

## Nancy Eiesland's Reimagined Theology of Disability

In "Encountering the Disabled God," Nancy Eiesland discusses her personal experiences with her religious community and her own Christian faith as a disabled individual with a congenital bone defect. She uses the practice of receiving the Eucharist as an example of the inaccessibility and obstinate conventionality of many religious communities. However, Eiesland states that her own disability shapes her relationship with God, and she argues that the church must develop a more inclusive "liberating theology of disability" centered around the systemic social and political needs of community members. She applies the idea of a "disabled" Christ to emphasize her sense of spirituality through knowledge of oneself and to reimagine disability as a sign of wholeness and unity (Eiesland, 10-15).

Throughout "Encountering the Disabled God," Eiesland uses her own experiences within her religious community to point out some of the most glaring obstacles for disabled individuals. She is especially bothered by her church's attempts to "accommodate" those with disabilities. Although the church tries to include her by bringing the Eucharist over to her chair, Eiesland points out that this makes a traditionally community-based experience solitary. She claims that many people with disabilities view themselves as "trespassers in an able bodied dominion" when at church and that religious communities are often an unreachable "city on a hill." (Eiesland, 10)

Other authors have also pointed out their dissatisfaction with the ability for religious communities to accommodate those with disabilities. Shockingly in, "In the World to Come, God Will Sign," Margaret Wenig expressed her opinion that individuals in religious communities

might come to a service to seek refuge from the outside world and would rather not see disabled people around them (Wenig, 131). Furthermore, she states that when accommodations are made paternalism and pity tend to take over. Oftentimes religious communities act as though they are doing a favor by making their services and spaces accessible for everyone (Wenig, 132).

Eiesland furthers her argument about the church's historically present stereotypes toward those with disabilities by identifying key aspects of discrimination in theology and scripture. She claims that the bible often correlates physical disabilities with impurities and sin. For example, Leviticus 21:18-20 bans all those with striking physical disabilities from becoming a priest or entering the most holy places in the temple (Eiesland, 11). Eiesland also points out that traditional ableist theological views of disability can be especially hurtful and troublesome. She recalls being told "Don't worry about your suffering now - in heaven you will be made whole." (Eiesland, 12-13) Eiesland claims that her disability played a crucial role in her knowledge of herself and God, and the idea of losing this would feel like losing her own knowledge of who she is as a person.

Although the church holds some objectionable views on disability, Eiesland still feels as though her faith gives her a necessary spiritual fulfillment that she cannot grasp through the disabled rights movements in which she participates (Eiesland, 13). However, she is not content with enduring the current state of her religious community. Instead, Eiesland argues that developing a "liberating theology of disability" would systematically change the way the church both looks at and treats those with disabilities. She points out that the first step in developing this new narrative is to acknowledge the difference between the charity work that the church has

adopted in the past and focusing the necessary systemic social and political needs of those with disabilities (Eiesland, 14-15).

Eiesland constructs this theology based on her epiphany of the wounded, resurrected Christ as a “disabled God.” She states that by embracing a view of a disabled savior, “disability not only does not contradict the human divine integrity, it becomes a new model for wholeness and a symbol for solidarity.” (Eiesland, 14-15) Her model rejects the same concept of disability as a drawback resulting from sin or incompleteness that she has despised her entire life. When Christ is seen as a survivor that embodies a necessary interdependence, she claims that the forced individualism of ableism crumbles, and those with disabilities are able to actually participate through their impairments. This idea of active participation rejects the paternalistic mentality that “in heaven you will be made whole.” (Eiesland, 12-13) This new liberating theology allows Eiesland to know not only herself but also to better her relationship with God through her disability (Eiesland, 15).

Other authors have also stated their connection with spirituality through their disabilities and “disabled” figures in scripture. In her plenary address titled “God on Wheels,” Julia Watts Belser uses Ezekiel’s vision of God descending in a wheeled chariot to connect with her experiences in her own chair and to link her disability with her spirituality (Belser, 4). She describes her own connection with religion and its interconnectedness to her wheelchair stating, “This is how the Holy moves through me, in the intricate interplay of muscle and spin, the exhilarating physicality of body and wheel.” (Belser, 5) This directly connects to Eiesland’s theology of disability and the fundamental idea that a relationship with God stems from knowledge of self that counters the historical ableism present in many religious institutions.

Margaret Wenig also emphasizes the importance of spirituality through one's own disabilities and countering common attitudinal barriers. She recalls a story about a teacher telling a deaf student that in the afterlife she will be able to hear. The student responds by saying "No...In the World to Come, God Will Sign." (Wenig, 133) Although Wenig uses this example to highlight the inaccessibility of religious spaces and society, it also serves the same role as Eiesland and Belser's expansions of their spirituality through their disabilities. Similar to the way Eiesland rejects the idea that she will walk in heaven, this student refuses the idea that God would take away a defining part of her identity as a person (her deafness). Instead, she dreams of a world in which access barriers (other's inability to sign) were no longer in the way of her everyday life (Wenig, 133). A "liberating theology" as explained by Eiesland would not force this student to practice in spite of her disability but would allow her to discover her own spirituality through her deafness. Instead, this new way of thinking about disability and God rejects the current patronizing attitudes of many religious institutions.

In "Encountering the Disabled God," Nancy Eiesland refutes the traditional second-class status of individuals with disabilities in the Church and develops her own "liberating theology of disability" based off of a relatable image of God and her own experiences with spirituality as an individual with a congenital bone defect (Eiesland, 10-15). Julia Watts Belser and Margaret Wenig also associate spirituality with an approachable God and one's own knowledge of themselves as individuals with disabilities. Eiesland states that a restructuring of power dynamics in the church will not only foster community and tear down the current standard of unattainable individualism but also allow people to have a deeper connection with God based off of their own

identity. Thus, disability no longer becomes a manifestation of sin and inferiority but is transformed to a sign of wholeness (Eiesland, 15).