/how-to-be-an-ally-to-disabled-neurodiverse-folks-in-activist-academic-communities/>
- o <https://projectlets.org/disability-justice>
- o <https://disabilityjustice.org>
- o <https://drc.arizona.edu/cultural-center/ableism-101-workshop-series-part-four-disability-justice-access-intimacy-care-webs>

2. **Seek accountability and keep showing up.** We all have moments where our mouths, typing fingers, or bodies move faster than our brains, and we say something we have not fully thought through. Build meaningful and faithful interdependent relationships of accountability. Having one or two people who will love you enough to call you into conversation, or call you out if need be, can exponentially contribute to your growth as an ally and as a human being striving to bring about God's kin-dom on earth. Keep showing up, even when it's hard.

3. **Give yourself a long, loving look.** Bring your whole, imperfect self to the work. Don't cut corners and buy your cow at the temple. Commit yourself to the bravery of imperfection and know that your cow might get a little dirty or scraped up in your journey to the temple. Your imperfect offering is better than a manufactured seemingly perfect offering. Expect that you will make mistakes along the way. Some mistakes may be easy to resolve with an apology, others may not.

4. **Combat Inner Defensiveness.** When someone cares enough to correct you, especially someone with a disability, thank them. You may never know what journey they went through to be able to advocate for themselves or learn what they are sharing with you. Their knowledge is a gift... even if it sometimes comes in frustrated wrapping paper. Your job is to hold out your hands, receive it, and proceed faithfully, seeking accountability along the way.

5. **Combat misconceptions, myths, and excuses in yourself and others.** People with disabilities are not your inspiration. They are living their lives just as you are. Allyship disguised as cultural voyeurism is not allyship. There are always power dynamics at play in whose thoughts are published, shared, and disseminated. Amplify the voices of people with disabilities, even if it means quieting your own voice. Good intentions are not an excuse for harmful outcomes. And difficulty of the work is not an excuse for inaction.

Our involvement in process of disability justice, education, and awareness is both an exercise of spiritual practice and an act of worshipping the same God for whom Jesus travelled to Jerusalem to honor. The Kin-dom of God has no time for cheap or feigned allyship. We are called to be all-in and to be a mirror to the image of God in others.

To be an ally is to humble ourselves time and time again, knowing we're going to make mistakes – and probably make a fool of ourselves – but showing up anyway. It's about doing the hard, messy work of learning and growing and bringing our full selves to the work. And notably during this season of Lent, it's about reimagining what it might look like for Jesus to cleanse the temple today.

In the name of God the Lover, the Beloved, and the Love. Amen.

4TH SUNDAY OF LENT

KYLE STEVENSON

NUMBERS 21:4-9 • JOHN 3:14-21

Lent is a time for ugly truths. Here's one—we are sinners, and the world as it is—is not sustainable. I understand sin as being out of fellowship and communion with God and fellow humans. When we no longer acknowledge God as a source of love and life and decide who is worthy of life and love, oppression will abound, and humans will not flourish. All of us are guilty of this. We are born into a world that builds itself on this level of arrogance, and we are all guilty. The lack of human flourishing is a symptom of sin. Ableism, white-supremacy, transphobia, homophobia, and sexism are all symptoms, and we are all complicit. We live in a sin-sick world. But there is an answer. In the Gospel lesson, we catch Jesus and Nicodemus in mid-conversation under the cover of night. The first thing we hear is Jesus alluding to the story in Numbers where God told Moses to lift a serpent on his staff, and those who look up will not die. Nicodemus knew that text well, considering he was a Pharisee, and the early readers of John knew that text well enough so that Jesus can give only a passing reference and they will understand the full point he was trying to make. I want to briefly look at the Numbers text.

At first glance, God seems unfair. They asked for food and water, and God's response is a poisonous snake that kills people. God seems irrational. Did their grumbling warrant such a rash response from God? I'm not sure but listen to the language of their grumbling. They had an issue with God and Moses. They say, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." This makes God angry. For one, God heard their cry and delivered them out of Egypt and claimed them as a people. They cried out, God heard them, sent plagues, opened the Red Sea when they were blocked in while holding off the Egyptian army, and then drowning their enslavers when they went after them. The Exodus from Egypt is the basis of God's covenant with them, so God takes them saying "we were better off in Egypt" personally. As if to say we were fine on our own. Also, they cannot seem to get their story straight. They said, "for there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." Which one is it? Do you not have food, or is it bad food?"

Well, that's not true because God sent manna in the morning and quail in the evening. God provided water from a rock, and when they asked God for meat, God gave them meat. This makes God angry. So, God sent a serpent that bit people and many people died. They repent, and God tells Moses to tell them to look to a staff with a serpent wrapped around it, and those who will look up at it will live. God reorientates their focus back to the one who called them, liberated them, and provided for them. God requires them to look outside of their present condition for their healing. This is the story Jesus draws on.

The human condition is clearly a mess. Long before the Covid-19 pandemic, there has always been the persistent pandemic of white-supremacy and ableism. Human beings think they have the power to decide which body types and minds are fully human. There have always been disparities in health care that impact Black people disproportionately. Folks with disabilities have still been deemed not worthy of care. This world is sick—unto death. Spiritually and physically. Looking within ourselves to fix the problem is not going to fix the problem. As people of faith who have a heart toward justice work and realizing the Beloved Community, we should be mindful that there is nothing we can do within ourselves to fix the world and make it whole. That doesn't mean we sit still and stop our work, but as Christians, we work knowing that we do not have the power within ourselves to abolish sinful systems. It does mean we need to be aware of our role as oppressors and people who participate in death-dealing sys-

tems. Simply put, we cannot save ourselves. There is a serpent among us, and we are dying.

Yet, God loves us. God sent God's only begotten Son. God became God's self to show us a way out. Jesus, like Moses who lifted up the serpent, must be lifted up and that all who believe in him will have eternal life. "For God so loved the world that God gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life." "Everlasting life" is not only about one day in heaven but a new way of living "here and now." Our own old ways of being and living together as a human family are clearly not working. Our way of deciding who is worthy of love and life is not working and thinking that we have the power to make that decision is death-dealing. Believing in Jesus and looking to Jesus is more than just reciting a 30-second prayer of salvation where "you ask Jesus to come into your heart." Looking to Jesus has nothing to do with physical sight, but where the attention of our hearts, thoughts, and values resides. It is looking to Jesus as the one who is love incarnate and seeking to love as he loved.

Believing in God's Son, whom God sent to the world out of God's love for the world, is not getting John 3:16 on a license plate. It does not mean painting John 3:16 under your eyes. Believing in God's Son is believing that his way, his teaching, and seeking to live the counter-worldly life of love he lived. That is the path to eternal life. The way we as humans are living is killing us and killing our planet. Yet, God so loved the world, Jesus says. Not just humans nor just your type of humans, the plan of salvation includes the entirety of creation. Yet, we kill the planet and each other when we cut down trees and allow corporations to emit toxins in the environment in Black neighborhoods just so that they can cut costs. How we are currently living will surely lead us to perish.

Jesus coming into the world exposes us and the ways we participate in death-dealing behavior. Some choose to cling to their own lives, their sense of importance at the expense of those who are marginalized, even after God has come among them. But there are those who look to Jesus for salvation, for a new way of being, living in community, and loving, and that is the way to eternal life. In the words of the gospel-hymn by Roberta Martin:

"Only a Look at Jesus

Also, bow down with care.

He has promised to defend me.

He will all your burdens share.

Only a Look, Only a Look

Turn ye away from sin.

One look, one look will bring salvation,

Eternal, eternal life to win."

5TH SUNDAY OF LENT

LISA MCKEE

John 12:20-33

What Do I Want?

God,

Here we are again this year. We have slogged through Lent and now we are climbing Golgotha on our way to a bright and clean Easter morning, where we meet You, Light Incarnate, in the garden. I feel like most people around me are just really relieved that the whole blasted season will soon be over. Soon this incessant preoccupation with reflection and contemplation can be turned to where it belongs – always somewhere other than ourselves.

But, this year God, perhaps more than any other, I feel like I'm circling the drain, peeling the same onion, and trudging around the same old tree. Digging myself a nasty trench. Going deeper and getting more stuck. I hear my friend's voices echoing refrains of Your good news, "Do you want to be made well?" and echoing the words of Your deepest magic, inviting me to trust You and my joy would be restored. Somehow, I never reach Easter anymore. Am I the only one?

Sometimes I think that if I had seen your wounds, it would be easier for me to believe that you really do love this creature, living in this body that you created and called without doubt when I was young. I am such a Thomas, and you loved him, too. I also know that You are not all that big on knowing, pun intended. You are also not big on certain bodies or intelligence. You invite everyone to follow and learn to love. And you show us that expansive love is costly. That's Your whole portfolio.

Because You know me better than anyone else, I can't rest too long on the body place because it's so much bigger than all that. From the beginning of time, You have created out of your redemptive nature. What You created, You love and want to restore. Everything. Everyone. No exclusions.

This was true about your embodied life, even maybe especially that last week. I was reading John's account of that last week, watching You walk through it. Even then you were asking everyone to lean into Love. I began imagining myself in the scenes and wondering if I really want what I say I do.

I say I want to sit at your feet like Mary and shower you with gratitude and compassion, but I choose to embezzle time and hide gifts and destroy joy like Judas...

I am one of the high priests who want You, Lazarus, and everyone who is not like me dead. I live in constant fear of losing my power. If I lose my power, I lose everything...

I am in the crowd as you enter Jerusalem, people are telling about all they had witnessed and I still can't believe what I am hearing, and I pass the Truth off as a riot...

The Gentiles came to see you with Andrew and Philip, and you know your time is near. You explain if I can trust and relinquish my life and love with abandon that I will experience abundance...

You invite me to follow yet again, saying that I was why You came. God speaks and I insist that it's thunder...You say the voice was for my benefit, that all my grasping and struggling will eventually ease, as I lean into Love...

I want to choose Easter. Please help me get there.

HOLLY WEEK

HOLLY WEEK

HOLLY WEEK

PALM SUNDAY

AMY LITZINGER

JEREMIAH 31:31-34 • PSALM 51:1-12 OR PSALM 119:9-16 • HEBREWS 5:5-10 • JOHN 12:20-33

**Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
his love endures forever.¹**

Okay, God. I believe that you are good, and I'm trying to believe that you are love, but this whole forever business? If this year's taught me anything, it's that nothing I thought was stable is forever. Maybe that's what Lent is about. It's about teaching us what is good, retraining us what it means to love. Are you showing me how to take the long view? That the type of love you show is about enduring hard things? Quarantine. Systematic oppression. Ableism. Isolation. Misunderstanding. Having to prove ourselves over and over again. All the paperwork and tracking. How do we thank you for that? How is it good? How is it shaping us, and refining us? How is it not punishment or something you ordained, but something you are using? These are all things I have been wrestling with during Lent and beyond. Things you put on my heart to talk with you about. If anything else, wrestling with these questions has deepened my relationship with you. In the past few months, you have turned me into a psalmist. With my pleading letters to Ableism to stop wreaking havoc on my life. On our lives.

**19 Open for me the gates of the righteous;
I will enter and give thanks to the LORD.**

**20 This is the gate of the LORD
through which the righteous may enter.**

**21 I will give you thanks, for you answered me;
you have become my salvation.**

Open the gates of the righteous.² Lord, help my unbelief.³ But if the church is to be your hands and feet,⁴ who decides who the righteous includes? Some of your law would say that it does not include me because of my disability, some would also say I am excluded from the priesthood (even of all believers) because I am a woman.⁵ Can I still preach if I do not stand? If the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak? Can I still lead if I admit I need assistance from those under my care? If I am open about the fact that I do not have all the answers, that I do fold under stress?⁶ Will you answer us if we cannot physically knock? If we do not verbally ask? If your people or your buildings have said no so frequently that we can only cry out with our hearts, even as our conscious minds say no, in order to protect ourselves?⁷ Will you answer us, and become our salvation? Even if we are too angry or hurt to say thank you for the things we do not acknowledge you give us?

I am glad that you allow me to thank you by helping others even if I don't always outwardly acknowledge your role in what I'm doing or why I am doing it. Sometimes people are more likely to receive without putting up walls if I don't mention why.

Unfortunately, the system Jesus left behind to continue his work is still filled with flawed humans who make a lot of mistakes in your name. After all, **Palm Sunday** is the remembrance of the celebration a lot of people of faith had right before they turned around and did a lot of damage to another changemaker with disabilities.⁸ I'm saddened that we still haven't learned many things you were trying to teach thousands of years ago. I think the reason why it's so hard to sing Hosanna right now, especially right now, is because I want to be done already. I want to live in this more perfect world that you promised us. It's not fair. Singing Hosanna because it's already done, because I know you've already planned it, and you have it executed. I'm only human, I can't see the end. It's frustrating knowing it's not supposed to be this way. People aren't supposed to go without care, we aren't supposed to die alone or have to prove our worthiness to be treated as humans. People with disabilities aren't

supposed to be seen as strains on resources, or permanently fight for crisis care. And yet we are. We are here, and you are here, but not yet here in the flesh. How do we claim salvation, as we await your return? How do we claim our inheritance, in celebration when there is still so much work to be done?

22 The stone the builders rejected

has become the cornerstone;

23 the LORD has done this,

and it is marvelous in our eyes.

24 The LORD has done it this very day;

let us rejoice today and be glad.

Lent, and this Lent in particular, is a time to reflect on what separates us from you. To acknowledge what works you are doing in us. To refocus on what unites us, and how our choices and mindsets separate us from each other. This year we had the opportunity to reset and be thankful for smaller, simpler things. We have learned what is important, and where our gifts to each other are most useful. I pray that you help us continue to turn our systems around. Continue to teach us which is the cornerstone and show us what you are doing this very day.⁹ So that we may learn how to rejoice in every day, whether we can see Jesus coming or not. We sing Hosanna, and ask to be saved, just as we are thankful that it is already done as we sing it.

11 As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples, 2 saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. 3 If anyone asks you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.'"

Jesus uses everyday things. Mended things. Prodigal sons who return, old wineskins, water, wine, bread, cloaks and donkeys and colts. A king so poor these things were borrowed.¹⁰ Broken people made new and lifted up, as David was.¹¹ Exiles returned.¹² People who come back to their faith. Jesus was allowed to mourn, even as he knew Lazarus would return at his own words.¹³

We can sing Hosanna, save us, and know that is also a praise that we will put in the work to reorder the kingdom with our own skills. We can be used to save each other. Things will get better. We will come out of the dark. We will be able to fellowship again. We will get what we need, even if we have to borrow the things we need, even our strength and courage. The kingdom of David will come.¹⁴ Because Easter is coming. And we are Easter people. And whether we invoke in our remembrance and celebrations next week, or whether we acknowledge it when the pandemic ends, or when Jesus returns, give thanks to the Lord for he is good his love endures forever and true. And we will be able to say Christ is risen indeed.

Amen.

Questions:

- How is the Lord good in these times?
- What does the word forever or endurance mean in times of great change?
- How do you determine who is righteous, and what if anything does it have to do with how you see disability? Is it different for yourself than it is for others? If it is different, why is that? How does God determine who is righteous? Is it different than yours?
- What stones need to be reordered in the systems in your life? Are there any in the Church? How do you think God is going to use you to do that?
- How is God reteaching you to sing Hosanna? What are you praising for, or what are you thankful for in your life right now?
- How are you letting others borrow your resources to celebrate God or to get what they need? How are you borrowing from others and asking for what you need?
- How are you communicating this? How can we give thanks to God that we are able to share resources and lean on each other as we work to reorder systems and build the Kingdom?

Endnotes:

1. Psalm 118:1
2. Psalm 118:19
3. Mark 9:24
4. Paul's letter to the Corinthians
5. Deuteronomy and Leviticus barred those with physical differences from the inner Temple and the priesthood, as well as specific admonitions about roles women could serve in the church
6. Some churches still believe that church leaders should be seen as strong and unbreakable, just as God is perceived to be
7. Some people with disabilities and others have been barred from entering church buildings for identity, behavioral or health reasons, which could be extended because of COVID-19 restrictions, and while they may still believe, may also have a hard time receiving Jesus the person into their hearts because the church has not been accepting of them, so they may not think they deserve it
8. Many scholars with disabilities believe that Jesus took on and redeemed disability through the crucifixion. The same people that praised Jesus by singing Hosanna called for his crucifixion.
9. Psalm 118:22-24
10. Mark 11:3
11. 2 Samuel 7:8
12. Ezra 1:1-4:24
13. John 11:35
14. Mark 11:9



HOLY MONDAY

SHELBY LEWIS

John 12:1-8, NRSV

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.

I spent a lot of time alone at recess. Most of my classmates liked to play soccer, but I got overwhelmed with that game quickly because I didn't understand the rules, where the ball was, or where my body was in relation to the other players. Instead of joining my friends I ran towards the trees where I could find wildflowers along the way. Dandelions were my favorite, even after learning they were technically weeds. Though each individual flower didn't have a strong aroma, I would get a few in my hands and felt as if I could smell the flowers forever if I just breathed deeply enough.

Besides not being able to keep up with soccer games, I definitely never felt "normal" compared to the rest of my peers, even if they were my friends. I behaved in ways that others perceived as strange, such as chewing my hair, rocking back and forth when in distress, and crying at what seemed like the drop of a hat. I never really understood these behaviors; I knew they were different, but I didn't know how to stop them or why I exhibited them in the first place. They frequently disrupted my learning and my social interactions, and I didn't know why I was so different when I just wanted to be the same. I liked picking flowers, but I just wanted to play soccer like everyone else.

I did not yet know that there was a word that explained my differences: autism. I was diagnosed at age three and a half but was ten before I had any awareness of the word. Learning about my diagnosis made my differences make sense, and I finally accepted my preference for picking flowers over picking sports teams. In the twenty-three years since my diagnosis, autism has become more widely understood beyond the early stereotype that autism was "an extreme male brain" that only affected boys who wouldn't walk away from their Lego sets to socialize with other children. However, there is still one pervasive stereotype of autism that deeply frustrates me: that autistic people lack empathy.

Many autistic individuals, including myself, do exhibit below-average levels of cognitive empathy, which helps one understand how to anticipate another person's reactions, understand social cues to continue or end conversations, or pick up on sarcasm or nuance. (Even so, below-average does not mean nonexistent.) I am known for my sarcastic remarks. Somatic empathy, on the other hand, is a form of empathy that autistic individuals often experience at above-average levels. Taken from the Greek root soma, translated as "the body," somatic empathy is a physical reaction to the emotions and experiences of another.

The heightened somatic empathy associated with autism is both a blessing and a curse. While I have long since given up on soccer and no longer chew my hair, I still get overwhelmed with (and feel physical pain from) different sensory experiences that others might tolerate without a second thought—like fluorescent lights or overlapping conversations in a crowded supermarket. However, it is this heightened

somatic empathy that allows me to experience unadulterated joy at the tiniest moments—like my cats curling up next to me on the couch or the warmth of a blanket fresh out of the dryer. Empathy exists far beyond clinical definitions and popular stereotypes.

Today's passage demonstrates the boundlessness of empathy. The dinner itself could not have existed without Martha's service. Her attentiveness to the guests' needs demonstrates deep cognitive empathy necessary to set the tone for dinner with someone as important as Jesus of Nazareth. This is the type of empathy that would have allowed me to see where the soccer ball was passed and how to play my part in creating an exciting game with my classmates. I don't want to discount Martha's role in this event. In contrast, Mary's actions did not follow any cognitive norms, but Mary is no less empathetic or important than Martha. It surely wasn't "normal" to anoint a guest's feet with perfume costing the same amount of money that a laborer would earn in a year, but Mary kept it for the day of Jesus's burial. By opening the jar of perfume and anointing Jesus's feet, Mary prophesied to Jesus's impending burial in just a few days. Though the perfume had a monetary worth, its value in this moment was immeasurable.

Likewise, Mary's prophetic action demonstrated a profound emotional bond with Jesus that could only be nurtured with shared somatic empathy. In the preceding chapter, both Mary and Martha wept for their brother, Lazarus, who had died four days prior to Jesus's arrival in Bethany. After seeing Mary's tears, Jesus himself—God-in-flesh—began to weep too. Jesus knew all along that he would raise Lazarus from the dead, and had even told Martha that all who believe in Him would have eternal life (John 11:26), but the sight of death—and of Mary's tears— still made him weep.

When the dinner began, the fragrance of nard filled the entire room—overwhelming the senses and creating an atmosphere of sweetness, reverence, and prophecy. It is Mary's somatic empathy and physical response to Jesus's presence that created this experience and set it apart from ordinary dinners. Likewise, just as Mary had moved Jesus to tears before he raised Lazarus from the tomb, the anointing of Jesus's feet might have moved Jesus to wash his disciples' feet at the Last Supper, of which he was the host (and the Host). I wonder how many flowers it took to make that much perfume.

The first time I participated in a foot washing on Maundy Thursday, just a few days after hearing this passage for the first time, I was moved to tears of joy and wonder. While I was not the only one crying, my reaction confused me. After all, I recoiled at touching another person's feet or having my feet touched in any other context. I knew that foot-washing was usually reserved for the lowliest servant of the household because feet were even more gross back then because people didn't wear shoes. Even so, Jesus was eager to wash his disciples' feet as an act of love. So too did Mary humble herself before Jesus of Nazareth, the lavish display of reverence also serving as a prophetic act—one that may have inspired the very foot washing I had just experienced.

While autistic people are not alone in experiencing somatic empathy, our negative experiences with it—like with fluorescent lights and overlapping conversations—often outweigh our joys. While both of those things are still physically painful for me, the joy and purpose I find in life and in my faith is just as meaningful as anybody else's. Both Mary and Martha were indispensable to setting the prophetic scene, and Mary's actions are proof that prophecy does not require words. Neither does the continued witness of autistic people, even when we're off by ourselves picking flowers.

HOLY TUESDAY

GREG WOODS

Isaiah 49:1-7 • Psalm 71:1-14 • 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 • John 12:20-36

Seeing Each Other as Beloved Children of God

In the readings for today, we hear about how if we follow God, we are the children of God. In the Gospel of John, we hear the foreshadowing of the crucifixion and the resurrection of Christ. This comes through the illusion of light and darkness. In John 12:35-36, Jesus urges his followers to walk in the light. He says that if they have the light and believe in the light, they will "become children of [the] light." What does this look like to become children of the light?

As a Quaker, I resonate with this imagery and language using light as a metaphor. Early Quakers called themselves Children of the Light drawing on the light imagery that is found throughout the Gospel of John. This light imagery also led early Quakers to talk about the Inward Light of Christ that is within everyone, a phrase to mean God's presence within everyone's lives. This phrase describes a powerful image, to see ourselves having God's love within our bodies.

Sometimes, I do not feel God's presence nor God's love, especially as a disabled person within our ableist society. Our society constantly reminds disabled people that the world is designed for able-bodied people. This happens in several ways, such as making everyday life inaccessible to disabled people. Also, this happens when people fail to see disabled people as equals, as fellow children of God.

Recently, a friend posted on social media about her frustration of having other people assume that her amazing and intelligent daughter is not intelligent because she has a disability. Sadly, I know this frustration personally as a disabled person. I wish I could shield my friend's daughter from this discrimination and the pain of having society see her as less than. Because of my speech impediment, people regularly assume that I am less intelligent. No matter how much I have done, how smart I am, how many degrees I hold, people see me as less than whole due to my speech impediment.

Usually, this condescension comes across as infantilizing disabled people. I have people talk to me as if I was a little kid, even now that I am an adult. Overall, I do not think most people mean harm, but this condescension has made me feel less whole, less worthy of God's love. To cope with this dehumanization, I felt like I had to constantly prove myself my whole life, prove that I am smart enough, that I am good enough to be loved by others and by God.

Yet, this premise that I need to accomplish anything to be worthy of others' love and God's love is absolutely false. Ultimately, it does not matter how many degrees or how much I have done in my life, God loves me just as I am. This is the crucial point of these passages today. Psalm 71 opens with the line of "O Lord, I take refuge; let me never be put to shame." Within God, we can find a place to dwell as children of the light, no matter who we are or what we have accomplished, or even how others treat us. This refuge is accessible for all, even if our churches are not.

Yet, throughout my life, I have to admit that I have failed to see others as children of God, especially other disabled people. Both internalized and societal ableism caused me to see myself as "better" and "less disabled" than other disabled people. Even as a disabled person I need to be aware of my own biases to free myself from this ableist society. The ableist society does not want to see how I/we can build solidarity with others. It thrives on the oppression of people that are not deemed "perfect" because of their disability, who they love, how they look etc. Because of this, I have often failed to see how solidarity with other disabled people and other oppressed people could liberate me from the oppression I internalized.

This happens because our current society bases itself on perfection and individualism. This kind of society does not let us show any kind of weakness and it hinders the self-love that we all urgently need. Society tells us the lie that we do not need each other, that we just need ourselves to get by. This communal sin of always seeking an inaccessible personal perfection does not honor Christ's command to walk in the Light. This does not just harm the disabled community but all of society. We will never attain this perfection because it is always fleeting and is not rooted in anything solid. There will always be more ways to look better, new flaws to erase, new achievements to reach for. We will never be satisfied in our quest for perfection. This misguided search leads us further away from the light that Jesus talks about in the Gospel of John.

When we seek perfection, we seek something that is not God's will. Jesus did not do his ministry alone, he called others to join him, to follow him, to be in community with him. So why do we often believe we do not need others in our journey? Through this lens, our journey becomes a collective journey. What holds us back from this collective journey?

More importantly, how could I fail to see that of God within others? How can I love others more fully? Exploring these questions on both a personal level and a societal level is how we can continue to build God's Kingdom here on Earth. This is the essential message of Jesus through the Gospels. He is showing us a way to breakdown the barriers between different communities, welcoming the outcasts back into the communities. Are we ready to do this within our churches and our communities? This continuing discrimination against disabled people is a sin.

As Christians, Jesus calls us in the Gospel of Matthew to live out two commandments: To love God and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. I see this actually as being three commandments, the last one as loving ourselves. I find this command of loving ourselves to be the hardest, especially within our ableist society.

Once we can fully love ourselves, we can fully love our neighbors. Once we love our neighbors as ourselves, we can fully love God. Then we can build God's Kingdom here on Earth and become children of the Light. We must embark on this long journey to build the Kingdom. Let us remember once again that we do not need to take this journey alone. We have God and each other to be part of this journey. We can start when we can see each other as equals, no matter our abilities.

In this season of waiting in the wilderness, here are some questions to ponder:

How do we see each other as children of God, as the beloved ones walking in the Light?
How do we see ourselves as beloved by God?

Let's walk together as the children of the Light.

HOLY WEDNESDAY

LOUIS JONES & BETHANY MCKINNEY FOX

Hebrews 12:1-3

12:1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us,

12:2 looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

12:3 Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.

Today's devotional entry is collaborative, based on a conversation between myself and Louis Jones about Lent, Hebrews 12:1-3, and connections to disability and ableism. Mr. Jones gave his permission for his quotations and ideas to be included, which I have edited and structured for this written piece. He approved the completed piece.

Bethany: When you read this Hebrews passage, and think about disability and ableism, what does it make you think about?

Louis: The first thing that came to mind was how people with disabilities are treated, because I've experienced that. The issue is our society and how it looks at so-called disabled people – there's enough individuals in power that don't look at what people have to offer. It's a systemic issue.

B: For sure, absolutely. It's so deeply wrong. Let's talk about how you're noticing that in the text – looking at the first verse, Hebrews 12:1, what does it bring up for you?

L: [Referring to laying aside "every weight and the sin that clings so closely] A lot of this stuff that's keeping people back, we're supposed to come together and get rid of it. Things like: where we put our time, our division, putting money and finances over community and humans.

We let other powers influence our lives, and we don't regulate them... Time is what's going to be counted. ...We can be too materialistic, hungry for power, and spend our time in the wrong ways.

B: Definitely. And even though we are invited to think about this all the time, Lent in particular is a season where we can examine that in ourselves and repent, and change directions to make sure we are truly following the way of Jesus.

L: Yes. And if you follow in someone's footsteps, you end up where they're at – you experience the similar things, you're going to experience a lot of similar issues. And if you don't come across those issues, you're not really following, you're doing something wrong and you're not following.

B: You mean like those parts in this scripture where it talks about Jesus experiencing the cross, shame, and hostility?

L: Right. Jesus fought with officials and religious people, who controlled everything. If you're following Jesus, you'll definitely have people who don't like you. Say you have a grand master or guru or something who lived an excellent, huge life. And let's say he walked a certain trail up a mountain to get to the top. Well, if you're going to follow him, then you're going to follow his footsteps and take that same trail. And let's say that on his trail he fell into a big mess of quicksand and he died. Then what happens to you if you follow him?

B: Then you also are going to fall into that quicksand and die.

L: Right. But everyone wants to be comfortable.

B: And yet, we realize – as it says in this text too – that Jesus experienced hostility. So, if we're following the way of Jesus, we are going to encounter hostility too.

L: In some of my records with the state and whatnot, it gives me certain labels and diagnoses that make people overlook me. The same that happened to Einstein in the beginning. A lot of people with disabilities have a lot of genius ideas – the main pioneers have been people with so-called disabilities. But today a lot of people dismiss people whose brains may work differently. That is hostility.

B: If you were going to give a message from this text specifically to disabled people, or to people who (as you say) are labeled disabled by other people, what would you want them to know?

L: When I look at the mess I've gone through, it's all about how you look through that black diamond, and which angle you look through. It's taught me a lot about empathy and what's really important. And what's really important is people, and I only learned that because of what I went through and because I survived. I would want people with disabilities to know that the greatest people who ever lived have gone through hardships. And, just because someone tells you you're this or you're that, there's a good chance it's not true. Only the Creator will know. Look within yourself and focus and rely on the gifts that the Creator has given you. If you judge yourself by what other people think of you, you'll get nowhere.... To be great is to be unique, which you are.

B: And what would you want to make sure nondisabled people get out of this text?

L: That they to need "lay aside weight" like preconceived judgements, looking at someone and thinking they are stupid. They need to consider that these are unfounded thoughts if they haven't even talked to the person or gotten to know them. And to lay aside sins - how they treat each other, how they act out on these thoughts/emotions that they may think about disabled people. I would tell them not to judge the book by its cover. Also, that it's a race against time do it quickly; be much more careful and considerate with pushing aside people, and put aside your pride. Consider your walk of life and if you say you follow Jesus, look at what you're going through, and ask yourself: does it line up? It's never too late. If you're around a lot of people who need help, and you're really helping, it's not going to be easy. It's time to ask yourself: what do you value?

MAUNDY THURSDAY

ROSALBA BEA RIOS

Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14 • Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19 • 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 • John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Death, blood, deliverance, community, sacrifice, and love. These words stand out upon reflecting on Christ's last meal on earth. He expectantly waited and prepared to complete the culmination of his purpose on earth. To die. Death, our dreaded foe and the subject of many existential postulations throughout history. Humans have attempted to make sense of it whether through ontological philosophies or theological understandings. Death is the culprit of the most painful and anxiety producing of human experiences. To lose loved ones or to confront the certainty of our mortality is a reality we all will face if we haven't already. The COVID-19 pandemic brought that reality front and center on a worldwide scale causing us to collectively experience an existential crisis. Whether it be the loss of life as we knew it, loss of identity, employment loss, or loss of a loved one. We are all facing death in some form.

In the Exodus narrative, God informs the Israelites they are going to be confronted with the angel of death and instructs them to quarantine. I imagine it was difficult for them to calmly savor their roasted lamb while knowing the threat of death lurked outside their door. As a community, they share in the same angst and huddle around their homes waiting for it to be over. God comforts them by assuring he will protect them through the blood of the very lamb they are instructed to eat. Their salvation hinges on the death of an innocent lamb while its blood on their doorposts served as a visual reminder of God's providence. The blood symbolizes death while paradoxically ensuring life and safety. A shield against the angel of death. Despite God's assurance, I wonder if they doubted God's promise that night and gave in to fear and boredom during their quarantine.

As a person with a progressive neuromuscular disease and profound physical disability, the COVID-19 crisis has succumbed me to a sedentary lifestyle via the quarantine. Because of my respiratory malfunctions, contracting the disease could be life-threatening for me. At the urging of my pulmonologist who recommended that I adhere to strict quarantine guidelines, I have lost my social life and independence that I worked so hard to maintain. Not only do I fear for myself, but also for my beloved elderly parents whom I live with. Like the Israelites, I've been instructed to quarantine and also fear what lurks outside my doorposts.

However, in John's narrative, Jesus' response to the reality of death is remarkably different. Jesus being fully conscience of the suffering that lay ahead chose to spend his last evening alive surrounded by his beloved friends. He savors his roasted lamb. He calmly relishes in the holiness of the moment by audaciously pampering his disciples with a foot spa! As stated in John 13:1, "he loved them to the end" and directs his attention on them rather than on his impending death. Not only that, but as God incarnate, he humbly demonstrates he is not above our mess nor his disciples' calloused feet. In fact, he gets up close and personal by washing their dirt away. How do we deal with existential dread and loss?

By following his example and live out his sacrificial love so that "by this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35). Love is truly the antidote to fear, even the fear of death. Quarantine or not, physical contact or not, technology has provided us a lifeline to connect to one another. I may not physically be able to give someone a foot spa, but Jesus invites me to eat from his supper table by serving others regardless of my circumstances or fears. To set aside my own burdens and "kneel down" beside my brother or sister with the means available to me.

We do not know what lays ahead this year or beyond, but we can take comfort in knowing that God incarnate identifies with our suffering and meets us in it. This physical reality is fleeting and we are all destined to meet the angel of death one day. Nonetheless, Jesus has paved a way for a new life free from existential dread through his sacrificial love. He truly is the way, the truth, and the life. In remembrance of his death, we partake of the physical bread and wine, but also remember him by taking part in loving and serving one another as he did.

GOOD FRIDAY

RAEDORAH C. STEWART

Hebrews 4:14-16 (21st Century King James Version)

"Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed into the Heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast to our profession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot be touched with the feelings of our infirmities, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

Story

I am an empath. Even prior to learning the language of the empath and the even more detailed six types of the empath, I now realize that I was an empath from childhood. I am such an empath, that my sensibilities and sensitivities traverse between that of the emotional empath, physical/medical empath, and intuitive empath. (The other three major empath types to which I do not readily identify are the geomantic empath, plant empath, and animal empath.)

For instance, as young as in kindergarten I befriended "the girl who walked funny" because she wore metal braces and used odd looking crutches. Always tall for my age, I remember telling her to hang on to my back instead of using her crutches when we went to lunch and recess. I don't remember her name, but the sound of her metal braces and crutches are sacred memories; and I recall the odd way we walked in sync as she hugged my waist from behind. I never knew, or cared, why she wore braces, I just knew that I could help her be more normal standing in line and walking to the swings. When we returned after Summer break to first grade, she was no longer at our school. Still, this lingers decades later as a defining moment in my life as a helper--a primary characteristic of an empath.

Fast forward many years ahead helping others in various ways, I was appointed to be the Pastor of Prayer Ministries at a megachurch. What a perfect job for an emotional/intuitive empath! In that role, I found myself prayerfully bearing the burdens of others in a spiritual way like I had carried the body of my young friend in braces. I never knew what person would come to the altar or which prayer request would come across my desk, still, I seemed to have the right words--not just trite scripture quoting--to speak comfort, clarity, and care. Sometimes, we were close enough for me to touch them as we prayed; other times, a lengthy phone call or hand-written prayer sufficed. Most often we shed tears and shared boxes of tissue. I was clear that I was called to this ministry at which being an empath proved to be a good vessel through which the Holy Spirit could comfort others. However, regardless of my awareness of being an empath, my type fails in comparison to the Divine Empath, Jesus Our High-Priest!

Scripture

How often have we heard that Jesus was fully human and fully divine? This apologetic is usually recited when trying to explain that when Jesus wept, slept, got angry, and made wine for a party, that these human experiences were not anthropomorphic. Instead, Jesus was living a fully human experience with a definite divine calling. As he agonized on the Cross, Jesus' last cries sounded very much like our human prayers of concern, distress, and plea. Now, Jesus' disabled body would be the last image of him the crowd of onlookers saw that day. The Most Divine Empath assumed our physical disabilities and spiritual infirmities. Jesus' broken body was the holy sacrifice that made all who believed one with him.

Our High Priest, unlike other cultural deities, is not formed by hand out of matter or imagined by sages. These could not physiologically know the human experience of broken relationship or broken body. But, Our High Priest, who was at the beginning before the beginning began intimately knew the limits of bodily suffering and disabled anguish. Jesus was in touch with what touched us! That is the good news! Therefore, when we gaze upon the cross, amidst some valid albeit competing narratives, might we see Jesus' disabled body as essential to a community called to grace, mercy, and justice?

The word to able-bodied persons would be to not sin by looking away from the visual anguish and inconveniences of the disabled body just as Jesus did not abandon us in the Garden of Gethsemane, on the Via Dolorosa, or from the Cross at noontime. Yes, yes, the temptation to simply take care of disabled persons may seem to be benevolence; however, reconsider that the disabled person is sent to care for

you with reciprocity. The temptation to find the loophole in the law to not make churches and public buildings radically inclusive may be cost efficient; however, reconsider that keeping disabled persons out of buildings is a way of keeping us out of sight and out of mind. These are not choices Jesus would make. These are not the choices Jesus made with his broken body on display. Our High Priest, even while disabled, showed aptitude for carrying out his calling and fulfilling his purpose.

The word to disabled persons is that Jesus knows when social systems fail us. Jesus knows when medical treatment is withheld. Jesus knows the agony of pain and the longing for deliverance. Jesus knows abject loneliness, public scrutiny, and openly displayed humiliation. Still, Jesus did not lose focus that he was not his mangled, maligned, and disabled body--he knew he came to the world that the world might be saved! The disabled body is part of the message of salvation. It was this Disabled Body upon which full inclusion into a restored relationship between humanity and God was established. It was through this disabled body that grace came to a mother, mercy to a repentant thief, and justice for us all. Even while tempted to look away from the Cross, hold your gaze upon the disabled body of Jesus the Divine Empath and see yourself as an agent of the message of salvation.

Together then, let us learn from Jesus the Divine Empath to show mercy and to be grace one to another regardless of how our bodies are framed.

Summary

Sure, disabled people move too slow, need too much, and get in the way. Disabled people also afford others a pace to be more present, create ways to improve the quality of life, and are children of God. What you see in those within reach reflects how you ultimately view the sacrifice of the Divine Disabled Empath. You will either look for the grace in us or risk losing the mercy this is to be found to include us in the life of the church and accessibility in culture.

SELAH

Jesus our Savior and Brother models for us the ultimate life of the Empath. For carrying our burdens of separation and exclusion, we have come to know that carrying the burdens of accessibility and inclusion is holy work. May we hear rebuke of the church espousing community without disabled persons in full communion and may we become the empath church that radically includes disabled persons in the next chapters of our church's story. Amen.

HOLY SATURDAY

EMMIE ARNOLD

Psalm 31:1-4, 15-16

How many days, months, years did it feel like for Jesus as He lay in the tomb?

How many years older are all of us since last March?

How devastatingly alone and hopeless did He feel?

How much longer will we feel alone and deeply disconnected from one another?

Was it encouraging for Him to remember Psalm 31 and think, "My times are in Your hand"?

Does time even matter anymore?

Where is God's hand right now?

Do we want to stretch ours out?

Can we accept the chance to let go of the control we try to grasp?

The sense of time warp that many of us have felt since last year is not new to me. I have been living with a stretched and strange experience of time for more than half my life. I have lived with a different definition of it ever since I began feeling symptoms that were, at first, looked at piecemeal but eventually looked at as a whole and labeled "fibromyalgia" and "bipolar disorder type II" more than six years after they began.

I am not unfamiliar with the sense of time dragging or speeding with tides that are unpredictable and bring with them alternately hope, grief, malaise, and most everything else under the sun. They are entangled together; they do not arrive one by one.

My body and mind are both my precious home and my worst enemy. They are beautiful and yet teeming with levels of pain, fatigue, and mood fluctuations that make my life, my times, difficult to predict. Though I have learned to give myself compassion over the years, I am not always gentle with my body and mind. I fight them, but I sometimes lose. I have days when I can live exactly the kind of productive, successful, adventurous, fast-paced life I expected before I got sick; I have days when I can barely turn on the lights and I sleep much of the day away.

My times are in Your hand.

I am far from the only disabled person whose definition of time is different from non-disabled people. It has a name: "Crip time." As Alison Kafer wrote in **Feminist Queer Crip**, "Crip time is flex time not just expanded but exploded; it requires reimaging our notions of what can and should happen in time..." Ellen Samuels wrote, "Crip time is grief time. It is a time of loss... Crip time is broken time. It requires us to break in our bodies and minds to new rhythms, new patterns of thinking and feeling and moving through the world."

Crip time, it seems, is not just for disabled folks and the ones who love them anymore; it's for every single person during the pandemic who is paying attention to their body, mind, and soul. None of us are living in regular time anymore. We are living in times when we sometimes truly have no idea what day it is. We are indeed trying to break into new patterns of moving through the world while also fighting against the feeling of getting used to it here because this is not normal, and this is harrowing.

Even once the world moves back to regular time, there will be more people than ever living in crip time because some who have survived Covid are not who they were before they got infected. They are living with at-times devastating symptoms that lasted far longer than anyone could have expected. They no longer recognize their bodies and minds. They have become unfamiliar. Infuriating. Needy, requiring dialysis; portable oxygen; an organ transplant; a home health aid; help from loved ones; an entire reframing

of life as they knew it. Time has expanded and exploded.

Though I haven't had Covid, as a disabled hospital chaplain, I know what it is to enter into an unfamiliar state, a body and mind that no longer match what I knew, expected, or wanted. One of my most treasured roles is to welcome my patients into crip time, to invite them to see their bodies as still loveable, their lives still bearing possibility, no matter how many or few days they have left. I hold their hands and pray that they feel God's hands on top of mine.

Maybe Holy Saturday is liturgical crip time. Time stands, and lies, still on this day.

On a day when the bright and wildly necessary hope of salvation and healing of a broken world seemed to be ripped away, something was still brewing underground.

The harrowing of hell was underway.

The prison doors were being flung wide open.

What once was seen as utterly irreconcilable was being brought close.

And yet I imagine that it was also a nightmare of a day for Jesus, one that felt like years.

I don't know if Jesus felt His Father's hand on His while He was down there, but somehow, His times were still in His Father's hands on Holy Saturday. So were the times of those who were above ground and utterly bereft, thinking that everything beautiful, their flicker and spark of hope, had just been extinguished.

When the Son of God re-emerged, leaving the tomb empty, showing us that the healing of the world is possible - and certain in the end - He came back with scarred hands. He chose not to heal those wounds. He easily could have done that, but He chose to bear them. Jesus' hands are powerful enough to tear the dividing wall of hostility down, yet gentle enough to touch people who had been considered untouchable; assure His friend Thomas, traumatized after His death, that He was who He said He was; and hold our hands, even on this day. These hands are the ones that counter our enemies' hands in Psalm 31 and in life. They are the ones that hold us fast and keep us from falling into darkness forever. The enemy's hand bears Covid particles; God's hand bears scars that remind us of some of the most important days in history. These scars are lasting reminders of the day that hope died; the day that time stood, and lay, still; the day that hope re-emerged stronger and gentler than ever. The enemy's hand seems permanent right now, but God's actually is.

God's hand is holding a vaccine vial, grabbing intubation tools, restocking shelves, delivering take-out and groceries, examining a sample in a lab, disinfecting surfaces, giving air hugs from six feet away, writing "thank you" cards, driving ambulances, taking care of the sick in hospitals and at home, picking up the phone to keep connected, scribbling class notes, helping with homework...

And holding us closely, lovingly, and telling us to heed our bodies' and minds' desperate need for rest. To slow down. To not do everything. To let ourselves be loved and cared for. To wait without needing to know every answer.

So let us, on this Holy Saturday, enter into a day of liturgical crip time, where we wait in uncertain expectation for a most certain hope.

Our times are in Your hand.

EASTER

ZACHARY HOLLER

ROMANS 6:3-11 ; MARK 16:1-8

Today we are celebrating and observing Easter, the culmination of Lent. Today marks the commemoration of Jesus's resurrection, the beginning of a new era, a time of renewal and rebirth. I hope and pray that over the last forty days you have been able to spend time in prayer and soul searching as an opportunity to grow deeper in your spiritual union with God by whom you are fearfully and wonderfully made.

As Lent comes to a close this year, let us consider it a new beginning, a new opportunity to offer our gifts and live out our spiritual identity. For today's devotional let's study Paul's words, inspired by the Holy Spirit in Romans 6: 3-11:

"3 Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4 We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. 5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. 6 For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with,^[a] that we should no longer be slaves to sin— 7 because anyone who has died has been set free from sin. 8 Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. 9 For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. 10 The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. 11 In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus." (Romans 6: 3-11 NIV)

Yes, this passage reminds us that, by faith in Christ, we have died to sin, but it is not only about sin. Christ died only to be resurrected. So, we also share in this new life. This is a story about renewal. I want to tell you a story about how I have experienced this renewal and how my personal experience with disability plays into it.

When I was a young child, I did not have any signs of disability. When I was three years old, I began to experience hearing loss followed by vision loss. A short time later, I began to struggle with balance and fine motor functioning. I have clear memories of what it was like to walk, see and hear and clear memories of the frustrating episodes of falling when my balance failed. It was a difficult time in the "unknowns". I continued to progress downward without any medical explanation. At the age of five, I experienced respiratory arrest and spent nearly two months in the hospital where I received a trach. This was the beginning of a new journey, navigating life with new challenges which was very emotionally difficult for a young child. Throughout elementary school and most of my teenage years I experienced feelings of anger and despair. I wanted my old life back and that wasn't going to happen.

At the time, I was embarrassed about most aspects of my disability although that has changed since. When I was eighteen years old, I was invited by family to attend the church Christmas program. Here, a group of youths invited my sister and I to join them for the youth Sunday school. Here I was in church, listening to people talk about God who I have been angry at, and listening to fellow youth share their own personal stories. One day during the sermon I had a "epiphany." Jesus, the son of God, actually died on the cross after a long journey in ministry during which he faced grief, pain, and persecution. He died and rose again. He can understand my every feeling. Yet, he rose. This was THE moment of spiritual awakening and renewal for me. Yes, I missed my "old" life and the things I was physically able to do in the past. But that was not returning. I had a new life to live into and gifts to offer. For instance, I had endured many difficult moments which forced me to learn the importance of patience and interdependency. Which is more Christ-like: living in interdependent relationships where everyone helps one another, or feeling the

need for self sufficiency and physical independence? This is the question I was asking myself and for me, the understanding of interdependency was a true gift because it reflects the image of God as a relational being. Therefore, it was time to start weaving this into my "new" self and life.

In reflecting on Paul's words, I did in a way experience a death to sin. I had to put aside my contempt toward God for allowing me to develop a disability. I had to stop putting myself down for having a disability and accept the situation as an opportunity to embrace the person I was made to be. My disability has shaped how I live into this identity. In Romans 6:5, Paul says that when we die to sin, we put off our old self. For me, that meant putting aside my pride and my need for independence and self-sufficiency, and my fear of needing and accepting help. In verse 10, Paul says of Jesus "the life he lives, he lives to God". In the following verse Paul tells us to count ourselves "alive to God." For me, this means many things, most importantly the appreciation of interdependent helping relationships. This creates an atmosphere for us to practice the virtues of Christianity such as love and hope and patience, and all good things. In this way, my disability and the experience it brought has provided me with the opportunity to experience renewal and live a new life.

We all have our own stories and experiences. We all have a different past and a different living arrangement. But we all have the same Creator. We are all made in the image of the same God and the Holy Spirit who breathes the breath of renewal has been sent to work in all of us. As you close your forty days of Lent, take time to reflect on what you have put aside, where you have grown deeper, and how you can live to God in a life of renewal. Thanks be to God!

AUTHORS



Zach Holler is a candidate for Ordained Ministry as a Provisional Elder for the West Ohio Conference of the United Methodist Church. He received a B.S. in Rehabilitation Services from Wright State University in 2012 and worked there after in Disability Advocacy. In 2014, Zach received his call to pastoral ministry and returned to school, this time attending United Theological Seminary, where he received his Masters of Divinity in 2019. Zach currently serves as Associate Pastor at Waverly Grace United Methodist Church in Southern Ohio where he is charged with exploring and developing his model for inclusive ministry that can be employed in churches of all sizes. Zach also serves as co-chair of the Disability and Ministry team of the West Ohio Conference of the UMC.



Rev. Letiah Fraser is a New York City Native that now lives in Kansas City. She is an ordained pastor with the Church of the Nazarene, an activist/organizer connected with the KS Poor People's Campaign; A National Call for Moral Revival, a disability rights advocate, a hospital chaplain and a doctoral student. Rev. Letiah Fraser received her B.S. in Adolescent Education and English from Nyack College in New York. She received her Masters of Divinity from Nazarene Theological Seminary in Kansas City. She is also currently completing her Doctorate of Ministry degree at Nazarene Theological Seminary. Her focus is on spiritual formation and disability theology. She enjoys traveling and participating in new adventures. She is passionate about the intersections of faith, race and disability. She identifies as a proud African American, becoming Christian woman who lives with a physical disability. She is a daughter, sibling, friend, and new plant-mom, who desires to be a writer, teacher, preacher, and professor.



Rev. Dr. Erin Raffety is the Research Fellow in Pastoral Care & Machine Intelligence with the Center of Theological Inquiry and the Empirical Research Consultant for The Imagining Church Project at Princeton Theological Seminary. She is ordained as a Teaching Elder in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), is a cultural anthropologist, and the proud parent to a daughter with disabilities. Raffety has published widely in the areas of disability ministry and congregational leadership and loves consulting with churches on these topics. She is currently working on a book on the importance or nurturing and receiving the ministry and leadership of people with disabilities in the Church.



Heather Lanier is the author of the memoir, **Raising a Rare Girl**, a New York Times Book Review Editor's Choice. Her essays and poems have appeared in The Atlantic, The Wall Street Journal, The Sun, and elsewhere. She is an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at Rowan University, and her TED Talk, "'Good' and 'Bad' Are Incomplete Stories We Tell Ourselves," has been viewed over two million times.



Amy Litzinger is a lifelong traveler with Jesus, which means using her voice and her art to advocate with marginalized people to thrive, especially her peers with disabilities. In addition to her paid work as a non-profit policy specialist, she strives to help the community of faith become more inclusive by infusing a theology of disability into congregational culture and by including people with disabilities in discussions of access. Amy has grown up in the UMC, receiving her BA in Religion from Southwestern University in 2010 and her MA in Theological Studies from Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary in 2015. She has been a certified instructor for DanceAbility International since 2015.



Greg Woods is a disabled Quaker minister living in Boston with his wife Jenn, their daughter Margaret Rae, and their cat Tuesday. He sometimes blogs at <https://diygreg.medium.com/> and can be found on Twitter @diygreg.



Emmie Arnold (she/her/hers) is a proud disabled woman, a chaplain for Northwell Health, a graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary, and a candidate for ordination in the PC(USA). She enjoys cooking, baking, reading, writing, watching too much television, playing and listening to music, exploring beautiful places, and spending time with family and friends in safe and creative ways during the pandemic.



Shelby Lewis, MDiv graduated from Vanderbilt Divinity School in December 2020, and is pursuing ordination in the Tennessee Region of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). She is the mother of two rescue cats, Lucius and Violet, as well as several plants at varying levels of survival. She completed her B.A. in Religious Studies at Elon University, where she was a member of Phi Beta Kappa and Theta Alpha Kappa Honor Societies, as well as the recipient of Elon LGBTQIA Alumni Association's Student of the Year Award in 2015. As a queer, autistic woman in ministry, she hopes to develop resources to help churches become more equitable for people with disabilities in the pulpit and the pews. Her favorite pastimes include taking Lucius for walks around the neighborhood, binge-watching *The Golden Girls*, and coming up with creative ways to socially distance.



Louis Jones is a thinker and artist living in Altadena, CA. He spends much of his time getting to know people in his neighborhood, and diligently researching and discussing topics like philosophy, religion, the environment, and the Bible. He is passionate about helping people by sharing information he learns. He describes his visual art as coming from his relationship with the Creator and the "spiritual sight" that comes through that connection. Over 50 of his images have been copyrighted with the U.S. Copyright Office. He recently took a job with a security company and is enjoying this new opportunity.



Bethany McKinney Fox is founding pastor of Beloved Everybody Church, an ability-inclusive church in Los Angeles where people with and without intellectual, developmental, and other disabilities, as well as neurodiverse folks, lead and participate together. She is director of spiritual formation for Cyclical LA, a church starting network. She earned her PhD in Christian Ethics at Fuller Seminary, MDiv at Columbia Theological Seminary, and BA in Philosophy with a minor in Russian Literature from UCLA. Her recent book *Disability and the Way of Jesus: Holistic Healing in the Gospels and the Church* (IVP Academic, 2019) examines how Jesus' healing in the Gospels, too often used in ways that wound people with disabilities, might point a way toward real healing and mutual thriving. She is ordained in the Presbyterian Church (USA). When she's not making music with her violinist husband, they're exploring L.A., cooking fun food, or engaging with Gozo, their dog.



Rosalba "Bea" Rios was born in Mexico City is a visual artist, a mental health therapist, and is passionate about social justice and faith. She has a B.S in studio art from Biola University, an M.S in clinical counseling from California State University, Fullerton, and an M.A in theological studies from Fuller Theological Seminary. She currently works in county mental health for the greater Los Angeles area providing clinical counseling for underprivileged individuals, children, and families.



Rev. Raedorah C. Stewart, MA is the Director of the Writing Center and is completing the DMin, in Story and Spirituality at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC.



The Rev. Kyle Austin Stevenson is a 2015 Cum Laude graduate of Morehouse College with a BA in History. While at Morehouse, Kyle served as a Chapel Assistant and served as Historian of the Martin Luther King, Jr. International Chapel Assistants Program. He was inducted into the 2013 Academy of Young Preachers in January 2013. In 2013, was licensed to the gospel ministry at his home church, Alfred Street Baptist Church, Alexandria, VA, where the Rev. Dr. Howard-John Wesley is the pastor. In 2019, he was ordained at the Historic Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, GA where the Rev. Dr. Raphael G. Warnock is pastor. He earned his Master of Divinity from the Emory University, Candler School of Theology, May 2018. Kyle earned his Master of Theology from the Columbia Theological Seminary, May 2019, and received the Frederick Buchner Excellence in Writing Award. He has an interest in liturgical theology and its role in forming disciples of Jesus Christ who see justice making essential to discipleship.



Tiffany Jones (she/her) is currently the Minister to Children and Their Families at Calvary UMC in Nashville, TN. Having grown up with a best friend with Down Syndrome, she has always identified as an ally to the disability community. She sees her role as not only seeking to educate herself, but also to educate others along the way. Tiffany is a graduate of Vanderbilt Divinity School where she wrote her Masters thesis on accessible worship with people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) in the UMC. She served as a Resident Director with Our Place Nashville for nearly three years and is passionate about accessible churches, worship and community for all people, just as God made them. Tiffany is currently pursuing a Masters of Science in Social Work from the University of Tennessee in hopes of one day obtaining her LCSW and specializing in mental health care with individuals with IDD and their families.



Lisa Lavelle McKee was born two months premature and weighed a whopping 3 lbs. 7 oz. when she came into the world. When she was 2 1/2 years old she was diagnosed with cerebral palsy, a neuromuscular disability that has multiple presentations and outcomes. She received intensive therapy from the Easter Seal Society and attended public school. Lisa holds BA and MA degrees in Rehabilitation Counseling, as well as an MA in Parks and Recreation Administration with a Therapeutic emphasis. In 1996, she received her M.Div. from Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC. Reverend McKee is an ordained Elder in The United Methodist Church. Lisa and her husband, John, also an Elder, live and serve in West Virginia Annual Conference. They have a thirteen-year-old Welsh Corgi named Chloe.

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