

### SESSION THREE: THEOLOGY, DISABILITY, AND HEALING

#### RECAP:

**INTRODUCTION:** This week, we will be discussing the topic of healing and disability. In the context of disability theology, healing is perhaps one of the most “hot-button” issues, especially in circles which emphasize healing as a present reality (i.e. Pentecostals). As we have begun to explore in this class, the experience of disability challenges the accepted notions of health, cure, and wholeness which often are assumed to mean particular things. Today, we will address a dominant myth in the church regarding disability: that disability should be healed.

Yet, even in naming this myth, we are confronted with many questions. What does “healing” mean? When Jesus healed on earth, what was the purpose of such acts? Ultimately, the way we answer these questions will tell us not only what we think about God, but what we think about those of us who are disabled, or even ourselves. Last week, we read Gospel passages in which Jesus healed others. In doing so, we attempted to wrestle with the things we bring to the text and the assumptions we make about disability. Today, we will peel back even more layers. How do medicine and modern notions of the ideal human (the “norm”) inform our theological understanding of “healing?” When we consider healing from the perspective of those with disabilities or those who live with persons with disabilities, what might our theological understanding of healing become? How might we practice a better understanding of healing as a church?

**MY BODY IS NOT A PRAYER REQUEST:** “The most harmful ableism I have experienced has been inside the church. I can almost understand it from my teachers and employers. People have been taught to value product over personhood, profit over people, and cash as king above all else. Disabled people do not produce anything the capitalist market deems valuable, and therefore we are cast aside as drains on the system. It’s eugenicist, but that’s capitalism. Eugenics tells us we can “improve” humanity by getting rid of any traits we find undesirable... But churches are meant to usher in new creation where all people have dignity and value simply because we are image-bearers of the Alpha and Omega. many churches claim to be “pro-life,” But they mirror ablest messaging that productivity and health are the drivers of dignity and worth. Many churches weaponize prayer, reducing God to a slimy vending machine churning out magical miracles upon request. One bendy body, coming right up! Just name it and claim it. “Jesus didn't die for you to be in a wheelchair, I've been told more times than I can count.” – *My Body is Not a Prayer Request*, Amy Kenny, 25-26.

**MEDICINE AND HEALING:** How does our modern view of medicine impact our understanding of healing, especially in the context of disability? Many of us view our own bodies as something separate from “I” or “me.” We often notice this when something isn’t “working the way it should.” Almost immediately upon injury, or illness, we think of ways to “fix” the problem, to get back to “normal.” In many ways, this impulse isn’t always bad. When we have the flu, we look for a way to get better. Yet, behind these notions of “health,” “better,” and “normal” often lurk images of the ideal human – the able-bodied or able-minded human.

Western medicine is a discipline which is influenced by the notion that the body is mechanical, an organism with proper functions, networks, and regulations. As such, all human bodies are comparable to an ideal functioning body. In the development of Western medicine, some have called this notion “the anticipatory corpse.” What is meant by this is that the body, as a machine, is viewed as not having a subject, or person, behind it – with a family, a history, a social context – but instead as a “corpse,” a thing of flesh, bones, etc. Thus, when we are treated medically, we are treated as if my broken arm did not belong to “me,” but rather as if my arm were inconsequential to who I am. The medical model also places the illness upon the individual body, removing the person from their context and assuming that all disabilities are conditions that should be removed or cured. Healing, in the medical context, means CURE.

Medical models of disability do not categorize disability as a social structure, like we have discussed in the past, but instead understand disability to be an illness or ailment preventing the ideal functioning of the human body. In the context of Western churches, this medical model gets adapted into our notions of healing. We often expect that God heals us by making us “normal,” or erasing that which causes a lack of “proper functioning.” Likewise, we end up reading the Gospel narratives and practicing healing through this lens. Disabled people have written, spoken, and communicated frequently about attempts to “heal” them in the context of church, often without their own permission. Implicit in these moments is that abled Christians “know better” than their disabled peers, assuming that the person wants to be CURED of their disability. The assumption is... “why would you WANT to live the life you live?” With a medical model in mind, we often approach one another by interpreting our various “symptoms,” identifying needs based on “diagnoses,” and assume we know what a healthy body or mind ought to be.

**Q: What are some of the ways you notice medical models of disability influencing prayers, healing, etc.? Do you have experiences of this? What are some ways you yourself have assumed the need for “cure.”**

Our understanding of healing, and the medical model, reveal our assumptions about what it means to be human. When we think theologically about what it means to be human, we are confronted with the person of Jesus Christ, whom the bible tells us is the prototype of humanity. In the context of disability, when we look at Jesus’ person and His ministry of healing, we are invited to rethink our assumptions about what health means in a Christian context.

**JESUS AND HEALING: Jesus didn’t heal everyone.** Shocking! Many modern readers, especially those in the Western medical contexts, find this to be a troubling fact. After all, from the perspective of a physician, why WOULDN’T Jesus heal everyone if every condition of humanity that deviates from the norm deserves to be “cured?” As we have seen last week, one way of reading the Gospel narratives is to see Jesus as providing miracle cures, that is, finding the cause of a person’s condition and removing it. If we read the stories this way, we not only erase the disabled person, we also ignore the larger message of Jesus’ healing ministry. So, what might be Jesus’ message in light of disability? This is where we will work toward a better theological understanding of “healing,” and likewise work toward a better practice of “healing” here at PMC.

### 1. *JESUS THE INCARNATE GOD – TOO HUMAN?*

The Christian tradition teaches that Jesus, the Second Person of the Trinity, became flesh. We are reconciled with God and one another through this, as our humanity is united with God and invited to participate in the fullness of new life. However, despite this reality, many have a pretty idealistic image of the type of human Jesus became. I want to invite us to consider this as the foundation for our understanding of healing, rather than cure. How might the incarnation inform our understanding of healing in a way which does not see disability as something to be rid of or cured?

**Diagram:** Image description – One circle labeled “IDEAL” with a perfect roundness sits next to a circle labeled “REAL” with squiggly edges. Across from these two is a Cross representing Jesus. An arrow pointing from the Cross to the circle labeled “REAL” is written.

In our medicalized and idealized notions and practices of healing (or CURING), we assume in the background that we are doing the work of Jesus because we are conforming people to the ideal human! But Jesus did not become the IDEAL human. He became the real human and embraced the fullness of the human condition.

*Therefore, when we practice and teach healing in a way which seeks to conform disabled people to the abled image, we are denying the reality of the work of God in Christ.*

What if instead, we took the reality that the Son of God became a real human to reconcile and redeem all things as the basis for healing?

**Q: How might this impact the way you understand healing in the Gospels?**

### 2. *JESUS THE RESTORER: DISABLED READERS AND HEALING IN THE GOSPELS*

Many disabled readers of the Gospels point to the social transformation that occurs in the healing narratives. After all, if Jesus didn't go around “curing” everyone, then what exactly what He doing when He healed people? For instance, while some of the narratives emphasize the great faith of the person who is healed (an emphasis which has often been used to abuse disabled people for not being cured), other passages do not mention the person's faith but instead focus on how the healing restores the person to a socially central status. In other words, many of the Gospel narratives of healing display Jesus setting right the social order, not so much removing the condition for removal's sake, but challenging the authorities who wished to exclude people based on these conditions. Some disabled authors, like Shane Clifton, have pointed to the ways their disability offers creative ways to show the importance of community and mutual belonging. For instance, some of the Gospel narratives emphasize the community of mutual care around the person healed (Mark 2: 1-12). Thus, if we connect Jesus' healing ministry with the doctrine of the incarnation (see diagram) and with the perspective of disability, we might begin to realize that healing means much more than medical cure.

## **EXPANDING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF HEALING:**

**Let's conclude by discussing** – what might it look like to understand healing from the perspective of disability and with the idea in mind that Jesus incarnates as a real human rather than an ideal one? What ways would this reshape our church to be a community of mutual belonging, and a community of healing?

**NEXT WEEK:** Next week, we will be discussing eschatology (the coming of the Kingdom, the “end,” etc.) and resurrection (Jesus’ resurrection, our resurrection, etc.).

## **RESOURCES USED:**

*Disability and the Way of Jesus: Holistic Healing in the Gospels and the Church* – Bethany McKinney Fox

*Disability: Living Into the Diversity of Christ’s Body* – Brian Brock

*My Body is Not a Prayer Request: Disability Justice in the Church* – Amy Kenny

*Crippled Grace: Disability, Virtue Ethics, and the Good Life* – Shane Clifton

*The Anticipatory Corpse: Medicine, Power, and the Care of the Dying* – Jeffrey Bishop

*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* – Michel Foucault

*Ethics* – Dietrich Bonhoeffer

This video of Amy Kenny on the top 5 things strangers say to her about being disabled:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=URPc3nMl15s>



This interview with Lamar Hardwick, known as “The Autism Pastor,” on autism in the church.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4vhIILxyESY>

