

SESSION FIVE: A HEALTHY BODY

INTRODUCTION: Over the course of the last four weeks, we have sought to understand disability in a more robust way, interrogate some of our theological assumptions around disability, and described a few possibilities for participating in God's work of a community of mutual belonging. Throughout our time together we have challenged our social notions of "normality," "health," and "healing," while asking what it might mean to embrace disability as an expression of the full variety of human life. Having discussed disability more broadly, the Gospel narratives around Jesus' healing ministry, healing itself, and resurrection, we end our time together on a more positive note by asking – "What is the healthy body?"

Today, we will discuss the healthy body. Likewise, we will leave time to discuss any remaining questions or concerns we might have. Throughout, we will reflect on Scripture as told by those with disabilities. Given that last week we discussed the Kingdom of God as an alternative social order, one which calls us to rearrange the social arrangements which oppress people with bodily and mental differences, we won't be discussing the healthy body – as in, the healthy individual body – rather we will be discussing the healthy corporate Body.

DEFINING HEALTH: THE WITNESS OF DISABILITY

Brian Brock, in reflecting on the life of his son Adam, who has Down Syndrome, is autistic, and non-verbal, describes how Adam has converted him from the tidy, mechanistic, and brutal world of modern Western capitalism to the recognition of a different world. He writes:

"Adam lives with incredible grace and without worry for the morrow. He is a friend with time, his body, and the people with whom he shares his days. In theological terms, it is clear that he is content to be a creature. Grateful for the medicine which has kept him alive, and which sometimes makes him more comfortable than he might otherwise have been, I am at the same time painfully aware of how his unselfconscious way of inhabiting time and place challenges the social conventions of his surrounding culture... In sickness and in health, the fullness of life for the Christian cannot be separated from the strange joy of togetherness in the visible body of Christ."

Brock concludes that *Adam* **"is the healthiest person I know."**

Brock uses the famous metaphor of the Body of Christ to locate health, as the Body of Christ reorients our attention away from ourselves (as we selfishly fight against the existence of others who are different in order to protect our way of life) and towards the redeemed attention and care to one another. Adam lives life against the grain of the social conventions and structures which rely on power and productivity. For Brock, the redemptive work of Christ – our acceptance of ourselves as creatures, is the true meaning of health. As he states, “God’s merciful address only comes to people caught up in lies about themselves.” Disability, some might argue, is a merciful address.

1 CORINTHIANS 12: THE HEALTHY BODY

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7gZrNdaQwGQ>

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul describes the functioning church, drawing a rich metaphor for the Christian community which has a redeemed attention to one another. There are three things I want to note about this passage:

- 1. The Spiritual Gifts are not individual but are activated in community.** In the larger portion of this passage, Paul emphasizes the energizing nature of the gifts in the context of the community of Christ. By emphasizing the gifts of the Spirit, Paul is emphasizing that the gifts are not possessed by individuals, but rather are purposed for the mutual care of one another. In other words, they only occur in the context of the other. In this way, the healthy Body is one which does not require a certain set of behaviors, capacities, or “gifts” for one to participate. Rather, one participates as God initiates mutual belonging. Yet, each part of the Body is different. This difference is not a weakness, but essential to its health (“the hand does not say to the eye...”).
- 2. The Body of Christ is a political body.** Interestingly, Paul is likely borrowing this metaphor from the Roman figure Livy. Livy uses the body example, but his is quite different. In Livy’s example, the body is controlled by a central strong organ which has power over all of the others. The weaker parts must rise to the occasion of the stronger. In contrast, the Body of Christ is one of redeemed attention to one another, what Brock calls “direct sympathetic communication between *all* the members.” In the context of disability, a healthy body is not one which functions according to the norm, but one which corporately resists the temptation to force that norm upon others, instead listening and caring mutually for one another.

- 3. The Body of Christ is diverse, but not merely inclusive.** Each body part is different and plays a role as the Spirit gives us life. We commonly read this passage assuming that the “stronger” parts of the body are to give *care for* the “weaker” parts – many people equate these with disabled people. However, I want to note here that Paul does not say the body parts which ARE weaker... he says the body parts which “*seem to be weaker*” (*asthenestera*). In other words, when discussing disability and the healthy Body of Christ, we are challenged to understand that God’s gathering of this community is actually a challenge to the assumption of normality. While the differences among us are real, the social norms, codes, etc. by which we judge one another’s bodies and minds are exposed by the Body of Christ to be a fiction – which is ultimately a broken communication. By gathering the Body of Christ, a new form of attention and communication is formed (refer back to point 2).

The healthy Body is one which acknowledges and embraces difference, or disability, and which pays close attention to the mutual gifts of its members, as God distributes these gifts via the Holy Spirit, for the care of one another.

A PSALM REFLECTION:

<https://vimeo.com/86925527>

QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION TIME:

RESOURCES:

- *Wondrously Wounded: Theology, Disability, and the Body of Christ* – Brian Brock
- *Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefulness, and Gentle Discipleship* – John Swinton
- *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God* – John Swinton
- *The Disabled God* – Nancy Eisland
- “The healthiest person I know? Disability and Health.” Daniel Rempel *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* (22.1).
- “The Witness of Disability in a Medicalized World.” Daniel Rempel. *Anabaptist Witness* 9, no.2 (October 2022): 43-61,