

**Turning Away from Ableism: Journeying Toward a More Radically
Inclusive Church for People with Disabilities**

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ABSTRACT

TURNING AWAY FROM ABLEISM: JOURNEYING TOWARD
A MORE RADICALLY INCLUSIVE CHURCH
FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

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People with disabilities make up the most significant minority of individuals in the country yet remain the most marginalized in society; this is especially true for the Church. This work unequivocally names the marginalization of people with disabilities in the Church as the sin of ableism, perpetuated in churches' liturgy, rituals, and theology.

This work takes both an autobiographical and autoethnographic approach to highlighting the intersections of its author's experiences of Blackness and disability within the Church and church adjacent spaces. Reflecting upon several personal experiences in light of numerous passages from within Christian scriptures that center on disability, the author presents a framework for churches to interrogate their inclusion practices or lack thereof and move toward making the church a more inclusive space for people with disabilities. Inclusion must not be understood as only getting people into the building but instead as welcomed and encouraged contributors to the life of the community of faith.

The most effective tool that the church has in changing its course and relationship with people with disabilities is within its walls. The Church must be willing to reconsider the importance of its embodied rituals, namely, Communion. And celebrating this ritual of the church remembers the sacredness of broken bread and a cup for all. No image or person within the canon of scripture personifies this importance more than Jesus. This work calls the Church to remember the brokenness of Christ's body and receive it as an affirmation of people with disabilities' place within the church, not only as attenders but also contributors to the flourishing of the community.

Throughout this writing are questions to help the reader consider the place of people with disabilities within their communities of faith. The author turns scripture into a lens by which congregations and congregational leaders alike might audit their measure of inclusivity. Jesus' gospel ministry was/is one of inclusion, not exclusion. Since the gospel, which is the message of God's love, is for all people, the Church as its chief proclaimer must make space for all who want and are willing to take part.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Within the Christian tradition, the Church plays an integral role in the life of its adherents. The Church is where worship of God occurs, where a sense of community is fostered, and where education and formation happen. In many churches across America, individuals have entered the doors and experienced a sense of welcome, belonging, and even discovered a greater sense of purpose. Others may have struggled to belong or may have felt excluded altogether.

There are many reasons people might experience feelings of being unwelcome or even excluded from a church. Yet, no reason seems to push individuals and their loved ones beyond the bounds of community more than living with or caring for someone with a disability. The Church's glaring lack of inclusion of those with disabilities is emblematic of an institution that has failed; it has failed to make itself aware of the vital importance and interconnectedness of its theologies, rituals, liturgy, and disability, with significant consequences.

The interconnectedness of theology and disability is pertinent when considering the Church as a formative space. Education and formation within church and parachurch ministries rely heavily upon sacred stories and texts, namely those within the Bible—a collection of stories articulating God's work(s) in and through a relationship with their creation. The telling of stories has played a significant role in Christianity's being carried from century to century. Engaging with stories, past and present, give way to learning

from the narrative(s) of others' lives and grant us the chance to glean from those around us, even within our immediate communities.

Therefore, my work will take both an autobiographical and autoethnographic approach in addressing the realities facing those in the Church living with disabilities, who may find themselves unable to fully experience community within congregations. This particular approach to engaging one's context is not a novelty,

Ethnography is a form of social research used by sociologists, anthropologists, historians, and other scholars to study living human beings in their social and cultural contexts. Participant observation is the hallmark of this kind of social research. Ethnographers go to the places where people live, work, or pray in order to take in firsthand the experience of group life and social interactions.¹

My work posits that the Church's chief sin against people with disabilities is the sin of ableism. It is enacted against those with disabilities most often through churches' rituals, theology, and liturgy—encompassed within this liturgical space is also the church's architecture. In conversation with Nancy Eiesland's, *The Disabled God*, my goal is to move the Church toward a renewed understanding of Christ's broken body's vital importance in the Church's relationship to and with people with disabilities.

Thus the church, which depends for its existence on the disabled God, must live out liberating actions in the world. The church finds its identity as the body of Christ only by being a community of faith and witness, a coalition of struggle and justice, and a fellowship of hope. This mission necessitates that people with disabilities be incorporated into all levels of participation and decision making. Jesus Christ as the disabled God provides a symbolic prototype and opens the door to the theological task of re-thinking Christian symbols, metaphors, rituals, and doctrines so as to make them accessible to people with disabilities and remove their able-bodied bias.²

¹ Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as Pastoral Practice* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 2008), 25.

² Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*, (Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1994), 104.

The Church must contend with its exclusion of those with disabilities, and this is possible if it utilizes its liturgies and embodied rituals to do so. A renewed focus on the ‘disabled God’ will move the Church toward repentance and a more radical inclusiveness.

Much of the development of disability theology since Eiesland’s groundbreaking work is attributed to males and are themselves non-disabled, several of whom are cited throughout this work³. Though their contributions have aided in furthering necessary conversations in this area, their work is not from their own lived experience; it is often based on theory or proximity to those with disabilities. Among the multitude of theological perspectives in existence, disability theology is undoubtedly contextual. It is a theological framework that seeks to decenter the voices of the non-disabled and amplify the voices and experiences of those who are disabled. Therefore, the work of disability theology must be rooted first and foremost in the realities of those who themselves live with disabilities. Using my own experiences as a Black-disabled-male whose spirituality is rooted in the Christian tradition as a point of departure in this meaningful conversation, I will also call upon scripture's witness to develop a framework that calls us to deeper reflection and more excellent action.

However, in order to move the Church forward to become a more inclusive space, it is also crucial to engage what has informed understandings of disability beyond the Church's confines. There are various types of disabilities and multiple ways in which disabilities are framed. Therefore, I aim to present a primer on disability and Disability Studies, informing readers of some of the varied understandings of disabilities

³ See work(s) by Thomas Reynolds, John Swinton, Amos Yong

theologically, theoretically, and colloquially. Learning some of the different kinds of disabilities and the models that frame them can help churches interrogate ignorance or unpreparedness on their part.

My approach to confronting ableism considers that ableism is not a singular matter but rather an intersectional experience. Therefore, the threads of my lived reality as a Black-disabled-male have been intricately interwoven into the tapestry of this work. Situating my work contextually in this manner provides an opportunity for me to contribute to disability theology in ways that those who are not Black and non-disabled cannot. Blackness and disability's intersectionalities must be named early on, as it is my being Black that has allowed me to experience Black Liberation Theology as a way forward from the muck and mire of ableism. I am defining ableism as the act of privileging the lived experiences of non-disabled people as normative over those living with disabilities. My work aims to address the concern that all too often, especially within the Church, those embodied in these ways are brought to tables only to fill symbolic roles. The Church must do away with its commitment to illusions of inclusion and move toward the full inclusion of people with disabilities in the Church.

The first few chapters of this work are primarily autobiographical. Beyond telling my own story, I lift occurrences from within scripture, grounding my work in at least four biblical examples of disability. The first provides a framework for engaging the experiences of people with disabilities while also shedding light on numerous disabilities and disability models. The second is an example of how scriptures which center on disabilities are read; it also considers the place of people with disabilities in the Church. The third lifts the importance of Christ's body in relating to people with disabilities; it

also highlights eucharistic theology as an avenue for understanding the importance of radical inclusion. The fourth lends itself as a tool by which churches can analyze their openness to and preparedness for those who are disabled or a part of another minority group. The whole of this work exists so that church members and leaders alike might realize what their churches are missing when they are not inclusive of people with disabilities.

James Cone, the father of Black Liberation Theology, wrote, "There is no truth for and about black people that does not emerge out of the context of their experience."⁴ Taking Dr. Cone's words to heart, sharing my own experience is where I begin this work.

⁴ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Orbis Books, 2012), Kindle, 16.

CHAPTER 2

MY STORY: “OPEN THE DOOR, OPEN IT WIDE...”

When I was about six or seven years old, my family moved from one part of Miami, Fl, to another. The place that we moved into happened to be an apartment located across the street from a church. Still standing today, this place is a large brick building, flanked by beautiful stained-glass windows, adorned by a tall steeple. A tall metal fence surrounds its perimeter, as do palm trees; its large main-entrance doors are separated from the sidewalk by a set of stairs.

Within weeks of moving into our new neighborhood, I had become accustomed to hearing in the distance sounds of singing and shouting coming from that building. As a child, the sounds that came from the church always intrigued me; it was the church's sounds that I came to know well before I had ever entered its sanctuary. Growing up, my family was not deeply religious, so it was not the norm for us to attend church regularly. Yet, there was something about what I kept hearing that made me want to experience it. I remember begging for the opportunity to go to service one day when my parents finally said yes. Dressed in a nicely starched pair of dress pants and a tightly buttoned-up dress shirt, freshly shined shoes, accessorized by a clip-on tie—I was on my way to church! I had no idea the impact that trip and ultimately that church would have upon me at the time.

I had made it across the street. Something was already going on when I got there. The church's main entrance doors were open; I could hear the organ playing, I heard and even felt the drums, and from the foot of the steps, I could see a group of men in black

suits singing. Later on, I would learn that this portion of the service was known as "devotion." Still sitting at the foot of the stairs, the Miami sun beaming down on me, I began to sweat. Eventually, a group of men met me outside, redirecting me to a different part of the building, and they led me up another set of stairs into the sanctuary.

The organ was still humming, the drums still beating, and the men still singing. The lyrics of the song rang through the sanctuary as I came in, "Open the door, open it wide, and let him come in!" The song's message was an invitation to welcome Jesus into our lives; in each stanza, the song lifted a different place in our lives that we should open to Jesus' presence. In a call and response fashion, the deacons and congregation sang, "When you pray, let him come in! On your job, let him come in! In our church...Open the door, open it wide, and let him come in!" In our church? Even as a child, I couldn't help but wonder, what if Jesus was like me? Opening the door and opening it wide means nothing if obstacles prevent a person or people from making it inside.

I was born with Cerebral Palsy (CP). CP is a disability that affects many individuals, yet it affects each of us differently, sometimes in both big and small ways.⁵ For me, having CP means that I must use a wheelchair to get around; it is not my disability's only impact upon me, but it is the most noticeable and often, most inconvenient.

Shortly after my first visit, I decided that I wanted to join the church. While my disability set me apart from most of the members, the church of my childhood never seemed to allow my being in a wheelchair to get in the way of being an active participant

⁵ "Cerebral Palsy (CP) describes a group of permanent disorders of the development of movement and posture, causing activity limitations, attributed to non-progressive disturbances that occurred in the developing fetal or infant brain," from "Types of CP," Cerebral Palsy Foundation, accessed March 4, 2021, <https://www.yourcpf.org/types-of-cp/>

in church happenings. I was a youth choir member, a junior deacon in youth church; I sang in the young adult choir and even became a minister in training during my mid-teen years. Some might say that I should have been grateful for having been included to such a degree compared to others in similar physical situations. I was and am thankful given the alternative that many in my position faced. However, I could not help but think about whether the church members realized there was more to be done.

Being a member of this church, for me, held significant meaning. This church would become the place where I would learn about and appreciate the complexity of my identity as a Black male. As a result of my disability and a lack of accessibility within the schools nearest to me, I attended schools different from my siblings and neighbors; thus, I learned the vital importance of code-switching at a very early age. However, Sundays in church meant that I did not need to alter myself to be accepted. I was being allowed to come just as I am, my Black-self.

Writing on the importance of community, author and educator Parker Palmer in his book, *To Know as We Are Known*, says, "We forget that a person can be a person only in community. Whether we are aware of it or not, each of us is a community in microcosm. The personhood of each of us is shaped by a moving inward intersection of numerous selves—family and friends and colleagues and strangers."⁶ Palmer's understanding of community is a valuable one to consider concerning the church's role in how people come to understand and experience themselves in relationship to others. Up to that point in my life, the church had already played an integral part in how I

⁶ Parker J. Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey* (New York: HarperOne), 57.

understood myself; and it would go on to significantly shape, more specifically, the way I understood my being disabled.

I remember being in my pre or early teens when the pastor stood before the church and said enthusiastically, "We need an elevator!" The congregation responded with a chorus of loud amens. The pastor went on to explain, "The reality is, our congregation is getting older, that means more people are dying. We're running out of people who can be pallbearers during funerals. We need an easier way to get the bodies in and out of the church." There were laughs and quite a few amens after that statement. I remember mostly feeling a sense of discomfort as I witnessed people react to what they had heard.

I had used walls as crutches for years, crawled up and down stairs into the sanctuary and the choir loft. Week after week, I felt like I was attempting to reach the summits of mountains. I recall being celebrated often for my 'perseverance'—not allowing my disability to get in the way of being involved in church life. What I experienced at that moment made clear to me, the congregation had never experienced the fullness of who I was. Some were so 'inspired' by what they deemed to be perseverance; they were unaware that I had done all of this because it was what I had to do to be a part. This unawareness was even more evident in the pastor's message that people deserved more accessibility in death than in life.

Certain moments in one's life serve as markers of self-discovery and even evolution in one's perception or thoughts. Until then, it was not as if I lived believing there was no difference between me and others. The world made sure I was aware of that fact; the most jarring thing was, coming to terms with the notion that the only way I could

be experienced and accepted by others seemed to be in fragments. It felt as though my schools had made space for my disability and not my Blackness. The church celebrated my Blackness while remaining willfully ignorant of the problem of its inaccessibility. As long as I was willing to traverse the "mountains" Sunday after Sunday, everything was fine. Frankly, the church's attitude and approach toward disability were confusing to me, and I soon learned that I was just scratching the surface of the Church's ignorance surrounding disabilities.

I would eventually move on from the church of my youth. I was now around sixteen and found community in a more charismatic leaning church, both in its expression and theology. Unlike my previous church, there, services were held in a single floor, renovated warehouse. This congregation was much larger, and its building was almost entirely accessible for me. While I felt welcomed by the community, it was not long before I started to experience a marked difference in the congregation's approach to and understanding of those with disabilities.

It was not uncommon to have church members laying hands on me, almost always without my permission, petitioning God to heal me. I vividly remember one Sunday in particular. After preaching a message on healing, the pastor called for everyone in need of healing to come forward. Someone who was sitting near me jumped up and began pushing my wheelchair in the pastor's direction. I believe the pastor spotted me on the peripheries. He stopped and looked directly at me amongst the crowd and said, "If you don't believe that God can and will completely heal you today, don't come forward, you will taint the faith of others with your doubt."

The truth is, I had not had any intention of going forward. I had never perceived myself as one in need of healing, at least as far as having a disability was concerned. But here I was, having been brought up without my consent, surrounded by others, and me sitting at least five feet away from the pastor. He pleaded with God to heal those living with various afflictions.' Though I didn't feel it was necessary to plead with God to make me walk, I could not help but feel guilty for not wanting what so many others wanted and believed so profoundly was best for me. The guilt associated with not desiring to be healed developed into a persistent and nagging whisper within me. To some degree, I felt like Paul, who spoke of a thorn in his flesh, which he called "a messenger of Satan sent to torment [him]." (2 Corinthians 12:7.)⁷

Nearing high school graduation, I began sensing a call to ministry. So, my goal was to commit myself to the study of scripture by enrolling in a Bible college. The school I attended was a church-based school that billed itself as a Bible college. I started attending classes and enjoyed the overall experience of learning to 'go deeper.' That was until I began taking courses focused on Healing and Faith. Little did I know, I would become the object of every lesson during these classes. My needing to use a wheelchair conveyed to those in the courses that I desperately needed physical healing. Our "professor" went as far as saying during lectures, "The reason you're not healed is that either you have hidden sin in your own life or there's sin in your family, or you just don't have enough faith for God to heal you." As one might imagine, hearing such things rattled me to the core.

⁷ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced employ the *New Revised Standard Version* (Division of Christian Education, 1989).

For me, the Church, which for the most part was a place of formation and affirmation, was increasingly becoming a place of great wrestling and pain. Sometime later, I would go to the orthopedic doctor. Looking back, I think I aimed to prove that divine intervention was unnecessary, that if I wanted to walk, I could. With me lying on the table in his office, the doctor asked, "Mr. Flag, what brings you here today?" I replied eagerly, "Well, Doc, I really would like to get up on a walker again, at least by the time I'm 21." At this point, I was lying on my stomach face down as he began to look at my legs, and without hesitation, he replied, "Well, that ship has sailed. It's just not going to happen." Thankfully I was lying on my stomach, so he could not see the tears running down my face.

I remember going home and saying to God, "If this is the kind of god you are, if you would hold me responsible for something that I had no choice in, I want nothing to do with you!" I was not frustrated with the reality of my being disabled; I had just reached my breaking point after being blamed for something in which I did not have a choice. Stewing in my frustration and anger, I picked my Bible up and prepared to throw it at the wall. In the process, it ended up opening to John chapter nine. I am not sure why, but I stopped and read it.

After encountering a blind man on the side of the road, Jesus' disciples ask him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." (John 9:2-3.) A commonly held belief in that day and time was that those who were disabled were so because of sin, either on the part of the individual or possibly generationally. Yet, Jesus' response casts this thinking down by responding, as

Eugene Peterson paraphrases, "You're asking the wrong question...Look instead for what God can do." (John 9:3-5.)⁸

In particular, Peterson's take allowed me to reject the notion that disability was somehow necessary for God to receive glory, unlike other versions imply. The invitation to 'look instead for what God can do' shifted my perspective to ask, "How might God use me just as I am?" My own lived experience, coupled with the witness of this occurrence in scripture, had presented me with a series of questions. Encountering this text in those moments appeared to directly challenge what I had been told repeatedly were the causes of my being born with a disability.

This occurrence within the narrative of Jesus' ministry not only served to contradict the way healing and scripture had been weaponized in my own life, but as Dr. Amos Yong, the author of *The Bible, Disability, and The Church*, writes,

[T]he Johannine text is important for a contemporary theology of disability because it clearly records Jesus rejecting the assumption that this man's congenital blindness was due to ancestral sin... Now, to be sure, Jesus' response cannot be taken to mean that there are no consequences to sin... In a real sense, there are ontological connections between sinful behaviors in a fallen world and the disabilities that sometimes result. But in responding to the question regarding the man born blind, Jesus severed the connections between sin and congenital disabilities.⁹

As a result of what I had been told over and over again, for years, "sin" had me bound. There is a sort of irony in this, as it was not sin in the sense of a personal vice or trait as many from a Christian background might interpret this to mean; the word itself, having had a cause-and-effect relationship with disability, created for me, a sort of prison. Over

⁸ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message* (NavPress, 2002).

⁹ Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God*, (Michigan: Eerdmans, 2011), Kindle, 699-700.

time, I had come to internalize the idea that my having been born with a disability was some form of punishment from God. Thus, my embodiedness as a person with a disability made me a personification of sin. I did not realize it then, but I had personally accepted the Church's othering of my body and lived experience. This othering was rooted in a very narrow understanding of sin.

While Dr. Yong, in his analysis of sin's role in this instance, addresses sin on a personal level, his raising the notion of a 'fallen world' brings to bear the question of sin's impact on the whole of creation? Encountering this story set me on a path; I had lots of questions. My biggest one, if not sin, then what made this man disabled? Considering this question and the story of this man's encounter with Jesus and his disciples, the text itself emerges as a multi-purposed source of engagement; exegesis, the analysis of my own story, and the development of a theological framework for the Church to learn from those living with disabilities' experiences. All of this, to the end, that the Church might be challenged to grow in understanding those with disabilities.

CHAPTER 3

WHAT'S SIN GOT TO DO WITH IT?: "JESUS, WHO SINNED?"

One of the first questions to emerge in this encounter focuses on sin's role in this man's situation. 'Jesus, who sinned?' This question is not without consequence, as it lays a foundation for how the disciples orient themselves to the man and his blindness. By asking this question, the disciples place the burden of sin on the man or his parents, aiming to absolve themselves of any responsibility in this man's marginalization. Beyond the immediate context of this passage, we begin to see how this question and the disciples posturing has implications for the Church's relationship to people with disabilities today.

The doctrine of sin is hamartiology; this word comes from the Greek word *hamartia*. In English, this is understood as "to miss the mark." Missing the mark within Christianity's context refers to anything that causes misalignment in our relationship with God. Writing on sin, James Alison says, "Sin binds us together, making room for us all to be wrong together, and yet all be rescued together, and all able to learn together."¹⁰ This all-encompassing view of sin renders no human untouched. Though Allison writes this as his understanding of personal sin, his words make way for an expanded view, a structural one.

Having spent time in various church spaces, I know that some groups within Christianity approaching sin as merely an individual concern teach the pursuit of personal holiness as a means to avoid being overtaken by sin. As such, their theologies offer several ways to combat it. However, there are inherent dangers in making sin so

¹⁰ James Alison, *Undergoing God: Dispatches from the Scene of a Break-In*, (New York: Continuum, 2006), 173-79.

individualized. Narrowly reducing sin to personal vices, immoral acts, and habits, or lists of laws we must not transgress, we risk missing the more enormous impacts of sin upon Earth's broader community.

Working from the assumption that sin touches all of humanity, we would have to include all of humanity's systems and institutions as they all are inescapably connected; this means the Church is not guiltless. If the Church is to exorcise the demon of ableism from its ranks, it must be willing to expand its understanding of sin to encompass institutions and structures like itself as instruments of sin's perpetuation. It may be simple to call out things like racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and xenophobia as oppressive ways of thinking and even name them as societal evils. We must also call out nationalism, classism, ageism, environmental neglect, gentrification, mass incarceration, economic inequality, even Christian supremacy, and ableism in the same ways. Every one of these is sin. They all affect our ability to be wholly in community with one another.

In addition to individual sin, these systems and ways of thinking can and do ultimately affect the whole world. Sin impedes our ability to individually and collectively work toward a more just society and world. By naming institutions and systems as being capable of 'missing the mark,' we allow ourselves to admit that no institution or organization is untouchable. An expanded, structural view of sin frees us to understand sin as anything that marginalizes any body and disrupts the harmony and flourishing of all creation. Only then can the Church move forward in repentance of its own sin of marginalizing those disabilities.

CHAPTER 4

DISABILITIES AND DISABILITY MODELS

When the disciples begin to question Jesus concerning the man's condition, at the heart of their question is the cause of the man's blindness. What made him different from everyone else? In the same way that the disciples found themselves grappling with the man's reality, many others have wrestled with how to rightly define what it means to be disabled or have a disability. Amongst people with disabilities and those who have endeavored to develop Disability Studies and Disability Theologies, there is no conclusive definition of disability. Generally, disability might be best understood as a difference that impacts one's ability to navigate life without limitation or accommodation. This definition, as will soon be apparent, is subjective. How one defines disability is significantly influenced by the lens through which one frames disability. The different rubrics used to determine disability are called "disability models," each positing different standards by which disability is framed and determined.

The various disability models and theologies that have emerged over time are a direct result of the work done to develop Disability Studies. Disability Studies as a discipline seeks to answer questions of meaning, nature, and consequence related to disability. The field emerged in an attempt to articulate the difference between "impairment" and "disability." The two were differentiated from one another by defining impairment as impacting one's body or mind, while disability was considered a social construct. These clear distinctions between the two would eventually contribute to developing the medical and social models of disability.

Before delving further into theologies or models, I would like to return briefly to Amos Yong's commentary on John 9. It is worth addressing that Yong, in this instance, is speaking directly to those disabilities that have been present since birth. However, not all people in the past or those currently living with disabilities were born with them. As of September 2020, according to the Centers for Disease Control's (CDC) Disability and Health Data System (DHDS), an estimated twenty-six percent (26%), that is sixty-one million Americans, age eighteen or older, identified as having some form of disability.¹¹ These numbers bring to bear another point worth addressing; it is easy to misguidedly narrow the goal of including people with disabilities to making architectural changes. However, doing so would continue to alienate a significant number of people, especially those who do not have mobility disabilities.

Those with mobility disabilities are often the first group to be considered as churches begin having conversations around disability, access, and inclusion. For this reason, I want to briefly highlight those disabilities that often are overlooked in the discussions. Beyond mobility, disabilities can affect one's hearing, vision, or cognition; and the data shows that some people have more than one of the disabilities listed.

The National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (NIDCD) reports, "About 2 to 3 out of every 1,000 children in the United States are born with a detectable level of hearing loss in one or both ears." NIDCD data also shows that "Approximately 15% of American adults (37.5 million) aged 18 and over report some

¹¹ The DHDS provides the following breakdown of numbers by disability type: 1) Mobility disability: 13.7%, 2) Hearing disability: 5.9%, 3) Vision disability: 4.6%, 4) Cognitive disability: 10.8%. "Disability Impacts All of Us," CDC, last modified September 16, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/infographic-disability-impacts-all.html>.

trouble hearing."¹² There are several possible causes of hearing loss and Deafness. For some, a hearing disability may be congenital, and for others, it may come from some infection, disease, or trauma. No matter the cause, living with a hearing disability has undeniable impacts on those navigating the world with hearing disabilities. The ability to hear is integral to how many in America communicate with each other. In a society that does not prioritize the experience of those with hearing disabilities, by normalizing different ways of communicating like sign language, those living with hearing disabilities may face feelings of isolation and loneliness.¹³

A number of those who make up the disability community are individuals living with a vision disability. According to the National Federation of The Blind, as recent as 2016, "The number of non-institutionalized, male or female, ages sixteen through seventy-five +, all races, regardless of ethnicity, with all education levels in the United States reported to have a visual disability."¹⁴ There are several tools that those who have

¹² "Quick Statistics About Hearing", NIDCD, last modified December 15, 2016, <https://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/statistics/quick-statistics-hearing>.

¹³ For example, the employment gap between deaf and hearing people in the United States is a significant area of concern. "Only 53.3% of deaf people ages 25-64 were employed in 2017, compared to 75.8% of hearing people – an employment gap of 22.5%," from "Employment Report Shows Strong Labor Market Passing by Deaf Americans," National Deaf Center, last modified August 22, 2019, <https://www.nationaldeafcenter.org/news/employment-report-shows-strong-labor-market-passing-deaf-americans>.

¹⁴ The data does not clarify what it means for individuals to be institutionalized in this instance. Therefore, it is difficult to determine whether or not those who are institutionalized are those attending schools for the visually impaired or those who receive care within a group home-like setting. According to the National Federation of The Blind the following is a numerical breakdown of those in the United States affected with vision disabilities: 1) Total (all ages): 7,675,600 (2.4%) 2) Total (16 to 75+): 7,208,700 (2.83%) 3) Women: 3,946,300 (3.01%) 4) Men: 3,262,300 (2.65%) 5) Age 16 to 64: 4,037,600 (2.0%) 6) Age 65 and older: 3,171,100 (6.6%), from "Blindness Statistics", National Federation of the Blind, last modified January 2019, <https://www.nfb.org/resources/blindness-statistics>.

a vision disability might utilize to navigate everyday life. A standard tool used by those who are blind or visually impaired is Braille.^{15, 16}

Individuals with intellectual disabilities make up the second-largest category of persons with disabilities in the United States, in comparison to those with mobility disabilities, with some overlap between the two. Approximately 6.5 million people in this country have an intellectual disability of some kind.¹⁷ Intellectual disabilities were once referred to as "mental retardation." However, this terminology is viewed as archaic and deeply offensive within the disability community. Such language implies a narrow and relatively linear view of individuals' cognitive abilities and development. Bearing this in mind, advocates and scholars within and beyond the disability community have begun using neurodiverse or non-neurotypical when speaking to the differences of people with intellectual disabilities. These terms more accurately name the individuals' different way(s) of engaging with others without implying their maturation has somehow been stagnated. There are several possible causes for intellectual disabilities, like genetics, injury, disease, or other neurological issues. These may emerge during pregnancy, occur during one's birth, or result from an illness or infection acquired after birth.

¹⁵ Braille is a system of raised dots that can be read with one's fingers, typically by someone who is blind or may have limited vision. "Braille is not a language. Rather, it is a code by which many languages—such as English, Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, and dozens of others—may be written and read," from "What is Braille?", American Foundation for the Blind (AFB), accessed March 4, 2021, <https://www.afb.org/blindness-and-low-vision/braille/what-braille>.

¹⁶ "In addition to the use of Braille, some vision disabled individuals may utilize a cane." However, contrary to popular caricatures of blindness, "Most people who are visually impaired don't use a white cane. Only an estimated 2 percent to 8 percent do. The rest rely on their useable vision, a guide dog, or a sighted guide," from "10 Fascinating Facts about the White Cane," Perkins School for the Blind, accessed March 4, 2021, <https://www.perkins.org/stories/10-fascinating-facts-about-the-white-cane>.

¹⁷ "What is Intellectual Disability?" Special Olympics, accessed March 4, 2021, <https://www.specialolympics.org/about/intellectual-disabilities/what-is-intellectual-disability>.

The numbers cited above serve as proof; ministry leaders and churches alike need to begin grappling with the matter of inclusion if they are not already doing so. The magnitude of their meaning for the Church looms large as they do not even include those with 'invisible' disabilities—those not apparent to others. While these figures may seem daunting in some sense, they also present many churches with an opportunity to widen their ministries' scope and to embrace a culture of radical inclusivity.¹⁸ Ultimately, to be radically inclusive means acknowledging that every individual is of sacred worth to God and their voices and experiences are of great value to the community. Radical inclusivity affirms the notion that every person is deserving of a place of dignity and safety wherein they can fully embrace and display their divine self wholly and freely.

Among the types of disabilities named above, there are many possible causes. Upon encountering the man born blind, the disciples reveal their understanding as one rooted in theological anthropology. Which is to say, the disciples and many others during their time, for that matter, viewed disability as a form of divine retribution for individual or generational sin. In sharing their presuppositions, the disciples provide the opportunity for disciples of today to interrogate further the various ways we understand and frame what makes a person disabled?

In light of this question, language's role in understanding disability emerges as something that we ought to give attention to. So, it is essential to address the use of the term “disabled” in relation to this community of individuals. As someone who lives and

¹⁸ “Radical Inclusivity is the intentional inclusion of all persons; especially people who have traditionally lived at the margins of society, such as people suffering from substance abuse; people living with HIV/AIDS; same-gender loving people; the recently incarcerated; and sex industry workers,” from “About Us,” Radically Inclusive, accessed March 4, 2021, <https://www.radicallyinclusive.org/about-us>. Though absent from those lifted within the definition, ‘people who have traditionally lived at the margins of society’ undoubtedly includes people with disabilities.

navigates the world as a member of this community, it is equally important for me to name that we are not of one mind regarding terminology. Just as our experiences are diverse, so are the ways we identify ourselves. While I like to be addressed or referenced primarily by my name, I, as an individual, when it is necessary to mention, do not mind being called disabled or even “a person with a disability.” As society has evolved in its understanding of humanity and the diversity of lived experiences in existence, there has been a concerted effort to shift the language we use, especially related to people with disabilities. In the past, the widely acceptable phrase to use when referring to people with disabilities was “handicapped,” this is no longer the case, as many within the disabled community have experienced this term as derogatory and narrowly focused. Handicapped is typically used by those who are not disabled to center a notion of incapability on the part of disabled persons.

To shift the language used around disability, many non-disabled people have opted to use euphemisms like “handicapable” or “differently-abled.” While the intent in using such terminology may be to be more inclusive, in my experience, it has only been successful in centering the discomfort of those who are non-disabled with the all too often harsh realities and inequities of those of us living with disabilities. A non-disabled person referring to me as disabled or as a person with a disability conveys to me an awareness and acknowledgment of the ways we live and navigate the world differently. Furthermore, it also acknowledges that my disability cannot be separated from me or my lived experience. Therefore, for a non-disabled person to call me disabled or even a person with a disability is not offensive in the least; it merely reveals one’s awareness of the stark differences between how we navigate and live in the world as disabled and non-

disabled people. Inclusion, even when it comes to language, considers agency and self-empowerment's vital importance, allowing people with disabilities to define who they are and what they should be called. Maybe you are still wondering how to rightly address someone who is disabled in your life, “First, notice how people refer to themselves when they’re talking in a group setting. When in doubt, call someone by their name — or simply ask how they would like to be addressed in a tactful, non-awkward way.”¹⁹ Like the various colloquial approaches to disability, multiple Models of Disability have also emerged over time; each provides a different lens through which disability is framed and understood.

MEDICAL AND SOCIAL MODELS OF DISABILITY

Though there are many, the most common Models of Disability are the Medical and the Social Models. The medical model views disability as an issue for the person living with a disability to navigate or overcome—the cause being a disease, medical problem, or trauma that needs addressing. It suggests that adjustments and accommodations, no matter how necessary they are, the onus to take care of them is on the person living with the disability. This particular approach to disability does not consider any other factors that may contribute to one facing limitations, whether cultural, socio-economic, political or otherwise. The medical model does not see the stairs as an

¹⁹ Brittany Wong, “It’s Perfectly OK To Call A Disabled Person ‘Disabled,’ And Here’s Why,” *Huffpost*, June 14, 2019, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/what-to-call-disabled-person_1_5d02c521e4b0304a120c7549.

obstacle that prohibits access to a wheelchair user; instead, it places the blame on the wheelchair and, thus, the disability.

This model is based on what non-disabled people think is best for persons with disabilities. For example, it is assumed that disability indicates a deficient or flawed human condition, a bodily deviation due to a “loss” of capacity in one way or another, which holds a person back from participation in society.²⁰

Conversely, the social model holds that disability is a socially created problem. Unlike the medical model, the onus for adjustments and accommodations is understood to be a societal responsibility, meaning that access is understood as an issue of equity and is, therefore, a human right. The social model purports,

[D]isability is a situation, caused by social conditions, which requires for its elimination, (a) that no one aspect such as incomes, mobility or institutions is treated in isolation, (b) that disabled people should, with the advice and help of others, assume control over their own lives, and (c) that professionals, experts and others who seek to help must be committed to promoting such control by disabled people.²¹

Unlike the medical model, which centers on the person, the social model calls into question the roles of numerous societal structures and factors that play a role in dis-abling people. This model holds that one is only as limited or disabled as the world around them causes them to be.

THE CULTURAL MODEL

As I reflect upon my own experience of disability, another model worth considering comes to mind. Though not as widely cited as the two previous models, the

²⁰ Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality*, (Baker Publishing Group, 2008), Kindle, 25.

²¹ Marno Retief and Rantsoa Letšosa, “Models of Disability: A Brief Overview,” *HTS Theological Studies* 74, no. 1 (2018): 3, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i1.4738>.

cultural model of disability should not be left out of this discussion. "The cultural approach does not seek to define disability in any specific way but rather focuses on how different notions of disability and non-disability operate in the context of a specific culture."²² What is critical in understanding the cultural model is the role of one's context in relation to one's disability. "The cultural model does not distinguish between impairment as a biological or medical condition and disability as social discrimination against people with impairments. Instead, the cultural model understands disability as a product of the ways that cultures use physical and cognitive differences to narrate, organize, and interpret their world."²³

For instance, many Deaf people are a part of communities made up of other Deaf people, where they have schools, churches, and other spaces shaped by and for them. Those who are a part of these communities do not typically identify as disabled unless they are in a setting that does not prioritize the experience of Deafness. A colleague of mine whose immediate family members are also deaf, except one of them, often jokes, it is their hearing family member who is disabled in that setting. Thus, the cultural model considers how some spaces may be disabling while others may not.

I can remember on one occasion coming into a patient's room who, before I could even introduce myself, asked, "How do you navigate the world with your two maladies?" I was a bit taken aback and sought to quickly correct what I thought to be an error on the patient's part, mainly because I was not used to the word malady being used in everyday conversation. I asked, "Do you mean my disability?" The patient said, "Well, yes, that,

²² Ibid., 6.

²³ Candida Moss and Jeremy Schipper, *Disability Studies and Biblical Literature* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) 4.

and your being black.” I was both shocked and angry. I honestly struggled to revisit that patient after that encounter. Though this experience was jarring, it proved for me the importance of the cultural model, which, unlike the others, provides a prism through which Blackness and disability's intersectionality can be further engaged without the need for me or others like me to fragment our personhood.

Though many throughout my life have celebrated the idea of me having the “privilege” to learn and work in predominantly white institutions, this reality for me has been a double-edged sword. My white supervisors and peers in the past have openly described me as “not like the rest of the other black people they know,” which I can only assume they meant to be a compliment; some have awkwardly straddled the fence of cultural appropriation, hoping to exhibit a sense of commonality between them and me. From where I sit, I have been left feeling the lasting sting of each micro and macro-aggression.

Imagine working as a chaplain in a hospital located in an affluent area and being mistaken almost daily for a food-service worker or patient. Imagine feeling constant tension as you enter spaces with your locs hanging down, knowing that someone will inevitably touch your hair without permission, simply because they are curious about how it feels. Imagine the “honor” of becoming the resident expert on all things ‘black’ due to who you are. Imagine a fellow congregant who is white saying, “we’ve done enough to accommodate them” during a churchwide conversation about diversifying worship. Imagine being gaslit by white supervisors, whom once you express a concern about the work environment suggests a need for a “period of self-care and self-examination.” Imagine your pastor being completely silent against blatant injustices

suffered by people who look like you, then being reprimanded when you dare to address the matters. Imagine working on the ministerial staff of ministries that will celebrate their making spaces more accessible for you while ignoring their need for cultural competency training and committing to being anti-racist. Imagine providing spiritual care for individuals who believe and proudly proclaim stereotypes around Black people. Imagine being told that you help meet several quotas within the institution. Even worse, imagine sitting in the presence of white individuals who, for the sake of ‘historical accuracy,’ feel justified in their use of the N-word during lectures and meetings you are attending. Imagine wanting to defend yourself against these instances of mental and emotional abuse but knowing your pushback will only result in you being labeled angry, difficult, or unwilling to be a team player.

Death by a thousand paper cuts is what these “imaginary” scenarios feel like when they are a lived reality. Author Austin Channing Brown in her book, *I’m Still Here – Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness*, details her own experience of what it is like as a Black woman to work for and in ministries where Whiteness is the standard. Brown says, “Whiteness constantly polices the expressions of Blackness allowed within its walls, attempting to accrue no more than what’s necessary to affirm itself. It wants us to sing the celebratory “We Shall Overcome” during MLK day but doesn’t want to hear the inditing lyrics of “Strange Fruit.” It wants to see a Black person seated at the table but doesn’t want to hear a dissenting viewpoint.”²⁴

What might be surprising to some is that so many of the spaces in which these incidents occur boldly proclaim a commitment to diversity and inclusion. The truth is, all

²⁴ Austin Channing Brown, *I’m Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness* (New York: Convergent Books, 2018): 70.

too often, for predominantly white institutions and organizations, diversity and inclusion have less to do with actual inclusion and much more to do with creating illusions. It may seem harsh to assert that predominantly white institutions and organizations traffic in the space of illusionary art, yet all too often, people of darker hues or those with differing abilities from the majority are paraded as “proof” of an institution’s commitment to diversity. My experience has taught me that, for the most part, these places are not hoping for transformation as a result of my or others’ presence but rather assimilation. The goal of assimilating others to the dominant culture is where racism and ableism intersect most. As Black people in predominantly white spaces, we are typically the source of much curiosity and discussion. However, the curiosity and interest never seem to be rooted in understanding alone; there is also the unspoken question of “how long will it be before you become like us?” Such a question should not be where the Church finds itself landing concerning matters of race and disability; yet, even if never uttered aloud, many predominantly white institutions silently imply an expectation of assimilation.

With the emergence of the cultural model, Blackness and disability's intersectionalities have become all the more important to consider. To identify as a Black-disabled-male is to recognize that every part of my being plays a significant role in my understanding and encountering the world. Likewise, it is an acknowledgment of how others experience me.

In a world that prizes whiteness and non-disability as the standard, striking parallels exist between the disabled and Black.

For the cripple, the black man is a model because he is on intimate terms with a terror that does not recognize his existence and is yet distinctly personal. He is in the process of discovering what he is, and he has known for a long time what the

society conceives him to be. His very survival guarantees him the role of rebel. What he has been forced to learn is how to live on the outside looking in. Until quite recently, he was not even asked how he liked it.²⁵

Just as my hospital patient's earlier question implied, culturally then, those who are both Black and disabled live with a double disability as society at large seeks to oppress us as a result of our Blackness and to "institutionalize" us because of our disabilities.

Therefore, to be Black and disabled is to live in protest of the systemic ills of racism, white privilege, and ableism in their many manifestations every day of our lives. I do not name these intersections for the sake of merely doing so, but to highlight how it is that professing to be a place of welcome does not always translate to full inclusion. When discussing the issue of ableism and its intersection with racism in the Church, it is imperative to remember that oppression like that of ableism within an institution is rarely unaccompanied by some other ism(s). Echoing the notions of ableism's intersectional nature, Talia Lewis defines ableism as,

A system that places value on people's bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normality, intelligence, excellence, desirability, and productivity. These constructed ideas are deeply rooted in anti-Blackness, eugenics, misogyny, colonialism, imperialism and capitalism. This form of systemic oppression leads to people and society determining who is valuable and worthy based on a person's language, appearance, religion and/or their ability to satisfactorily [re]produce, excel and "behave." You do not have to be disabled to experience ableism.²⁶

Depending upon the context and the body that one inhabits, the forms of oppression they have to wade through may be numerous. "In sum, the cultural model of disability implies

²⁵ Leonard Kriegel, "Uncle Tom and Tiny Tim: Some Reflections on the Cripple as Negro," *The American Scholar* 38, no. 3 (1969): 416-7, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41209678>.

²⁶ A definition "developed in community with Disabled Black and other negatively racialized people, especially Dustin Gibson", from "Working Definition of Ableism," Talila Lewis, last modified January 1, 2021, <https://www.talilalewis.com/blog/january-2021-working-definition-of-ableism>.

a fundamental change of epistemological perspective since it does not deal with the margin but rather with the ‘centre’ of society and culture. [sic]”²⁷ In this case, the ‘center’ of society is located at the intersection of Blackness and disability. That is to say, what might typically lead to one’s marginalization is now a source of both commonality and community. Thus, the margins no longer exist, as the shared lived experiences of those within the community draws everyone to the center.

I have often lamented that churches believe including people with disabilities necessitates only installing ramps and elevators in their buildings, but full inclusion is much more than that. Being fully inclusive welcomes the entirety of one’s personhood. I wrote earlier about my childhood church, how they seemed to embrace my Blackness while ignoring my disability. I have also experienced the reverse in other spaces where I was engaged in learning as a student and spaces where I was involved in vocational ministry. Having learned and worked in predominantly white spaces, it has not been a unique experience for me to encounter some degree of accessibility while also grappling with vestiges of racism. Whether it is racism or ableism that rears their ugly heads in our communities of faith, they are each incredibly disabling in their own ways. In light of this incongruence of ideals within spaces that laud the sacred worth of all creation, the cultural model stands as one by which I believe communities of faith can partner with and empower people with disabilities so that the Church is a space wherein no one is disabled.

²⁷ Anne Waldschmidt, “Disability Goes Cultural: The Cultural Model of Disability as an Analytical Tool,” in *Encounters between Disability Studies and Cultural Studies*, eds. Anne Waldschmidt, Hanjo Berressem and Moritz Ingwersen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017): 19-28.

No organization is perfect when it comes to diversity, inclusion, and accessibility, but there are ways to work toward the goal. Performing an informal audit is a great place to start. If you are in a leadership role within a community of faith that desires to or already promotes itself as an inclusive space for those who are minorities and people with disabilities, here are some questions to ask of your organization:

- 1) Does my/our preaching and teaching exclude or marginalize any bodies or experiences?
- 2) Is our language around differences relevant and appropriate?
- 3) Does our worship exhibit intentionality around diversity (i.e., preaching styles, music styles, liturgies, varied pronouns when referencing the Divine, etc.)?
- 4) Are we careful to honor cultural and ethnic differences within our community in a way that is not appropriation or exploitation?
- 5) Can someone with a mobility disability access all spaces where meetings are held?
- 6) Are our restrooms accessible?
- 7) Are there any ministries within the church where any form of a disability might preclude someone from being a part of them?
- 8) Are our worship services and online presence accessible to those across the range of disabilities (i.e., vision impaired, hearing impaired, neurodiverse, mobility challenged, etc.)?
- 9) Is our marketing and messaging careful not to objectify or tokenize disabled people or other minorities?

- 10) Are people with disabilities and other minority groups openly encouraged and welcomed to fill leadership roles within the congregation?
- 11) Are the voices and lived experiences of minorities and people with disabilities valued, consulted, and incorporated in the decision-making process?
- 12) What signage and symbols do we use to promote that we are inclusive of all people, and are their meanings evident?

The list of twelve questions is by no means a complete one. I aim to get you thinking to formulate a more extensive list as you consider your context's realities. A number of the questions raised here will be addressed as I progress through the remainder of this work.

CHAPTER 5

REJECTING ABLEISM: “YOU'RE ASKING THE WRONG QUESTION”

'You're asking the wrong question.' Jesus does not flat-out condemn the disciples' question; he instead shifts their focus. It is as if Jesus is saying, inquiring is welcomed, even encouraged. After all, they are disciples—learners, followers. The problem appears to lie within the subtext of their question. "Why is this man not like everyone else?" With this, the disciples reveal their ableism.

At its core, ableism is an act of oppression as it both knowingly and unknowingly diminishes the importance and value of people with disabilities within a space. Concerning ableism's presence in the church's preaching and teaching, in my experience (though not the only way), it shows up mostly in using biblical narratives that include individuals with disabilities to symbolize spiritual or other types of "brokenness." While it may "preach" well, in the end, it ostracizes many and perpetuates the erroneous idea that individuals with disabilities are not to be understood and encountered as whole people. Such exegesis lacks depth, as real people with actual disabilities are undoubtedly present in the biblical era. Their presence in the biblical narrative teaches us much more about how the world cares and fails to care for those with disabilities than it ever gives us the license to objectify people's physical conditions and experiences for the sake of a good illustration.

To say that a blind or paralyzed person's presence within the biblical narrative is simply to teach us about our spiritual blindness, paralysis, or some other spiritual deficiency is to show a lack of compassion for others' lived realities. In her book, *A Healing Homiletic* author, Kathy Black writes on the matter,

Homiletically, the blindness texts have so often been preached metaphorically that "blind" and "blindness" are the most common sensory terms in religious vocabulary. They are always used in a negative connotation; usually in reference to our refusal to obey or pay attention to what God wills for our lives. The presence of persons who are blind in our congregations and communities seems to go unnoticed as pastors consistently use "blind" and "blindness" as metaphors for living in some state of sin.²⁸

Shifting from the use of metaphorical language within the preaching moment may be difficult for some to overcome. Some might reject this idea in an attempt to 'remain faithful to the text.' The reality is that scripture is filled with instances where writers repeatedly use ableist metaphors to get their point(s) across. The use of such language within Biblical translations does not mean that preachers and teachers alike cannot read a particular text "as is." However, doing so may require providing a brief commentary on more culturally relevant ways of thinking and terms in use today; this will show a deeper and more critical engagement with the text and further equips the audience with relevant information. As one who currently pastors a church, I understand how proposing that one pays careful attention to their language might add an extra layer of pressure as you sit to craft lessons and sermons. Still, I want to assure you that doing so will convey a message of both compassion and consideration for those who may be listening to your words.

In lifting the importance of the words that we use in conveying our messages, it occurs to me that the same intentionality must be given to the images we use to further our messages. In the same way that predominantly white churches, especially those seeking to be more diverse and inclusive, should be mindful of iconography and imagery throughout their spaces and promotional materials, careful consideration must also be

²⁸ Kathy Black, *A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability*, (New York: Abingdon Press, 1996), 562-3, Kindle.

given to messaging related to those with disabilities. It is not out of the ordinary for predominantly white institutions who struggle with diversity and inclusion to desire to highlight any sliver of diversity when they can. Still, in doing so, many find themselves guilty of tokenism—using the presence, stories, and images of persons from minority and marginalized communities to promote a sense of diversity within them.

I recall wrestling with the decision of where I would eventually attend seminary. One of my biggest questions and concerns was how my being embodied as a Black-disabled-male would impact my experience and ultimately be used to benefit the institution? During my senior year, I was invited to share my story; what had brought me to seminary, my experience, and my future plans? Along with the interview, a set of photos was taken. I was well aware that this would be shared on the institution's website and in print. However, I was not prepared for my photo being used as the Seminary's Disability Services page's banner image. As the only visibly noticeable Black-disabled-male on campus, I was incensed. The use of my picture was blatant tokenism. Thankfully, upon learning of my disapproval, the Seminary's administration moved quickly to remove my photo from that particular page.

Two additional instances come to mind as I reflect on how imagery can undermine or even derail what might otherwise be experienced as inspiring and possibly transformative. On a Sunday when my family and I were away from the congregation we regularly worshipped with, I decided to worship online with another church that was familiar to me. The music was contemporary, and other elements throughout the worship experience kept me engaged. The expectancy for the preaching moment was palpable even through the screen.

The lights dimmed as the set changed. At one end of the stage was a hospital bed; at the opposite end, a wheelchair was parked. The preacher, now donning a white coat like that of a doctor, proceeded to ease into the sermon. I cannot recall the text used to center the message or what came after its title showed up. An image of what looked to be an operating room or possibly a hospital triage area served as the background image for the words “Sick Faith.” I honestly could not think beyond what I was seeing. I am sure it was not the preacher’s intent, but I could not move beyond the implied messaging of such staging. The presence of the hospital bed, wheelchair, and those words all together created a blockade within my mind and spirit. In those moments, the worship experience had moved from uplifting to wounding. I could not help but think back to those times when I had been told that my being disabled resulted from my having deficient faith.

As technology expands, churches and their pastors are not only live streaming their services online, but they are also utilizing social media to reach and presumably increase their number of followers. One popular platform that has been used to that end is Instagram. Instagram is a photo and video sharing application (app) accessed primarily on cellphones; Instagram’s reach and user base span various people worldwide.

One day while scrolling through my feed on the app, I came across an image that read, “Don’t let blind people proof read (sic) your vision.” The statement alone was overtly ableist, and yet, it was worsened by an image in its background; a set of fingers whose nails were painted red being used to read Braille. Given that the person who posted this has a rather sizeable audience as a megachurch pastor here in the United States, many did not hesitate to call out the image as offensive and ableist. Instead of apologizing or removing the photo as so many had requested (many of whom readily

identified as having a disability), the poster repeatedly responded, “no offense intended. Was used as a metaphor. Hellen Keller who was also visually impaired once said “only thing worse than being blind... is having no vision” (sic).

Those who claim a call to preach and teach the gospel—the good news of God’s love, can no longer use ignorance as an excuse for the harm done against people with disabilities within their churches and audiences. As technology widens our reach and influence, it would do us well to assume that someone impacted some way by disability is in our audience.

While churches may not intend to, they often promulgate theologies and engage people with disabilities from the medical model's understanding of disability. They understand an individual's disability as a 'deficit' or 'flaw' to the rest of the community, as evidenced by at least the last two examples. Holding such a perspective may manifest additionally as statements like, "I'm so sorry that you can't walk. I will continue to pray for your healing." Or, as has happened to me many times, someone may notice that I cannot get into a particular area of the building and will flippantly remark, "Don't you just wish you weren't in a wheelchair sometimes?" Not only do such responses reek of ableism, but neither of them seems to take into consideration my feelings or the church's need to make necessary changes to be more accessible.

The Church must be willing to shift its focus—a shift to look inward and confront its complicity with ableism. In doing so, the statement, 'You're asking the wrong question,' can then be experienced as an invitation to continue learning, individually and collectively, as a call to all who seek to follow and emulate Jesus' ministry of inclusiveness.

CHAPTER 6

“LOOK INSTEAD FOR WHAT GOD CAN DO.”

Going back to the day that everything for me changed, I was overwhelmed by the weight of blame from others for my being disabled; I had prepared to end my relationship with the Church and God. I did not care anymore that I had committed myself to the Christian faith; I could not care less about having experienced a call to ministry; I was done! Yet, it seems that the Spirit had other plans. 'The man born blind' met me in the middle of a conversation with God. It was a rather heated one; I had just boldly declared to God, "I want nothing to do with you!" Thinking back to that day, I honestly do not recall having heard or read that story before then. If I had, it felt as if I was experiencing the text for the first time; it indeed took on new meaning for me that day.

The issue of meaning is an important one in the overall structure of this work.

Writing on meaning's importance within the Biblical text, Brian Blount says,

Simplistically put, text meaning is determined through historical and literary engagement that uncovers text intent, or text meaning is ascertained through an engagement between the reader, reading out of her space, and the text as it is engaged in that space...a culturally responsive engagement of this meaning potential has profound implications for the shaping of a more just biblical society, classroom, and profession.²⁹

I have sought to make explicit what this text has meant to my faith journey while lifting potential meaning for others to utilize this biblical text as a framework for the Church's efforts concerning inclusion. My goal in sharing my experiences has not been about promoting a voyeuristic experience for you, the reader, or, worse, to lift my life as a

²⁹ Brian K. Blount, "The Souls of Biblical Folks and the Potential for Meaning," in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 138, no. 1 (2019): 6-21, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.15699/>.

source of 'inspiration porn.' Instead, this work has been one of constant wrestling, wrestling with redeeming something that weaponized my lived experience against my faith in the God whom I seek and live to glorify.

Realizing the Black experience's role in developing this framework, I began to consider this intersection's theological implications more deeply. Pondering further upon Jesus' response to his disciples, I soon realized that several translations render this verse as "he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." (John 9:3).³⁰ Some use "glory" in the place of 'works.' The real source of tension in this verse is the implication that Jesus is responding to the disciples with what is possible rather than definitive given the man's current reality. Jesus was not saying, this man needed to be born blind so that God could receive glory, or even that God might receive glory. Instead, Jesus is making clear that God would be glorified in the man's life despite what their theology purported to be true. Offering this retort to his disciples, he essentially says, God can and will get glory, even in this.

This line of thought provides a direct connection to the work of Black Liberation Theology. Much like this particular verse's message, Liberation Theology is a theology that holds in tension present-day realities with God's intended outcomes. Those familiar with the atrocities Blacks endured in America may misread such a position, but this must not be misunderstood as a surrender to suffering. Although, suffering is at the heart of the Black American experience. Instead, it is an acknowledgment of the providence of God.

Providence, then, is not a statement about the future. It does not mean that all things will work out for the best for those who love God. Providence is a statement about present reality—the reality of the liberation of the oppressed. For

³⁰ *International Standard Version.*

blacks it is a statement about the reality of blackness and what it means in the liberation struggle against whites.³¹

For those with disabilities, God's providence emerges in both the liberation of society's understanding of their realities and the work of their full inclusion, especially within the Church. Approaching the narrative in John 9 from this vantage point allows us to experience the text differently than before; it turns the encounter into a masterclass on how one can bring liberation to those who are disabled through the work of inclusion.

As people living with disabilities, we might claim a certain kinship between us and 'the man who was born blind.' The disciples do not know him, yet they proceed to pose questions about his experience, questions rooted in ableism, and the desire to justify his marginalization. Yet, Jesus reveals himself as Liberator, as he meets the man amid his oppression and facilitates his liberation. In doing so, Jesus models what it means to be inclusive, especially of those with disabilities.

First, the encounter serves as proof that God in Christ is present with those whom society seeks to relegate to the margins. Second, it serves as both an affirmation of different experiences and an indictment against those who cannot perceive God to be at work within those who are different from themselves. Third, it serves as a double commissioning, one to openness, the other to witness. Jesus not only calls the disciples to expand their imagination concerning who God might use; after placing mud on the man's eyes, he sends him to a pool whose name means "sent." In lifting the name of the pool, the writer communicates that one does not encounter Christ just for the sake of having an encounter but so that one might bear witness to Christ's liberating power.

³² James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation: Fortieth Anniversary Edition* (New York: Orbis Books, 2011): 81, Kindle.

Still. What do we do with the fact that the man's encounter with Jesus resulted in him being healed? Considering my reality as a Black and disabled man, I must name that no matter how much white supremacy may deem Blackness to be subpar to its standards, there is no changing that about me. In the same way that we would not expect one to eventually be healed of their Blackness based upon whiteness' standards, we must not sweepingly apply an ableist lens to the healing narratives, presupposing that Jesus' goal was to establish a normative experience of non-disability. Therefore, the prompting to 'look instead for what God can do' should also be received as an invitation to read John 9 differently; in a way that does not diminish the miraculous healing power of Jesus but invites us to expand our notions of what constitutes healing.

Thinking through and wrestling with the ways that we understand healing and apply its use, I posted the following on several forums across Facebook: "As a person who lives and navigates the world with a disability, I am curious if those who are non-disabled would be willing to expound upon how you define, interpret, or understand terms like brokenness, healing, and wholeness?"³² Among the nearly fifty responses, what began merely as a conversation starter, became a learning opportunity for me and all who responded.

With regards to healing, as might be expected, there was no one definitive definition. Some people spoke of healing from a medical perspective, while others approached it from the vantage point of faith. Whether coming to healing through the lens of medicine or faith, for most, healing is understood to be the righting or fixing of something wrong with an individual. Yet, if we as Christians believe in the theological

³² JJ Flag, Facebook status post, December 28, 2020.

concept that humanity was formed as a reflection of the “Imago Dei,” a Latin term translated to mean Image of God; then, this understanding must make room for diverse bearers of God’s image in the world.

After looking again at the healing narratives throughout Jesus’ ministry, they were not about fixing something “wrong” with those healed. In each instance, it appears that Jesus was doing the work of removing whatever obstacle(s) prevented the person from experiencing the fullness of community in their context.

By only framing healing as a miraculous act, we remove ourselves as possible mediums of healing. Yes, the healing narratives display Jesus’ miracle-working power. They also allow and further invite us to find ourselves within the text, being encouraged and empowered to carry out the work of liberation and healing— removing whatever obstacles are barriers to full community that may exist within our contexts.

In a sermon centered on Jesus’ healing of ‘the woman with the issue of blood,’ in Mark 5, writer and public theologian Candice Benbow poses the question, “How do we live on the other side of healing?” suggesting there is more to the story than the miracle the woman ultimately experienced. Benbow says, “The consequences and impacts of decisions and circumstances last beyond the healing moment.” She reminds listeners that though the woman does experience a miracle, the pain, questions, and marginalization of the preceding twelve years do not simply go away. Beyond the moment of her encounter with Jesus, there will be more work to do. Benbow’s contention with the way the text is preached is that it is incomplete. “Healing is a communal effort.”³³ Healing involves

³³ Candice Marie Benbow, “For sisters who are tired of the pain but are afraid of the cure,” Macedonia Missionary Baptist Church (Spartanburg, SC) on October 14, 2018 as part of the “Live, Laugh, Love” Women’s Conference, December 31, 2020, sermon, 4:25, <https://youtu.be/93k9NXXRXZ0>.

more than one moment, and one person, a community of people, had worked toward a resolution for the woman. A community of people would be impacted by the miracle she ultimately experienced.

Considering this woman's experience and the many others whom Jesus healed, we need not acquiesce to systems and structures that perpetuate oppression and marginalization, simply anticipating better in the 'sweet by and by.' We would benefit from reading them as a challenge for us to work against the oppression of ableism both within and beyond the church, to actively pursue radical inclusion as a present-day reality of what God's kin-dom looks like for the here and now.

In addition to these texts being catalysts for significant change, they also call us as people with disabilities to oppose the notion that the reality of full inclusion is reserved for an eschatological reality. At its core, the gospel message is one of radical inclusion, affirming the truth that those who have regularly been ostracized and pushed to the margins of society, maybe even within the Church, are welcomed—to take their place at God's table. Yet, all too often, especially within the Church, people with disabilities are brought to literal and figurative tables only to fill a symbolic role.

CHAPTER 7

“YOU PREPARE A TABLE BEFORE ME...”

A table is an ordinary meeting place, no matter where one finds oneself, whether determined by culture or class. Therefore, it is no surprise that tables are so often referenced within the scriptures. A line found within what is likely the most well-known Psalm, Psalm 23, reads, “You prepare a table before me...” Most assume King David to be the writer of this particular passage. While this Psalm carries the tone of one who has lived a little and has experienced God’s favor in unexpected ways, it does not appear that David was always as favorable to those seated at his table.

In 2 Samuel 9, after searching for any living relatives of Saul's household, David learns that Jonathan, Saul’s deceased son, has himself left behind a son named Mephibosheth. David intends to show kindness to Mephibosheth as he aims to keep a promise he had made to Jonathan before his death. So, David invites Mephibosheth to his table. What unfolds is an interaction worthy of deeper reflection as we further consider the full inclusion of people with disabilities within the Church.

Maybe Mephibosheth is a name you have not heard before? Nevertheless, Mephibosheth’s role within the biblical narrative is significant as he exists as one of the earliest characters with a disability within the Hebrew Bible. As readers, we first learn of his existence in 2 Samuel 4, following Saul and Jonathan's deaths while involved in a battle at Mount Gilboa. Mephibosheth’s nurse learns of their deaths and takes Mephibosheth fleeing in fear of what may happen to them, but in the process, Mephibosheth is dropped, which causes him to be permanently injured. We do not

reencounter him until 2 Samuel 9. This portion of scripture reveals that Mephibosheth's existence is by no means inconsequential both to the kingdom and to David; much can be said about Mephibosheth's rightful place as heir to the throne as Saul's grandson.

However, what is most striking about the story is that David welcomes him to his table upon learning of Mephibosheth's existence. One might assume, on the surface, it is merely right that David would offer such an invitation in light of him wanting to 'show kindness' to Mephibosheth.

Bearing this thought in mind and given my prior engagement with texts involving disability, it is essential to consider the different ways scriptural texts involving disability are read. There are typically three ways these types of texts are approached. First is the *redemptionist* approach. This way of reading the text seeks to redeem texts which include disability despite details that may appear problematic. This particular approach does not consider the passage's original context as it seeks to redeem the passage by lifting modern applications from the text. The second is the rejectionist approach. An alternative to rescuing the text, the rejectionist approach "would argue what the Bible has negative portrayals of disability that should be rejected in modern society."³⁴ This approach does not seek to redeem the text but instead aims to reject it wholly. It does not matter whether the portrayal of disability is positive or negative within the text because the Bible is an ancient text; it has no value in speaking to the realities of people with disabilities today. The third is the historicist approach. Unlike the previous two, this approach prizes the context of the text as "it undertakes historical examinations of disabilities in the Bible and

³⁴ Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper, *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities and Biblical Studies* (Georgia: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 4-5.

its subsequent interpretation, sometimes in comparison with neighboring ancient cultures, without any overt interest in the consequences of the conclusions for today.”³⁵

David and Mephibosheth's story serves as proof that not all texts or Bible stories featuring disability can be read in an entirely liberatory way. Reading David and Mephibosheth's story through the lens of one living with a disability, David's gesture does not land as generously as it first appears. Several of the verses within 2 Samuel 9 can serve as salient conversation starters about ableism, especially within the Church's context. I have listed some of the particular verses below:

³ The king said, “Is there anyone remaining of the house of Saul to whom I may show the kindness of God?” Ziba said to the king, “There remains a son of Jonathan; he is crippled in his feet.”

⁸ He did obeisance and said, “What is your servant, that you should look upon a dead dog such as I?”

¹⁰ You and your sons and your servants shall till the land for him, and shall bring in the produce, so that your master's grandson may have food to eat; but your master's grandson Mephibosheth shall always eat at my table.”

¹³ Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem, for he always ate at the king's table. Now he was lame in both his feet.

David's invitation to and interaction with Mephibosheth has the potential to serve as an indictment of the non-disabled while also pushing us all to interrogate and further reimagine how we engage people with disabilities on an institutional and relational level. One of the first things to emerge within this pericope is the power dynamic present between the leader and the lead. In this instance, David is shown to have both access and ability, and the text implies that neither is true for Mephibosheth. As I noted earlier in this

³⁵ Hector Avalos, “Redemptionism, Rejectionism, and Historicism as Emerging Approaches in Disability Studies,” ATLAS, Essay, Iowa State University: 92.

writing, much of the Church's lack of inclusivity boils down to an absence of access and ability for those living with disabilities. Therefore, full inclusion necessitates physical changes to worship spaces and an intentional divestment of power on the part of those who occupy places of leadership within communities of faith. It could be said that this is what David is aiming to do, but to end at that point would mean to ignore other realities present within the text and those often lived by people with disabilities today.

Secondly, Ziba, who is the one to tell David about Mephibosheth, cites Mephibosheth's condition before ever mentioning his name. He tells David, "There remains a son of Jonathan; he is crippled in his feet." Earlier, in addressing the use of the term "disabled," I asserted that I prefer primarily to be addressed by my name; this is important because I have experienced being just "the Black man in the wheelchair." Though there are times where such a descriptor helps differentiate me from a group of others who bear similarities to me, all too often, people living with disabilities are only described by their differences. This practice may seem harmless but is undoubtedly reductionist. It conveys that one is known first and foremost through the prism of what makes them different from others rather than as a person.

Thirdly is the glaring presence of Mephibosheth's self-deprecation, as he refers to himself as a "dead dog." This cruel way of referring to oneself conveys a sense of uselessness on the part of Mephibosheth. Mephibosheth's response brings to mind how often those of us who are disabled in some way are left to feel at worst as though we are useless, having nothing of value to offer others. At best, being told we fulfill a specific purpose in our being disabled.

As I thought about this reality more and more, I realized that Mephibosheth's acquiescence to a place of lowliness might have very well been a survival tactic. I remember going through several interviews as I discerned where I would attend seminary; in one interview, I was told, "You'd definitely help increase our school's diversity quota. You check so many boxes." In retrospect, I want to believe that the person who said this was joking. Yet, at the moment, all I did was chuckle uncomfortably, knowing this person wielded significant power in determining my acceptance to the institution. This moment for me equates to that of Mephibosheth's 'dead dog' remark. Like myself, I suspect that he knew people with disabilities serve far more purpose than symbols. Still, we do not always feel empowered, much less emboldened to declare such truth, especially in moments that seek to confine us to symbolism. There is something so dehumanizing that takes place; it feels as though you have been robbed of your voice entirely.

This notion of uselessness cast upon Mephibosheth is furthered in verse 10. David instructs that Ziba and his sons will be responsible for caring for the land; furthermore, Mephibosheth will always eat David's table. While some read David's gestures as ones of kindness, others have expressed skepticism. What is most interesting about those who perceive David's actions to be purely motivated by kindness is that Mephibosheth's being disabled takes center stage as the cause. Hebrew Bible and Disabilities Studies scholar Jeremy Schipper cites the following from Rabbi Ephraim Solomon, who wrote:

Now concerning the honour which David showed to Mephibosheth... this is something else for which he should be much praised. For he could easily have left him in his house, after restoring him. Since he was there broken and mutilated in body, and could not walk, he could have used this as an excuse, saying that he

kept himself hidden because if he was seen in that condition, he would only have been ridiculed. But he loved this poor creature for the love of his father, Jonathan. Furthermore, he showed that he was not being led by the kind of ambition followed by the princes of this world, who are always wanting to parade their triumphs and who, if their lives are not full of pomp, feel dishonoured. But they do not have the main thing: namely, the fear of God and the kindness due to their subjects. Thus, we should particularly observe what is told us here about David, who was not ashamed to have a poor lame man at his table.³⁶

Rabbi Solomon's understanding is that David's actions are worthy of celebration; there is also the implication of David's acts being worthy of imitation.

However, merely pitching a tent on this single understanding of the story and text, rather than journeying on, robs it of its nuance. As Schipper asserts, "A minority of commentators read David's summoning of Mephibosheth not as an altruistic expression of loyalty, but as a shrewd political move that places a potential rival for his throne (Saul's heir) under 'house arrest.'" In this instance, we understand 'political' to be referring to the monarchy, yet; there are also politics at play as we consider the role and place of people with disabilities in the Church and larger society. Reflecting on the emergence of the Disabilities Rights Movement during the 1960s and 70s, Nancy Eiesland wrote,

For persons with disabilities, the body is the center of political struggle. In challenging society's definitions of our bodies as flawed, dangerous, and dependent, people with disabilities initiated a social movement that stressed positive self-image and self-help. The movement has grown as we have refused to allow our bodies to be warehoused in institutions, restricted from public buildings, and discriminated against in employment. People with disabilities in recent years have become increasingly visible and active in public life.³⁷

³⁶ Jeremy Schipper, "Why do You Still Speak of Your Affairs?": Mephibosheth, Disability, and National Identity in the David Story", *Vetus Testamentum* 54, no. 3 (2004): 347, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1568533041694564>. In Keli Yakar, Polish rabbi Ephraim Solomon of Luntschitz (1550-1619) gives a similar interpretation. According to him, these actions show David's humility and compassion because, unlike other kings, he did not become disgusted by Mephibosheth's presence at his table.

³⁷ Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 49.

Eiesland's words lifting the disabled body as 'the center of political struggle' though articulated years ago, seems a fitting description for the place of disabled bodies in society even today. The same appears to apply to Mephibosheth in both a literal and figurative sense as he is the rightful heir to the throne. Still, because of his being disabled, David need not worry much about Mephibosheth as he is viewed as unfit to lead. Mephibosheth deviates from those within the Disabilities Rights Movement in that the story does not highlight Mephibosheth offering any significant pushback against David or any of his pronouncements. Looking back at Mephibosheth's 'dead dog' remark about himself, again, unlike those who were disabled and a part of the Disabilities Rights Movement, who 'stressed a positive self-image and self-help' individually and collectively, Mephibosheth, all but resigned to the notion of uselessness on his part. Mephibosheth appears to be content with his place at the king's table. By bringing attention to Mephibosheth's satisfaction with just a seat at the table, my intent is not to shame him but rather to illuminate another matter presented in this story. This matter provides an additional opportunity to engage the text further as we consider the challenge of the full inclusion of people with disabilities facing the Church today.

In his analysis of the interaction between David and Mephibosheth, amongst several other concerns within the story, Yong raises briefly for our consideration the matter of embodiedness related to those in leadership roles. He points out,

On the one hand, according to the popular (normate) mind, Mephibosheth is "unfit" for the throne, and his being disabled sets up David's "fitness" - recall that the Deuteronomist Historian (the scholarly identification of the author of 1-2 Samuel) had earlier said that David "was ruddy . . . , had beautiful eyes, and was handsome" (1Sam. 16:12)³⁸

³⁸ Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 483-486.

David, for the most part, met the physical characteristics of how a leader should look. It may or may not come as a surprise, but even the matter of looks have their place in this conversation. Churches must be willing to interrogate their commitments to homogeneity in the face of claiming to desire diversity. Congregations and their leaders alike can and must work toward decentering those who are non-disabled by being willing to ask, what message are we conveying about who God uses in the people we choose as leaders? Like the buildings that often house these congregations and emit from them, with great intention, an "air" of prominence, strength, and vitality within their particular communities, so do many who lead them. The American Christian leader archetype is a charismatic, clean-shaven-well-dressed, learned and well-spoken, cis-gendered-heterosexual young to middle-aged-male. Across racial and ethnic lines, male pastors seem to be widely perceived as the most capable and qualified to carry out the duties necessary to keep the Church going as an institution. Despite data showing, women account for the majority of church attenders. A simple Google image search of the term "pastor" will reveal that algorithms, like larger society, have not yet caught on to the idea that pastors come in various "packages."

One might ask why such insights are necessary when discussing the issues of ableism and inclusion in the Church? The fact that most leaders across the Christian spectrum fall within a particular set of physical parameters is by no means a coincidence. As I stated earlier, rarely does oppression present itself in a single form within institutions. The Church indeed does not find itself immune to this harsh truth. This reality is the byproduct of the Church's complicity in perpetuating ableism, ageism, racism, patriarchy, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, and several other exclusionary

ways of thinking, eventually leading to oppression. For many who find themselves serving on search committees and boards within the church, it seems as though there has not been a clear enough distinction made for them between Jesus the Good Shepherd and another human being who merely follows his example as an under-shepherd within the local church. That is to say, many hope to be led by someone who closely mirrors the Jesus they “know,” but the problem is, the image of Jesus that many have in their head is an incomplete one. This incompleteness is something I plan to address further at a later point. For too long, the Church’s preoccupation has been with disabled persons’ lack of conformity to “normal” more than making it possible for their full inclusion in the Church, most apparently in its leadership.

To zero in on and celebrate David’s kindness toward Mephibosheth simply because of his being disabled is a refusal to go deeper. Yes, David welcomed him to his table, but why? Narrowly focusing on Mephibosheth’s disability while lauding David’s actions as worthy of emulation ignores the power Mephibosheth held in just being alive. Mephibosheth’s place as the rightful heir to the throne is a significant part of who he is, and the value of ‘good’ optics related to David’s care for him cannot be ignored. No one can say for sure that David’s actions were not motivated merely by kindness. However, the interactions between these two provide an opportunity for greater introspection on our parts. When we invite people with disabilities or any marginalized persons to the proverbial table, why are we doing it? Are we hoping to appear more charitable, in line with the trendiness of diversity and inclusion, or are we hoping to bring real transformation to our institutions and organizations? Transformation within the Church

can only happen once the Church pivots from theologies that center able-bodiedness as its members' shared experience.

CHAPTER 8

THIS IS MY BODY, WHICH IS BROKEN FOR YOU...

Just before Jesus' betrayal, unjust trial, and eventual execution by crucifixion, he gathers with his disciples for their last meal together. It is during this time that Jesus takes bread and wine to symbolize what he is about to endure. While teaching the church at Corinth about the importance of what took place that night, the Apostle Paul says,

For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me." In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." (1 Corinthians 11:23-26.)³⁹

Anyone who grew up in a Black Baptist Church like mine likely heard their pastor recite these words as part of observing the ordinance of Communion. These words are known as the words of institution. Though most translations of verse twenty-four use 'given' instead of 'broken,' I grew up hearing the latter. At the time, I had no idea the significance that seemingly minute difference would eventually make in my relating to God.

I can recall several times during my younger years when the first Sunday of the month came around being overcome with a great sense of worry and fear; it was Communion Sunday. There was an air of theatrics that surrounded this moment; amid the dimly lit sanctuary and the sounds of mournful tones flowing through the congregation, we sang hymns focused on the crucifixion of Jesus. Hymns like "The Old Rugged Cross"

³⁹ *King James Version.*

and “There Is a Fountain.” Soon, we would get to the reading of scripture; it was the pastor’s custom to go straight to 1 Corinthians 11. After reading through verses twenty through thirty, he would make it a point to go back and emphasize the importance of verses twenty-nine and thirty before the elements were served to the congregation by the deacons. 1 Corinthians 11: 29-30 says, “For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep.”⁴⁰ After sleep, he would often say, “that means to die.” As a child and even into my early teens hearing these words month after month resulted in anxiety-inducing fear of Communion. For years, before and after partaking in Communion, I repeatedly questioned my worthiness.

You may have noticed my using the terms ordinance and sacrament in speaking about Communion. Ordinances and sacraments vary across Christian denominations and communities of faith. The two most common are baptism and Communion.⁴¹ Though some may use these words interchangeably to discuss baptism and Communion in the Church, there is a difference. “Ordinance” is typically used by those who are Baptist or adhere to Baptist theology. In this context, baptism and Communion are understood to be symbols, as catalysts for believers’ reflection, remembrance, and a tangible connection to pivotal moments in the life of Jesus. Conversely, sacraments are understood as means through which God’s grace is present to and experienced by those who partake in them.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Growing up, we understood that the water in baptism served to represent a place where one died to sin and was raised to life in Christ. Beyond the symbolic death, baptism also symbolizes receiving the Holy Spirit, as well as incorporation into Christ's Church. In the United Church of Christ, the denomination in which I am ordained and pastor, the sacrament of baptism is available to all, from infancy to adulthood and because baptism at any age, incorporates a person into the Church Universal, there is no need for an individual to be rebaptized. Depending on the context, the way that baptism is performed may vary (i.e., immersion, pouring, or sprinkling of water). No matter the mode used, baptism is significant in that it is a communal act both in witnessing and affirming one’s welcome into the kin-dom of God.

The distinction between the two would play an integral role in my coming to experience Communion differently.

Though I had not grown up with an understanding of Communion as a sacrament, my journey of faith would eventually lead me into the United Methodist Church (UMC). It was in the UMC that I learned of John Wesley, Methodism's founder who "described the Lord's Supper as "the grand channel whereby the grace of his Spirit was conveyed to the souls of all the children of God."⁴² For United Methodists, in practice, this meant the Communion table was open to all, whether or not they had professed faith in Christ. Methodists believe that God's grace, present in the sacraments, have the potential to make one aware of the grace already present in their life, thus drawing them into a relationship with God. This understanding is a drastic difference from that of the church of my upbringing, which taught that both a profession of faith and baptism was necessary before one could partake of Communion. The UMC had opened the door for me to experience Communion, not as an exclusionary practice of the Church, but as one that made it possible the door for all who desired to be a part.

As I have come to understand and experience it now, in my ministry, Communion is a time of deep reflection and gratitude as I think about the "meal" being reminiscent of what occurs during the parable of the Great Banquet. In Luke 14:15-24, Jesus tells the story of a wealthy person who has prepared a lavish banquet, only to discover their invited guests will not be coming. Upon learning this, the host instructs one of their workers to "Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame." Even after this instruction is followed, there is still

⁴² Gayle Carlton Felton, *This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion* (Nashville, Tennessee: Discipleship Resources, 2005), 11.

room. The host responds with the following instructions, “Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled.” This text has continued to shape how I understand my place in the Church and has shifted my approach to ministry as a pastor. I will say more about the latter soon. The parable tells a story, God has set the table, and Jesus calls us all to come so that we might take part in the abundance that is there.

In Communion, using the bread and cup connects humanity as they are common elements across the globe. They serve as tangible reminders that Christ is our living example for engaging in the world. This is most often expressed as the minister offers the bread and cup to those partaking by saying something like, “This is the bread of life and the cup of love.” The table is not ours; it is God’s. Therefore, anyone who desires to partake of this meal may do so. In sharing this particular sacrament, it has been my experience that the community is brought into greater connectedness with one another and the Church Universal. At this table, the outcasts are welcomed. Here is where we all can experience God’s benevolence and radical hospitality. The sacraments are a reminder for us of the work of God through the incarnation. They exist as both a conduit and invitation for the Spirit to bear witness to and through us.

Nancy Eiesland, whose work I have already referenced, is regarded by many as a pioneer of Disability Theology; Eiesland changed theology's landscape by writing *The Disabled God*. In it, Eiesland lifts the image of a disabled Jesus, whom by being so, “has transformative power. It is the experience of Christ from below as a corporeal experience. The power of the disabled God is the seemingly inherent contradiction this God

embodies.”⁴³ This view of Jesus gives us a more complete picture of the one who is the Good Shephard and whom millions claim as their source of salvation.

The way that we perceive God inevitably impacts how we understand and relate to God. For the Christian, the incarnation is central to our theological framework. It is God's incarnational nature that we believe allowed the Divine to don human flesh and live amongst humankind in the person of Jesus. Yet, nothing makes Jesus more relatable to those who are disabled than the breaking of his body, the wounding of his flesh. And still, the intersections of disability and race emerge as it is Jesus' unjust death by crucifixion on the cross that places the disabled and crucified God in solidarity with the oppressed. The cross's role as the instrument that catalyzes the disabling of Jesus cannot be glossed over. Cone, writing about the cross' significance for Blacks who endured the era of public lynching, wrote,

In that era, the lynching tree joined the cross as the most emotionally charged symbols in the African American community—symbols that represented both death and the promise of redemption, judgment and the offer of mercy, suffering and the power of hope. Both the cross and the lynching tree represented the worst in human beings and at the same time “an unquenchable ontological thirst” for life that refuses to let the worst determine our final meaning.⁴⁴

In his analysis of the parallels between the cross and the lynching tree, Dr. Cone lifts the vitality of symbols in Christians' lives, namely Black ones. Cone also lifts symbols as a means to subverting what might otherwise be experienced as the sanctioning of violence. The claiming or the reclamation of symbols as signs of hope does not end with the Black community. It extends to other marginalized groups like the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer+ community (LGBTQ+). Episcopal priest and author Patrick S.

⁴³ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 100.

⁴⁴ James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (New York: Orbis Books, 2013), 20, Kindle.

Cheng writes on the theological validity of the community's use of the rainbow as a symbol, saying, "The rainbow is an ideal metaphor for the experiences of LGBTIQ people of color. Like queer people of color, rainbows exist within a space where race, sexuality, and spirit converge or come together. In other words, rainbows are fluid symbols that have racial, sexual, and spiritual significance."⁴⁵

A lot like other people groups who have found themselves pushed to beyond the margins of community within the Church, Christians who are LGBTQ+ have had to lean into the reality that one symbol can bear a diversity of meanings.

[R]ainbows and queer people of color share the characteristic of multiplicity. Multiplicity refers to a state of having multiple co-existing and overlapping identities, as opposed to a singular dominant identity. Rainbows are defined by multiplicity because they have been understood in many different ways throughout history. As we have already seen, the rainbow has multiple meanings in different cultures, whether it symbolizes a covenant, a pathway, a garment, a serpent, or an enlightened body. Even within the Christian scriptures, there is not just one meaning for the rainbow—it is both a symbol of God's promise never to wipe out the human race by flood, as well as a symbol of God's divine glory that surrounds a throne or an angel.⁴⁶

Leaning into this multiplicity of meanings is essential, especially considering those who believe the rainbow is exclusively meant to represent God's promise concerning humanity's future. The same can be said of how artists, for centuries, have depicted various images of Christ, attempting to avoid any implications of blemish or wounds. This makes the nature of Jesus's broken body in relation to people with disabilities all the more poignant in claiming it as their own. Eiesland writes, "Empowering symbols are vital for any marginalized group."⁴⁷ Much like the grotesque crucifixion of Christ on the

⁴⁵ Patrick S. Cheng, *Rainbow Theology: Bridging Race, Sexuality, and Spirit* (New York: Seabury Books, 2013), 2215-2218, Kindle.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 2266-2271.

⁴⁷ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 91.

cross exists as a symbol of hope and solidarity for Blacks who find redemption in Christ's death; and as the rainbow exists as a symbol of the LGBTQ+ community's intersectional nature, so does Christ's wounded body, for those with disabilities. His wounds make it possible for those who have been othered because of their bodies. They can find welcome to and solidarity with God. By experiencing kinship with Christ in this way, disabled people are subverting a narrative of non-disability as the standard for full inclusion in the Church.

Reflecting on an earlier point concerning the Church as a space of education and formation, the Church must be willing to think through symbols' role in reshaping how its adherents understand and relate to those with disabilities. The eucharistic imagery of the broken body of Christ provides an opportunity for such reimagining to take place.

“Religious symbols point individuals beyond their ordinary lives. Religious symbols not only prescribe or reproduce social status, but they also transform it. The power of symbols and myths is in the motive force they engender.”⁴⁸ So then, if the Church is to live into its being the body of Christ truly, it must be willing to affirm and thus oppose the illusion of non-disability as the standard of normalness by decentering the idea of a Christ untouched by the human experience.

Analyzing and reimagining the multiplicity of symbols and use of symbolism in the Church provides an opportunity for us to interrogate the Church's use of both as a means to exclude. Ironically, churches have utilized Black, disabled, and queer bodies to further their agendas of appearing to be diverse. All the while ignoring the differences that Christ as the Church's head bears in his own body. It is as if acknowledging the

⁴⁸ Ibid., 91.

woundedness of Christ's body will somehow diminish his divinity. Yet, no scriptural occurrence affirms the wounded and still wholly divine nature of Christ more than that of his resurrection and the state of his resurrected body. After dying a gruesome death, Jesus resurrects and goes on to see his disciples. At first, they are startled by his appearance. It is telling that in this recounting (in Luke 24) of what happened that day to assure them of his identity, Jesus immediately tells them to "Look at my hands and my feet. Touch me and see!" Why would Jesus instruct the disciples to do so if his body did not still bear the wounds of his crucifixion? To eliminate the possibility of his appearance being dismissed as merely a ghost sighting, Jesus goes so far as to eat while he is with them. Jesus returns fully embodied and still wounded.

Thomas, who was not present when Jesus visited with the disciples, learned from the others that he had missed Jesus. Thomas often gets a bad rap because he openly admitted his doubts by saying he would only believe it was Jesus if he could see and feel for himself the wounds in Jesus' hands and side. Eight days later, when the disciples, including Thomas, were gathered together, Jesus showed up again in their midst. Aware of Thomas' doubts, Jesus invites him to do just as he said he had wished to, see, and feel Jesus' wounds. "The resurrected Jesus Christ in presenting impaired hands and feet and side to be touched by frightened friends alters the taboo of physical avoidance of disability and calls for followers to recognize their connection and equality at the point of Christ's physical impairment. Christ's disfigured side bears witness to the existence of "hidden" disabilities, as well."⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Ibid., 101.

In raising the matter of invisibility concerning disabilities, it is clear that no-body is left out of Communion with(in) the disabled body of Christ. Additionally, if we read this encounter too quickly, we will miss a powerful message that Jesus' invitation to 'see and feel' conveys; while seeing can potentially happen from a distance, feeling requires closeness. Therefore, Christ's invitation both embodies and exemplifies radical inclusion as he shows that those with disabilities must not only be perceived but tangibly experienced; only then can the fullness of Christ's presence amongst us be fully realized. In the wounded body of Jesus, the Eucharist comes to life anew. "The People of God cannot be nourished by the Eucharistic feast - the table of plenty - if the bread is not broken and the cup is not spilled."⁵⁰ So then, the Church must be willing to experience this wounded Jesus, not as one who is seen as weak or easily overcome, or his wounds as a source of repulsion. Still, as the disabled God, whose difference and disability place them at the margins of society. If one were to consider the whole of Jesus' ministry, such an idea is not farfetched as it is characteristic of his ministry to meet at the margins and beyond. This being true, and with the disabled God as our example, we would do well to respond favorably to the invitation to receive of his body broken for us.

⁵⁰ The Rev. Jerry Maynard, Facebook response to the author, December 28, 2020.

CHAPTER 9

THE GREAT BANQUET AS A MODEL FOR MINISTRY?

Early on in my work, I shared how the parable of The Great Banquet played a significant role in the way that I understand Communion and welcome. For so long, this story has been an example of uncommon generosity for me. It is a passage of scripture from which I believe churches, large and small, can learn. For some, it may be very familiar. In any case, I hope that you will experience it anew.

In Luke 14:15-24, Jesus tells the story of a person who had set out to host a banquet, only to have those who had been invited to back out when the time had come for it to take place. Each guest gives a different excuse as to why they cannot attend. Presumably, because the host does not want all the preparations to be wasted, they instruct their servant to go out and bring in the “the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.” After following the host’s instructions, there is still room. Unsatisfied with the crowd size, the host instructs their servant to go back out. This time they are told to “Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that [the] house will be full.” Jesus ends the parable in the voice of the host, saying, “I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.” (Luke 14:24.)⁵¹ At first glance, this story reads like one of uncommon generosity. To read the parable as such is by no means a stretch. Within the Biblical narrative, it is couched between Jesus at the home of a religious leader, healing a man in need. The parable is followed by a brief message on the costs of being a disciple, in which Jesus says, “those of you who do not give up

⁵¹ *New International Version*

everything you have cannot be my disciples.” Therefore, it would be safe to assume that the parable of “The Great Banquet” exists as a model of generous and inclusive ministry, especially since it is the disabled and other marginalized people who are sought out and brought in.

I have always read and understood this text as God being the host, Christ, the servant, and the Church as the people brought in from the margins. I have also approached this parable from the vantage point of Christ as the host, the Church as the servant, instructed to go out to the margins and beyond to bring in the people. However, there is more than just a single way to read Jesus’ parables. In discussions around this parable with other people with disabilities, I learned that I was in the minority in applying a *redemptionist* view to the text; several of my disabled colleagues named this text one of the most problematic stories within scripture that center on disability.

Overall, it seemed as though those who I know with disabilities could find nothing redeemable about this parable. Our group’s consensus was that the text does more to dehumanize and stigmatize people with disabilities than anything else. The text perpetuates a power dynamic between the non-disabled and the disabled. It positions the presumably non-disabled host and servant as saviors to those who have been marginalized. Therefore, rather than promoting inclusion, the parable creates a framework for saviorism.

Reflecting on her research around the inclusion of people with disabilities in the Church, Rev. Dr. Erin Raffety says,

When we questioned pastors of churches about what theological rationale they might give for the importance of ministry with people with disabilities, many of them cited Matthew 25, framing people with disabilities as “the least of these,”

unto which the church is commanded to provide care, or 1 Corinthians 12, in which people with disabilities are “the weaker parts,” or at least perceived to be the weaker parts of the body, even though they have importance. In each of these theologies, the Church maintains its role, and also its power and hegemony, as that which welcomes, includes, or ministers, while people with disabilities are perceived as those in need of welcome, inclusion, or ministry.⁵²

Given my own *redemptionist* reading of this parable, even as a person with a disability, Dr. Raffety’s findings are not too surprising. The Church and its leaders seem to appreciate any opportunity to be positioned as a standard-bearer for morality and benevolence in the world. Based on this notion, it would appear as though this text may still serve a purpose in the journey toward radical inclusion for those with disabilities in the Church. I want to lift this parable as a model, but not in the way you might assume. To suggest that this parable be applied as some sort of template for diversity and inclusion, or even the work of church revitalization in some three-step process, would feel just as hermeneutically and exegetically irresponsible as some of the examples I shared earlier.

As has been the case throughout my work, I believe that a reflection and action model of ministry will lead to lasting change. You may recall my previous list of suggested questions to ask of your organization as you work toward being a more inclusive space for racial and ethnic minorities and people with disabilities? I believe a similar resource for auditing and shaping a more inclusive ministry exists within this parable. Once again, reading the text primarily through my lens as one living with a disability, I want to provide a brief exegesis in hopes that the questions that emerged will spur deep reflection and more excellent action for churches to become spaces of radical inclusion for those with disabilities.

⁵² Rev. Dr. Erin Raffety, forthcoming book.

Luke 14:15-24 ⁵³

15 When one of those at the table with him heard this, he said to Jesus, “Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.”

16 Jesus replied: “A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. 17 At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is now ready.’

18 “But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, ‘I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.’

19 “Another said, ‘I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I’m on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.’

20 “Still another said, ‘I just got married, so I can’t come.’

21 “The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, ‘Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.’

22 “‘Sir,’ the servant said, ‘what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.’

23 “Then the master told his servant, ‘Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full.

24 I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.’

1) Was there something about the host or space that was inhospitable which prompted the original guests to back out?

Though this question is not particular to people with disabilities, it is no less poignant as we consider what it means to create spaces where all are welcome. We must be willing to ask whether we are cultivating a culture and experience that people would much rather avoid than being a part of.

2) Do we value diversity, or are we merely repurposing what already was?

In reading verses 21 and 22, we learn that the host is bothered by the fact that so much preparation has gone into this banquet, only to have the guests send their regrets. In what appears to be an attempt to salvage what is there, the host sends their servant out to gather those who have been relegated to the margins of society. In doing so, it is clear

⁵³ *New International Version.*

that they were not the host's first choice. As we engage in creating radically inclusive spaces, we must ask ourselves whether or not we are merely resorting to a last-ditch effort?

3) Is inclusion a core part of our identity as a community of faith, or are we responding to a need for numbers?

In verses 22 and 23, after the servant has followed the host's instructions, there is still room. Unsatisfied with the turnout, the host sends the servant back out to ‘compel’ people to come so that the banquet is full. Is our aim simply to fill seats and check off boxes, or are we moving toward a present-day vision of what’s the kin-dom of God looks like here on earth.

4) What does it mean for us to ‘compel’ people to come?

Because verse 21 tells us that the host is angry at those who were invited yet decided not to come, it is with good reason that I believe anger is the emotional undercurrent of this entire text. Therefore, it is hard not to read the instruction to compel as, to force. Are we compelling people by way of fear tactics or harmful theologies? Alternatively, suppose I were to read this instruction to compel as something positive. In that case, it is worth asking, what mediums are we using to draw people into our spaces? Are we promoting a message which conveys welcome, acceptance, affirmation without pretense?

5) Do we value people’s stories beyond their labels?

One of the glaring pitfalls of this parable is that the marginalized guests are never named or engaged in any way beyond their labels. In pursuit of more inclusive spaces,

are we willing to get to know people's stories, their who, what, and why? Will we dare to engage them beyond the boxes that society has placed them in?

6) Different people bring different perspectives. Are we willing to listen?

Though this point does not emerge from a particular verse within this parable, the entire parable bears its implications. It goes without saying if you gather a crowd in a room, there are sure to be differences. We must be willing to wrestle with whether or not we seek homogeneity or aim to honor the differences in our communities of faith (i.e., race, ethnicity, culture, gender identity, sexual orientation, economic status, education, and abilities)? Will we cultivate spaces where the difference of experience and opinions welcome?

7) Who is being excluded?

This parable ends in verse 24 with Jesus speaking in the host's voice, declaring that those who had been invited before would not get to taste the banquet. Although exclusion is subtlety woven throughout this parable, it is its ending that will hopefully lead us to ask, who have we determined will not taste of the banquet? What are we losing by not having their voice(s) present?

CONCLUSION

By no coincidence, this work ends in addressing the question, “Who is excluded?” It is the point at which I began my work by positing that it is people with disabilities who are being excluded from our churches and communities of faith. I have sought throughout my work to highlight the ways in which churches’ architecture and theology, as well as the presence of anti-black racism all, converge in the perpetuation of the sin of ableism. Yet, the call of the gospel, which is the message of God’s love proclaimed to the world through the Church, is to create spaces wherein all might be welcomed, especially those whom society has pushed to the margins and beyond. This is the ministry of Christ.

Using my own story and various biblical narratives from both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, which centered on disability, I question the Church’s preoccupation with non-disability as the standard. In doing so, I also raise the question of the impacts of the intersectionality of disability and racism. Unfortunately, the ministry and work of Christ seem to have been undermined by the Church’s preoccupation with supposed normalcy, no longer sees the efficacy of his broken body as a way to connect with those whose bodies are disabled in one way or another. The salvation of the believer is ultimately in the disabled body of Christ!

The disabled body of Christ serves as the tangible example and the symbol through which disabled people are welcomed and included into the family of God. Christ’s broken body extends the table for people with disabilities to take their rightful place at it. Not as some symbolic gesture but as fully contributing members of the community. Out of a multiplicity of symbols and symbolism throughout history emerges

the desire to relegate people with disabilities to mere characters. However, this work ends flipping the use of characters as models for inclusion on its head and instead calls us to reflection and more excellent action.

The process of engaging in this work has been both challenging and fulfilling. It has created an opportunity for me to wrestle with how I understand myself and my call as a faith leader. My understanding of the work of radical inclusion and my appreciation for those who have laid the foundation for this work are great. My earnest hope is that this work will inspire and challenge others to pursue the goal of full inclusion for people with disabilities, knowing that is so doing, your honor God and the bearers of God's image in the earth.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ While acknowledging that I identify as a Black-disabled-male throughout my work, I recognize that much of this work addresses the twofold part of my identity as a Black-disabled person, not giving significant analysis to my maleness and the role that it plays in shaping my perspective or lived experience. I name this for the sake of sharing that in future iterations of this work and scholarship, I intend to further engage the intersections of Blackness, disability, maleness, and even queerness all of which are lenses that impact my perspective and reality thus, my commitment to the work of radical inclusion within the Church.

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