

**Boston College**  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY  
**Continuing Education Encore Events**

**Transcript of**  
**“More than Elevators: Physical Disability and the Church”**  
**Part 2 of 2**

**presented on March 1, 2013**  
**by Dr. Debbie Creamer**

**Melinda Brown Donovan:** And now I'd like to invite back our presenter, Debbie Creamer.  
[applause]

**Dr. Creamer:**

Thanks. I had fun meeting a lot of you during the coffee break, and there's a part of me that just wants to sit down now and go back into conversation. I hope that the sense of what I gave during the first hour is helpful to you in the sorts of ministries and work that you're already doing. Part of my sense, just by trying on those definitions—and I know I took a little while talking through them—is it gives us space to have different conversations on what we've already been having.

So if, for example... So my church has got an accessibility committee. It's a committee that meets once a month and is really thoughtful about ways to do inclusion. And one of the things that I try to do with them once a year or so is to say, when we're talking about including people with disabilities or we're talking about ministry to or with people with disabilities, what do we mean? And they roll their eyes, and they're like, okay, you're the academic in the room. We do the work. Go away. Oh, wait, streaming video, they're all going to see this, aren't they? [laughter]

But part of my sense is, if we're doing that sense of ministry to people with disabilities as the people that we feel sorry for, that's one lens. If we're doing it for the people who have functional difference, that's another lens. If we're doing it for a group that's an excluded minority group, that's another lens. And if we're doing it as part of the connection to who we all are as community, that's yet another lens.

And I think all of those lenses are helpful, but that that can be a useful question to ask and to be constantly interrogating ourselves about. When we're thinking about this, what are we thinking? And what would it mean to try on something a little bit different?

What I want to do in this session, as I previewed at the beginning, is not just talk about disability in a general sense but to talk about it really in terms of Christian community. And as I do these talks in other places, I think this is a similar conversation that you could have in other religious or value-based settings. So I'm going to be drawing specifically on Christian resources, but you could imagine having a similar sort of conversation drawing on text from the Judaic tradition or from Islam. You could imagine it in terms of other faith communities, or even value groups.

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What I want to do is think about how the resources of the tradition are both helpful and not helpful to us, and how they give us imaginative possibilities moving forward. And I promise I'll save some time for conversation at the end, because that's really the most fun part for me.

And this beginning part, many of you could probably do this story as well as I can. When I walk into settings that are Christian-based and want to have this conversation, I start by saying, "What do we see when we look at religion with an awareness of disability, or what do we see when we put Christianity and disability together?"

And the main thing that I want people to take away when I ask that kind of question is that it's mixed. There are ways and moments in which you can tell the story that say Christianity has been awesome for people with disabilities. There are ways in which you can tell that story of Christianity has been horrible for people with disabilities.

And I think it's useful to name both of those, and to name those not just in contemporary memory practices. So I could actually pause us for a minute. I'm not going to, but I could, and ask you to turn to your neighbor and say tell the best and worst story of how your church has engaged people with disabilities, or you, if you're a person with a disability. If we have time, I might come back to that, because it's always a little interesting to do.

But I want to name that as not just being within our individual memories but as being invested in the whole tradition. So the history of the Christian tradition around disability is one that's messy and one that's complicated and one that can be told a variety of different ways.

Part of that is, if you read the ancient texts or early sermons and commentaries in the Christian tradition, you get a sense that disability then meant something different than disability now. So disability then was often a marker of something bigger, so based on the moral understanding, but even more so, because medical understandings or understandings of the body were very different 1,000 or 2,000 years ago than they are today. Even understandings of what the individual is, so the way you think of yourself as a person, it's very different than it was 1,000 or 2,000 years ago today.

And most of the things that we have that seem to have been talking about disability weren't really talking about people with disabilities at all. They were telling bigger stories. So in the book *Disability in the Christian Tradition*, which was back there, I did a chapter on John Calvin and what John Calvin had to say about disability. And at my school, it's a joke, because I'm not a Calvin scholar and I hated this writing project, in part because I took it on thinking John Calvin was just going to be horrible about people with disabilities. I was going to write five pages of how horrible he was and how useless he is. I'm not Presbyterian, thank goodness, so I could get away with that. And then I'd be done.

And what I found from reading his works, which I think are true if you read anybody's, if you read encyclicals or you read early Church Fathers, if you read anything else, often, when disability language shows up, it's not about disability at all. So it's about who's in and out of the community or what the signs are of God's favor or metaphors for who we are as a

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community and a body together. So you can't just go look for the word blind or the word lame in old texts and imagine it's the same sort of thing as it is today.

At the same time, part of the deal with Christian community is we do inherit those texts and we do inherit those hymns and we do inherit those old stories, so they pop up. And those of us who are advocates often find ourselves in the position of having to either acknowledge or frame or work alongside that. So it's really easy to find good and bad sound bites. And when people engage the tradition, I'm encouraging them to do more than just the sound bites, but to recognize that those sound bites still come forward. Right?

So we can look in the Bible, for example, and see moments. I'll talk about Jesus a little bit more in a little bit but, we can see the great banquet and invite the lame and the blind and the crippled. We could use that as a catchphrase or a slogan. Or I know a couple churches who've done that as t-shirt logos for their accessibility communities, you know, Jesus said invite, right?

You can play with stories. So Paul talked about the thorn in his side and this impairment that made his ministry more difficult. You can go back and try to reclaim that from a disability perspective and say, ah, even Paul was a person with a disability, one of the early folks in terms of thinking of Christian mission and evangelism. And you can make other kinds of stories. But I'm not a historian. I'm not going to do all the history work, but just to say that it's really complicated and messy. So if we're talking about what Christianity thinks about the body or about disability, that's also really complicated and messy.

More recently, and this again could be within our generational memory or the folks from a generation before us, if we tell those stories, the legacy of the church is really messy too. So as we mentioned in the first part, churches have big challenges with architecture, so buildings that are 100 years old or even buildings that are 50 years old often have really big architectural challenges for people with mobility differences.

And our congregations and worshipping communities more broadly haven't been awfully thoughtful about people with sensory difference or other kinds of difference. For me, pews are one of the most uncomfortable places to sit of anything in the entire world. Or for folks with auditory differences, understanding a sermon or even hearing the words of the Mass can be really complicated and is often not thought through. It's just assumed that you're going to adapt to it. So there's been that kind of level of lack of inclusion.

And those of you who are advocates know that religious communities fought to be exempted from the Americans with Disabilities Act. So there's a legacy of, that even when the broader society was attending to issues of disability a minority experience or as a civil right, the religious community more broadly, in some pretty public, and sort of embarrassingly so, ways went out of their way to not step into that level of inclusion.

And that's a messy and complicated story and has to do with separation of church and state, has to do with the costs that it would be for small congregations to comply with something like the Americans with Disabilities Act. But it's one of the ways in which those

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who are outside of church will often look at Christianity or church communities as being exclusive of people with disabilities, because we quite literally were for a while.

The last 20 years have seen a significant amount of welcome in communities in terms of access for people with disabilities and particularly, for me, people with physical difference. And as I saw many of you or talked with many of you during the coffee break, I got stories from you of the ministries that you're doing and the work you're doing.

And I think that that's been a really wonderful thing, and I'm excited when another 20 years go by to see the next level of steps and that even conversations like this might become less important at that point because of the sorts of access, and the sorts of nice legacies, or the communities that have engaged the elevator and next can think about engaging other sorts of access points. And that's work that we do for ourselves and for future generations, so it's really exciting.

But still churches have been slower to change than, say, shopping malls. And if you're a person in a wheelchair or a person with a mobility difference, you're going to find less access, most likely, at your church than you are at any other place that you go during the week. Even if the sanctuary has become accessible, for example, to people with wheelchairs, chances are good that parts of the building aren't. And the two parts that I often find to be not welcoming are the youth room and the choir loft.

So this is striking to me in terms of, when we think about access, many communities will think about, for a person with a wheelchair or a mobility difference in particular, think about getting them into the sanctuary but not think about getting them into the life of the congregation more fully, until that 16-year old has a ski accident in Colorado, at least, and uses a wheelchair. And then we have to move the youth group, or someone who's already a member of the choir has a mobility difference, and so then we think about putting the choir loft somewhere differently, or we need to think about the pulpit.

And for me, as I'm working with students who are pursuing ordination who have a variety of physical differences, I have to work with them in terms of how they can think of their congregational setting not just being accessible for someone who's coming in and kind of consuming the religious experience but who's taking a leadership role. And you might think of this in terms of your congregation when you go back home – to look physically at the space and to say not just can the person get in, but where can they go and where can they not go?

It reminds me there's a slogan within the disability rights movement that says, "If we can't go, we won't come," meaning, if we can't use the restroom in the place where you are, we're not going to come to your place at all. And restrooms are also, again because churches have fought for exemption from the ADA, one of the places that often don't have access. And if your restroom isn't accessible, I don't want to go places where I can't find a restroom anyhow. You all can imagine the rest of that.

So we have, in my kind of Protestant setting, a lot of times with those old wood pews that are all laid out. If a church has done the work to make a cutout for a wheelchair, it's often

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the first pew and the last pew. Most of my, Methodist, everybody sits right in the middle. Nobody sits in the front. And only the teenagers tend to be in the back. But if I were coming in in a wheelchair, I'd want to choose where I would be for the worship service, or at least be aware that other folks are being able to make a choice, and what does it mean that I can't?

Or, again, as I said, the pulpit area is often not accessible. So if someone's going to be a liturgist or if someone's going to participate with the elements or something else, to think about not just whether that's accessible, but what message is it sending to your community, if the only place of access is to come in and be a listener and not to be a leader or to be a full member of the community?

The National Organization of Disability does statistics about all sorts of things related to disability. And one of the things that they find over and over is not only are people with disabilities often in a lower income group, often have less access to health care, often have challenges to employment, but they also often are less active in religious communities than folks without disabilities.

And you could imagine that from a couple different angles. One would be, as a person with a disability, what does the local congregation or community have to offer me? Or is it worth engaging the ways in which I might not feel welcome to go? And the other is architectural and other kinds of access. Maybe I would be a welcome participant if I was welcomed. Maybe I would like to be a member of this community if I could get in and if I could use all the space, and if people wouldn't stare at me, and if, when we pass the peace, someone actually comes and greets me. All of those sorts of pieces, I think, are really important when we think about the particular kinds of limitations that happen in space.

And so I guess one of the homework assignments I would do is, as you go back into your congregation or other community, to try on some of the lenses of different kinds of physical difference, and just imagine what spaces and attitudes are like in your setting and how that might be engaged differently as a way of making more access.

So as I said, access is one piece of it, and some congregations are fantastic with access. Some have been really thoughtful about it as they do renovations or as they do other kinds of projects. Some have been really horrible. So I have students again pursuing ordination who will do an internship. And people will say, well, you can't be our minister because you only have one hand or you can't be our leader because you're in a wheelchair and that just doesn't make sense, or we've never heard of a blind pastor, how would that work? And so there's the attitude space as well as the architectural space.

And there are the real horror stories I hear, for example, parents who, a friend of mine, parents, they have a child with autism. And they were asked not to come back to worship because the child was perceived as being disruptive. Or I attended a church for a while that was near a group home of a community of adults with Down syndrome. Same sort of thing. They would come in, they loved to sit in the front pew. If the pastor asked a question that was sort of a hypothetical question and the rest of us know it's just a hypothetical question,

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they'd answer. Right? Or they would not like to sit still for an hour. They liked to move their bodies.

And I remember working with this congregation that, on the one hand, really had the commitment to being inclusive and, on the other hand, folks were feeling this is really disruptive of their own worship experience to have a message or homily that was being disrupted, or to have the physical movement when other folks were wanting a quiet place of worship. And really facing that kind of difficulty, but sometimes facing it in ways that weren't our best selves, so to say wouldn't you all be happier at some other church? Or you can come to the contemporary service but not the traditional one, or whatever.

So churches have been their best selves and their worst selves, I guess, is really the place I want to leave that, with the sense that sometimes churches are making it better and sometimes churches are making it worse. And while we're all human and are not going to be perfect as we engage these, it's worth thinking about.

I think what I want to do is skip ahead a little bit, communities you all are so active in a lot of these ministries and work that I think I don't need to unpack the story of what's going on in churches much more. And so I want to jump to the part that I think is the most fun, which is thinking about God. I'm a theologian by training. And as an academic theologian, I have this really fun flexibility of coming in and trying things on and then leaving.

So what I want to do for maybe 20 minutes, we'll see how it goes, is really talk about how it is not just the practices that we do in a congregation, but the beliefs and framings underneath it. Because I can go into a congregation and say, "You really should be inclusive of people with disabilities and here's what we should do." And some people will get on board with that, because they feel like they ought to. Some people will get on board with that because they're committed and engaged or they have a similar experience. But some people will still feel like they're doing it as this kind of other thing or as something that's just not quite natural or that's not quite right.

It reminds me of the whole sense of political correctness, I guess. We do things sometimes because we think we should do certain things. But until we're able to look at the deeper questions and uncertainties and images and meanings underneath, it's hard to make real lasting change.

So again, with the elevator, I could go into a congregation that doesn't have an elevator but has a lot of stairs and give them statistics. And I could tell first-person stories that'll motivate or manipulate them for a minute. And I can explain why this will be good for church growth or whatever. But until I've really been able to touch that sense of the value of people with disabilities or the value of God's Creation or something deeper, it's not going to make ongoing lasting change, and then it becomes just a practice that we do because we think we ought to rather than part of genuinely living together. And as a theologian, my sense is one of the ways of thinking of making that deep down change is to talk about the values that underpin the things that we do. Okay?

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So that's where I'm going to jump right now, is to talk about God, because my sense is that a lot of our actions about disability, our engagement about disability in the church and in wider society come from or are connected to those understandings of God. And as somebody who gets to come in just for a moment, I'm going to ask you to try on and to play with images of God with me for a minute.

I wouldn't ever presume to stand up here and tell you who God is or what God is like, particularly with a camera, but even just with human living people here, because I don't have different or more access to God than anybody else. And my sense is that God is always beyond our understanding and God is not the sort of thing anybody should ever stand up at the podium and say this is what God is, thanks, bye-bye. But I do think it's helpful to try on different images of God.

In part, again this is part of the heritage of our tradition. So if you read Scripture or if you look at the history of sermons within our tradition, it's common for us to try on lots of different images of God. So in the Bible, there's lots of different stories about God that portray God in very different ways. So if I imagine the stories in the Bible were actually about a close friend of mine, you would have no clue who this friend really is because I would have given you so many different sides of this friend. Right?

That's my sense of how we tell stories of God as a Christian community too is we tell lots of different sides or lots of different pieces as a way to try to capture a larger thing but also as a way to try to engage us in different sorts of ways. So that's my whole preface to say don't get scared if I start to tell you things about God right now, communities I'm just wanting to try on those pieces, and then to try them on backwards to say, if we did imagine God that way, what difference would it make?

So I'm a bit of a practical theologian that way, that I want to start with a practice and I want to think about an idea and take it back to the practice, take it back to the idea and keep going around with that. So that's also my sense of what I'm doing here is not just telling you something to tell you it, but to say my sense is that, when we engage people with disabilities, we often do that with bias or we do that with gut feelings that are messy or we do that with ideals and values. And what happens if we look at those ideals and values, and then if we look again at disability and then we look again at those ideals? So that's what I'm going to have us do a little bit.

So I think the first thing I want to do is. . . So oftentimes, in my community, what I do is start off by dismissing an idea of the omni-God. And I'm going to ask you to allow me that here. I guess the last disclaimer I want to give before I actually do something other than just give a lot of disclaimers—talking about God is anxiety provoking, right, for me, anyhow—is to say that we all engage God in different ways.

And so I hope nobody will be offended by anything I say or don't say about God in the next few minutes, because again, you have different insights than I do and you have different beliefs than I do. And even if I'm talking within a small community that I know really well, my sense is, as soon as I start talking about God, I'm going to offend somebody. And so I

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ask for your graciousness to just walk with me or ride with me through this next little bit and try on and see how it feels.

My sense is, as a starting place, with images of God around disability is that one of the places where we often will get hung up or one of the places that sometimes becomes unhelpful is when we have a really narrow sense of God as someone who is all the omnis: so omnipotent, omniscient, omni-everything. So God can see everything. God can do everything. God knows everything. God, in this caricature version, is kind of like the homecoming king, or queen, maybe, super smart, super athletic, super beautiful, no limits, can do everything.

That to me, that caricatured version of an all-powerful God, can sometimes become really destructive for people with disabilities. And let me tell you that in a couple different angles. And one of the ways that it can become difficult is, if I imagine God in that very caricatured way, God becomes the homecoming king or queen, and then the further I am from that, the further I am from God. So if I imagine God as all powerful, so God can do anything God chooses to do, and I'm not only a human person but I'm a human person with specific functional limitations or impairments, the more impaired I am, in a way, the further I am from God. So that can become a really damaging way of telling the story.

For me in my tradition, I'll talk about that sometimes in terms of gender language around God. That if we use a very specific narrow idea of God as almost literally male, then in a way men are closer to God or more like God than women are. And then I can go back and unpack that and say gender is messier than that and what we talk about with God is messier than that, but there's a way in which that story or that gut-level theme will sometimes play through. And that same thing can happen with disability.

And I'll show you that in a second when we talk about God and disability, but if you just imagine for a moment that, if you think of God and the main thing you think of God is this really narrow sense of physically able or able, no limitations, then the further away from that you are, the further you might feel from God.

The other way in which that caricatured version can be difficult or damaging, is if you have the idea that God plans and does everything for a reason. And you've experienced disability, particularly as something that's an experience of suffering or something that's unwanted, you're left with the story and no way to engage the story that says God did this to you for a reason. And again, there's ways in which to make that more nuanced and complicated, but there's also ways in which that story can become very painful to people.

And so you hear parents in particular, but also people with disabilities, really struggling with that sense of why did God do this to me? I'd kind of like to be angry at God about this, but I'm also not supposed to be angry about God. And if God is the one who can point God's finger and make something happen, I don't want to piss God off either. Right? Or God must know better than I do, so I'll just trust God for this. Or as part of God's big plan, I've got a piece that I'm supposed to follow through and do, so God's given me this disability for a reason. There's something I'm supposed to figure out and do as part of it.



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For me, the narrow thread of that story that becomes very cause and effect can be dangerous, particularly when it's isolated from everything else. So for some folks, that kind of worldview where God does everything, makes a whole lot of sense and is the way that they have meaning and significance in the world. I get nervous when that gets applied unequally to disability. So for someone for whom that's their worldview and God has a big plan for everything—and that includes how good the coffee was today and it also includes my experience with disability—that's kind of a coherent sense. Or that God has a sense of the trajectory for my whole life and disability fits into that—that can make a lot of sense.

In our culture, and particularly the way the media picks this up, but also sometimes in people's individual lives, that gets disconnected, so the only cause-and-effect piece is the disability piece or the suffering piece or the trauma piece. And so I'll nudge people who have that worldview to ask about the consistency and the integrity: communities if you're going to believe God is doing this for a reason, I hope you can also believe that God is doing other things for reasons. Or if you believe God gives disability as part of God's plan, I hope you'll also be able to believe that God gives other life experiences as part of God's plan.

And at the very least, I hope that folks won't project that onto other people who might be believing different things or might have different ways of making sense of the world. And I hope that, within the messiness and complexity of life, we'll hear both the life-givingness or an idea of a God that's that big but also some of the risk that that can carry for a person who experiences really any kind of trauma or loss and disability, insofar as that's trauma or loss.

So that's a messy legacy. That's a difficult legacy for folks. For whom that kind of God makes sense, that's going to be a hard thing to wrestle with. It can be a good thing to wrestle with. It can be a hard thing to wrestle with. Because of my sense of the reading of the Christian tradition, though, I know that's not the only story of God that gets told. So I'd like to offer some of these other stories as companions or alternatives, again as things to just try on as a way of playing with the story of God. And as I said, I really do mean play.

So the first one isn't mine. Actually none of these are mine. I believe in collaborative learning, so I steal from other people as much as possible. And I believe I can't have the only idea of God so. . . And it's easier to tell you what these other people think about God than me, right? So the first one many of you might already know, Nancy Eiesland, who wrote the book *The Disabled God*. How many of you are already familiar with that text? Okay, so that's maybe a quarter of the room, I think.

Nancy's proposal—this came out in 1994, so this gives you a sense of how recent a lot of these conversations are. Nancy was a person with a physical impairment who is a professor at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta. And at the time that she started engaging this, she was a student, so she was doing an internship placement as a chaplain. And as a person with a disability, she was really struggling with this idea of God as all powerful who caused her disability for a reason, and that that was the first way many people engaged her. "Oh, God did this to you. Oh, God did this to you."

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And she was having not a whole lot of luck, both turning that back, “Well, and God gave you brown and God gave you a full head of hair and whatever.” That wasn’t working consistently. And she was personally having trouble connecting to this God: that this was the God that she wanted to feel as loving and compassionate but she was also carrying around this constant sense of the, she called it “the buff God,” so the really athletic, muscular God who points in the sky and causes disability for certain people. And there was just this big disconnect for her.

And she was working with a group of vets who were wheelchair users, and they were struggling with this idea of what is the God that can connect to us? And one of the folks there at the rehab center said, “Well, if God was in a sip-puff chair, then God would understand what life is like for us.” That idea of God in a sip-puff chair. First off, if you know what a sip-puff chair is, it’s one of the wheelchairs that’s for folks who have very limited mobility and so they control most of its functioning through a straw that they blow and suck on in order to move.

So at one level, this is an image of a person who experiences very significant physical impairment. This is somebody who’s not going to be moving their hands and limbs around a whole lot in order to make sense of the world. They’re blowing and sucking on a straw. So from one level of judgment, you see this as a person who’s significantly impaired. On the other level, if you’ve encountered someone who uses a sip-puff, effectively, at least for me, I have to watch out, because they’re going to run over my toes. They have power that I don’t have. They have speed that I don’t have. They have mobility that I don’t have because they’ve got this piece of technology that helps them be strong and powerful.

So the image of God in a sip-puff chair, for her, was an image that was at once vulnerable and powerful. So this is an image of limitation but it’s also an image of great power. And it’s an image of a God who engages the world complexly. So it’s a God who maybe can’t do everything that God chooses but a God who can also do a lot.

For her and for the folks in this community, it was a helpful image as an alternative to that buff Michelangelo God, because this was a God that was in some ways more like them, but as they paused in their Bible study and talked about it, was also a God that’s somewhat resonant with the Christian tradition. So for example, it gives us that idea of Paul with his thorn being really successful in ministry but still engaging physical limitations.

Or, as I’ve played with this in communities, we’ve realized and we’ve talked about the story of Jesus that we have after the Resurrection is a story of someone who still had scars. We don’t know a whole lot about Jesus after the Resurrection, or there’s not a whole lot of text that describes Jesus after the Resurrection. We don’t have texts that say whether his hair was long or short or whether he was looking like he’d been in the sun too much or whether it was looking like he was well fed. But we do have texts that say he had scars. And not only did he have scars, but he didn’t have a taboo about the scars. He invited people to come and touch the scars.

And again, I’m not a Bible scholar, so I’m not trying to do much more with that than play with that imaginative possibility of, within the Christian tradition, we have a story of a God

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or of the Son of God who experienced impairment in specific sorts of ways, experienced a body that was somewhat different than that normal or standard body. And so the idea of a God with disability shouldn't be completely foreign or stomach-turning to us. It's part of our tradition.

Part of what she did with that story too, with the idea of the disabled God, I think she did two things. One is she gave an image that fits with experiences of disability. And we know there's always danger in that, right? There's danger in imagining God in our own image. And so we want to always be careful when we do that, communities then God always looks like us and likes the people we like and does the sorts of things we care about.

But on the other hand, as you think about it, there's also a way in which imagining God as having some connection to us can be really helpful. The story of Genesis, that we're created in the image of God, gives us a sense of access to God that we might not have if there wasn't any overlap and connection. And so at the very least, the idea of trying on the image of a God with disability can be empowering for people with disabilities.

It also betrays some of our assumptions against disability. So when I walk into adult ed groups in particular, and I mention this idea of the disabled God, a lot of times the first response people have is, "God can't be disabled." That's just wrong. God is powerful. God's not disabled. God is good. God's not disabled. God is strong. God's not disabled. And the adjectives that go against the word disability tell us something about what people think about God, but tell us more about what we are thinking about disability.

So if you take that image in—I mean, first off, be careful with it, because people really will be like, "God is not disabled." But I think that that's an interesting access point, both as we think about God but more about what we think about our values with disability.

Let me talk about maybe four or five, four other images that fit in, I think, even more neatly with the Christian tradition, and can become another way of telling stories of God alongside those other stories. So just again, as we talk of stories of God as not just father or parent but also as creator or potter or gardener or other sorts of things, these are other stories, I think, that we can tell alongside. And they fit a little bit with the different models, and particularly these first couple.

So the first one I want to tell you about is the story of the Accessible God or the Advocate God. This comes very much from the idea of disability as a minority experience or a social experience, and particularly that sense that people with disabilities are often excluded or left outside of congregations and communities, but also employment and family life and other sorts of things.

The idea here then, is that God recognizes the exclusion of folks and invites those folks in; and not just invites in terms of, "come on in," but goes and stands with the people who are outside, or sits with or rolls with the people who are outside and is a strong advocate for people who are left outside. The way this story gets told, and I steal some of this from Jennie Weiss Block's book *Copious Hosting*, which is a little bit old now but is a nice image, particularly talking about Jesus and that Jesus's ministry, for her, was all about inclusion.

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Obviously there's lots of ways to read the Gospel stories of Jesus, but one way that she reads it is to say, a lot of Jesus's ministry was about inclusion, that he welcomed all people, regardless of gender, regardless of their nationality, regardless of their vocation. The tax collector was just as welcome as the scribe, right, regardless of past life experience. And she tells that story of Jesus as being this radically inclusive person, who then—the catchphrase here—then does become the invite to the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind if you're throwing a banquet.

She also says, as part of this, that Jesus challenged authority wherever he went. So if somebody said, "Yeah, no, we don't want that person," or "No, you can't do that here," Jesus was like, "Uh-huh." You're supposed to laugh when I say, "Jesus said, 'Uh-huh,'" [laughter]. That Jesus was radically inclusive, right, so and Jesus would speak against those who were making exclusive spaces. Do you all say, "Jesus uh-huh" in your congregations? That's pretty cool if, yeah, no. [laughter] Just, we'll take that one out for next time.

But, so Jesus radically challenged authority and Jesus said, "Follow me," without first asking what it was about your life that might impede your ability to come, that what it might be, what other kinds of limitations you had, Jesus was just like, okay, you follow me. You follow me. You follow me. So in those ways, both in terms of countering authority or common wisdom and also in Jesus's way of reaching out to people, he was radically inclusive. And Jennie tells this story as a way of thinking of God more broadly as being one who's radically inclusive, both welcoming in and being one who then will act against those who are being exclusive.

And another image that came up in one of these conversations as I was talking with folks about this image was from Isaiah 40, the story that "every valley will be lifted up, every mountain will be made low." You could take that and play with that as a slogan for accessibility. Every staircase will be leveled off. Every elevator will give you every access to every part of the building. And again, it's not saying this is God who is, but these are images we have of God that we don't play with or pull out. So that's the Accessible God or the Advocate God.

A second one comes from Kathy Black's book *Healing Homiletic*, which by the way I think is a really wonderful book, both because it talks about how to preach texts that have to do with disability, and it does a nice job of playing with the history of Christianity and religion and disability and also engagements for possibilities today.

So what Kathy does is talk about God as the Interdependent God, or at very least, the God who values interdependence in us. And she, too, goes back to stories of Jesus. And she says, part of what we see when we look at Jesus's ministry is not a solo person who is totally independent and detached from everybody else and a well-made American man kind of image but, rather, was somebody who lived in community intentionally.

So when Jesus traveled, Jesus called other people to him. Jesus allowed other people to feed him and to meet his basic needs. He worked with other people in a way that was a clear sense that his ministry wasn't just about what he would say but what he could enable other people to say, and depending on how you read some of the stories, where Jesus was

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even challenged by others and then would change his story or change his activities as a part of that. And whether that's that he fell asleep on the boat and they woke him up, or he would tell folks "No, I'm not actually here for you," and they would say, "Yes, you are," that Jesus was one who was interdependent, so he was engaged in community.

And she says church then can be the continuation of that community, so a place that really values interdependence and really values community, which is something that's often highlighted by disability. So those of us who live with physical impairment often will be more obvious to others that we need help, that we need a wheelchair or a cane to get around, or that we need the large-print hymnal. But what that really betrays is the sense that we're all interdependent.

So when I'm trying to explain that to some of my students, I'll ask, "How many of you knitted the clothes that you're wearing today?" Or, "How many of you cooked the food and raised the food and did all the work with the food this morning that you've eaten?" Or, "Who here helped build this building that we're in right now?" Well, no, we're all interdependent all the time, but we sometimes pretend that we're not.

And with Kathy here, the image of God she gives and the stories of Jesus she tells are ways of reminding us that, whether we have a disability or not, we're always interdependent with each other, and God is interdependent with us. And even reading the history of the tradition, you can see ways in which, in the stories of the Christian texts at least, that it appears God might have changed God's mind along the way, or God had a plan and the people didn't follow it, and so God had to make a plan B and a plan C and a plan D, still again that sense of interdependence and community.

And even the story in Luke 5—it's often described as the Story of the Paralytic, so you know that one—so Jesus is speaking to a group. The building is so full that this person who is described as a paralytic can't get in. So his four friends come and take the roof off of the top of the building to lower the friend in. Kathy tells that story as not being a story of healing, *per se*, but as a story of interdependence.

So here are the friends working with the person who is described as paralytic to get into Jesus. And Jesus, then, recognizing that as a community activity; so again a story of interdependence or, at the very least, a story that our community, the folks who are gathering the early stories of Jesus, thought were important enough to tell. You could have just skipped to the end and said Jesus encountered a paralytic, healed him, the end. But part of the text of the tradition is, no, these other people came along and helped and were part of the story and part of the engagement.

The third one I don't have a good name for yet but I've been calling lately the Bold God or the No-Hang-Ups God. This came for me from a sense of a brochure that I got from the '70s, I think. And the front of the brochure says, "What do you say to a person with disability when you first meet them?" Or what do you say when you meet a person with disability? And you open up the brochure, and it says, "Hello." [laughter]

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So the idea is your first encounter with a person with a disability is as a person. And then the disability stuff might come in later, depending on how it's relevant or not. This image of God as the Bold God or the No-Hang-Ups God or maybe the Authentic God is a story of the God who then also engages each of us as people first, as ourselves first. And then, if we also have a disability or other impairment, if we've got other life complexities, if we've got other challenges, those things come about as part of relationship and community, but they don't come up first.

So in that same story that's often called the paralytic, the encounter that Jesus has with that person who's been brought in by his friends on a stretcher, Jesus's first response is, "Your sins are forgiven," which was often Jesus's first response with anybody, whether or not they had a disability. So the engagement here in this story is Jesus encountering this person not as a cripple, not as a pathetic Other, but as a person who has sins just like everybody else and needs them forgiven just like everybody else. And as the story goes on and Jesus gets challenged, then he says, okay, then go walk, and I can do that too. But his first engagement is with the person as a person.

So this is the idea of God who sees us, who engages us. The God of the Resurrection, who's not afraid to touch and be touched, so shatters those taboos that we often have with people with disabilities, and instead engages us truly as God With Us and not as a God who's three steps back and separated by judgment.

The last one is the one that comes out of my work with limits in particular. And this is the one I've usually been calling the Authentic God or the Limits God. And for this one, I draw both on Genesis 1, so that we're created in the image of God and we were seen as very good, and from John 1, the Word made flesh. If we all have limits, every single human being who has ever lived has limits. And if life moves us towards disability, what if God does too? What if God also has limits? This is a twist on the idea of the Disabled God, but it takes more broadly this idea that we all have limits. It's not about being disabled or abled. It's about that every human person has limits. And what if we imagine that God does too?

And again this is an unsettling thing, and it betrays many of our assumptions and feelings about limits. But if we can step aside from those for a moment. So if we go back to the idea of limits as being ordinary and unsurprising, and we let ourselves sit with them for a minute, what would it look like to imagine or play with the idea of a God with limits? If we don't look at the negatives, we start to see some of the positives, or even if we just hold the negatives to the side, we can see some of the positives.

And here are a few that I've played with. One is creativity. My sense is that creativity often comes out of limits. If you don't have limits, you don't actually have to be particularly creative. So if our wheelchair user is at the bottom of a staircase, chances are good that part of what's going to come out of that is some sort of creativity.

That creativity might be on the part of the person who's using the wheelchair, who then figures out some other way to get into the building. It could be on the part of the friends, who figure out some other way to get the person into the building, or that move the activity

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that would have been in the building out. It could be a bigger plan to break down the staircase altogether, or to put in a ramp or an elevator. It could be all sorts of other things, but it's a creativity that's going to come because there was a limit in the first place.

Chances are good that, just sitting there, nobody's going to be like, oh, the staircases are great, but let's change it anyhow. It's that experience of limit that really leads to that sort of creativity. And that's something we see in the Christian story. So again, as we look at the texts of our tradition, we see stories of God or of Jesus or of others who come up into something and hit a bump or hit a limit, and then they do come up with a plan B or they come up with a different way of doing something or something new is created out of it.

And there are lots of ways, I think, to pull out text to tell that story, but in general, that sense that creativity is something that I think is pretty fantastic. Creativity is a characteristic we see in the God of our tradition and that I would like to see in God. And that can be an experience that comes out of limits.

A second one, and closely related to that, is a sense of perseverance. So often, when we encounter limits, we then engage in perseverance. Again, without the limits, there's not really the need for perseverance. But if you are getting tired and so you need one more cup of coffee to keep going, you've encountered that limit of energy, but you're going to find a way to persevere. Or if you're at the bottom of the flight of stairs and trying to get in the room, one of the options is to wheel around and go somewhere else, but another is to persevere and to figure out some way to get into that community or to get into that.

Many times it's our experience with limits that then leads us to persevere into something. And again, perseverance is one of the stories that we hear about God and about Jesus in the Christian tradition: keeps going even when the people don't do what God had hoped the people would do, or keeps going even in the face of famine and drought, or keeps going even in the midst of difficulties. And that, to me, is something that we can imagine with the experience of limits connecting into perseverance.

A third for me is authenticity rather than grandiosity. So if you don't have limits, you can be grandiose. You can say, "I'm the most amazing whatever in the whole world. I can do everything. I can be perfect. I can have everything." But with the experience of limits, often causes us to be authentic, to say, "I would love to do that but I don't have the time," or "but my body won't let me," or "but I've got limited money."

And that then gives us space to be authentic with each other. It's often in those moments of authenticity where we're vulnerable with each other. And when we let that vulnerably out, that then we develop real, authentic relationships with each other. So I'm not going to genuinely connect with many folks until we've shared the sorts of limits, the sorts of authenticity that comes from that, and the vulnerability that comes from that. And my sense of the God of the Christian tradition is also one who has those levels of authenticity, or at least again that's something I'd like to project onto God and try on and see what difference that makes.

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The other two, kind of quick; one is complexity. So again, without limits, you don't need to be complex. But complexity comes from the experience of scarcity or it comes from the ability of not being able to do everything in a super neat and tidy and perfect sort of way; that it's what makes us not cartoon characters, what makes us genuine, kind of rough, sort of complicated, sort of messy people. And the God of our tradition is a God who's sort of complex and rough and messy and sometimes hard to grasp in those sorts of ways that overlap with ideas of limits.

And then the last for me is really a sense of hope. So if we don't have limits, we don't really have a need for hope. If we don't have the possibility of impossibility, we don't have the need for imagining possibility beyond that. It's in the face of limits that hope comes about, because otherwise we just know what we need to know or we have what we need to have. But limits give us hope. And again, my sense of the story of the tradition is one in which we can tell stories of hope that evoke God and evoke community and all sorts of other things.

And so I think, of all of those, those things that come out of limits that can be positive characteristics of limits or can be things that come from good out of limits, are characteristics that we can see in God. They're characteristics that we can see in the story of Jesus, whether that's post-Resurrection or throughout the ministry of his life.

So kind of to pull that all together—and then I'm going to switch to question and answer space, I think, because I don't want to just be the talker here—my sense is that the texts and traditions hold all sorts of different kinds of possibilities and they're things that we can draw on. So again, if I were preaching in a community or if I were leading a study on some of these, I wouldn't go in with the idea of, "let me just lay this out for you and give it to you," but this idea of trying on different resources from the tradition. The Christian tradition has got so many different wonderful stories and so many different ways of interpreting these stories. And I don't think we should be afraid of trying on new interpretations.

If we always have the kind of sense, at least that I did from Sunday school, that Jesus was like this magician doctor who healed people, that gives me one sense of Jesus. So then I'm going to think of a Jesus who's going to heal me or not, and then I have to deal with whether I'm healed or not healed in relation to Jesus. So when I was in high school, I was a member of a fellowship of Christian athletes. And I remember, on a retreat we went on, some people came to me and said, "We'd like to try a faith healing." And I was like, "Okay, great." And they did. And I didn't feel any different or better afterwards.

And I remember, and this is a high school memory, but I remember that sense of being ashamed that I didn't get healed, and feeling kind of bad for my friends, because they wanted to heal me and they didn't. And it wasn't because I didn't pray hard enough or they didn't pray good enough. And Jesus was a healer. And here I am not getting healed. So does that mean I'm far away from Jesus or I'm not worthy of Jesus or whatever?

And I tell that as a high school memory, because I think all of us have more complex senses of things as we become adults, but that still lingers. So if the only story you hear about



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Jesus is magician, medical healer and you're a person who might want healing, it's hard to think of a connection or a value space there. Or if you're a person who doesn't feel the need to be healed but the other people around you are thinking you ought to be healed, that too creates a disjuncture, especially if that's the only story that's getting told.

So to create communities where we tell other stories alongside those to say, yeah, sometimes Jesus did do physical healings in the stories of our tradition, and sometimes Jesus went and advocated for people's rights, and sometimes Jesus was aware of his own vulnerability and his need for other people and lived in community intentionally for that. And yeah, sometimes God had mood swings, or sometimes God got really angry or sometimes God wanted to do things that then didn't happen. And those are other stories that I think we can tell with those stories that make space for conversation and make space for alternatives, and then make space for practice.

So again, if the only story I'm telling is a story of God who causes and doesn't cause things, and of Jesus who heals and doesn't heal things, that gives limited access points for us in terms of how we make sense of our own ministries. So then I have to be a person who either heals or who enables. If I have other stories, then I have other possibilities too.

So I think that's where I really want to leave us is that sense: both with my sense of definitions from the first part of the presentation and my sense of these images from the other. Not so much to say what's right and what's wrong, but to try on some of these different ones and see if they give us different space for possibility. I think trying on the different definitions of disability and trying on different images of God give us ways, then, to look at what we're doing differently, so we can be more attentive, we can be more critical in a good way, to say, "Okay, I'm doing this. What value sense is along with this or what assumption is with this? And then might I try different values or different assumptions?"

And as I said, you all do the hard work of putting that into practice, but my sense is, by asking good questions and being more aware, it gives you all some more possibilities for what you might do and ways in which you might act. Let me stop there. Thank you.  
[applause]

So I think we've got about half an hour. Again, if folks need to get up and move, that's great. We have a microphone that'll come around. And I'll ask if you'll wait until you get the microphone to ask your question or make your comment. And here I would invite general comments and stories, wisdom from the group as well as specific questions that relate to the presentation.

**Participant:** My first comment is about John 9 and the great value for parents who find their child has been born with or acquired a disability, with the response of Jesus: "Neither this man nor his parents have sinned."

But I want to speak next about the paralytic. Two things are particularly striking to me. One is that, here's this paralytic who has four friends. Now that is rare. And I think the biggest miracle was that, by the friends lowering the man through the roof, the crowd was forced to make room for them, because they had first tried to approach at ground level and

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the crowd refused to make room for this person with a disability. And that happens. We know that happens. It happens all the time. But when he was let down through the roof, they were forced to make room for him. And after he had been healed, they made room for him to leave, in obedience to Jesus. And so that was a miracle. To get that stubborn crowd to let him into their midst and then to let him leave, that really was a miracle.

And a third thing is that I think a lot of people my generation, I'm in my sixties, went to school obviously before the ADA. There were very few students with obvious disabilities, particularly with mobility problems, in the public schools. And we were implicitly taught by this segregation that we did not have to make accommodations for people who had mobility problems. The segregated schooling taught us that. And so there's often resentment. Why should we have to make accommodations for the them?

And when I go to different parishes and talk about these issues, when I'm invited, that's one of the things I point out, because it helps people understand that we're still dealing with the effects of the segregated schooling.

**Dr. Creamer:** Yeah, there are a lot of good points there. And I want to just repeat two of them. One is, I really love taking these passages, from the Bible in particular, but you can do it from anything, and having conversation with folks who bring different lenses and wisdom to it. So every time we play, and again, that's where the space of play really comes in for me because, if folks don't feel like they have to get the right interpretation and can instead just, "Well, what does this remind you of" or "What can you see in this," it gives creative possibility. And so I think that's a wonderful thing to be able to go back and do.

The other is just to kind of echo your point about segregation. And so we both have, those of us living today, have both the hopeful and helpful legacy of the ADA. So when I talk with young folks, many of whom have lived their whole lives with the ADA, they have a different experience around disability or they've encountered people with particular disabilities at least all their life. So they don't have some of the baggage that some of us do.

On the other hand, they often though have a sense that everything's all fixed, and so you have to struggle with that in the way that the ADA didn't cover at all. So, great. Thanks.

**Participant:** I'm retired after 32 years of parish ministry, and I wanted to make two suggestions. First of all, I kept waiting for you to include John 9:3 as Jesus's response, and was glad that the person who spoke before me gave that response.

The other reality is that those of us who use the Lectionary know that we have to confront that Gospel every three years. And every three years, I am inundated with mail asking, from other pastors, how should I preach this Gospel, because I am blind? And one of the realities I have always put forth is to preach the reality that perhaps the healing was not so much physical as spiritual. You notice that Jesus leaves the man to confront the issues that face him. And he dares to go into the synagogue and confront the Pharisees with the reality that he wants to be treated like everyone else. And I think this is the approach that is so often not taken. We'd rather approach it from the physical healing standpoint.

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So I think you need to be sure to include the third verse, where Jesus says that, “The glory of God can be revealed through this man.”

**Dr. Creamer:** Yeah, thank you. That’s, again, playing with these texts is so rich. Another way that I’ve heard some of those stories told, and this may be some of what you’re getting at, is that what Jesus was doing. The physical healing in some ways was irrelevant. What Jesus was doing was restoring folks to access to community. So if the community had excluded someone based on physical or sensory difference, maybe what Jesus was doing was taking this moment to say, “Let me help you, as a member, back into this community,” while simultaneously challenging the community in other sorts of ways.

I love—again, as a theologian and not a Bible scholar—we can play with these texts in so many ways, and even just trying on different characters in a story. So we often tell the stories with the same characters, and we imagine we’re Jesus or we imagine we’re the disciple. Well, what if you’re the person who’s come seeking healing? What if you’re the person who didn’t actually come seeking healing but your friends or your parents sought it for you? What if you’re a parent here? What if you’re a bystander? And try on some of those different lenses with some of these different perspectives, knowing that anytime we interpret a story there’s lots of different interpretations. So yeah, thank you for that. Right here in the vest?

**Participant:** I just wanted to ask about people, once we get them there, for example, if you let someone come in with a—let’s the wrong word. But if people come in with a wheelchair and then you bring them into the meeting and we go downstairs for refreshments and they need help eating, or they can’t speak clearly, who sits with them? Who talks with them? There are probably many, many other examples.

**Dr. Creamer:** Yeah, that’s a good question. And some of it’s getting to the practical stuff. Some of it, for me, and again, as an academic, I can do this, is thinking about our ideals and our values again. So within the disability rights movement, there’s been a slogan for a while that says, “Nothing about us without us,” so, which I think is a great phrase, and it’s a nice way of thinking about, as we get into that next level of practical question, oftentimes with a person with a disability, I can ask them.

And oftentimes different people with similar disabilities will want or need different things. So there might be one wheelchair user for whom they would really like to rest for a moment while you get the plate for them, and there are others for whom they may need just a little assistance with a serving spoon but can handle everything else themselves. And some of that may depend on what day of the week it is, or what mood they’re in, or how well they know you, what else is going on, how many people are between you and the serving area—all those sorts of things.

So my first sense, for a question like *how*, is going to be, if you’ve got folks with disabilities, ask them. And recognize that sometimes that might be a little awkward, because for the most part, I don’t have to ask other people and I may need to ask a wheelchair user or someone who’s blind. On the other hand, we have to recognize we’ve got our own sense of stigma and concern of doing the right thing that we need to let go of. You know what?

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We're going to offend people with disabilities just like we offend people without disabilities. Sometimes they're going to be gracious and wonderful, just like all of us are sometimes gracious and wonderful. Sometimes they're going to be grumpy, just like sometimes all of us are grumpy. And so it's the messiness of human community.

That said, there are also ways to learn best practices from other folks. So I often will talk, so the issue for me often comes up with people will say, "Okay, my congregation says 'please stand.' What's a better phrase?" I'm like, okay, the way I've figured that out has been by asking other congregations what they try. And so I've collected a variety of those. And then I can share that. So in a room like this or in other sorts of settings, you can ask folks, "How are you working with X issue or how are you adapting to X situation?"

This to me again comes from some of my other commitments. So if I think about racism, some of it, for me, is as a person I'm white. As I engage a person of color, sometimes it's a matter of messiness of me in relationship with them. And I'm probably going to offend them sometimes. And I'm going to hope they're gracious enough to help me. But I also can go talk with other white folks and not always be trying that out with people of color.

So my sense with people with disabilities is similar. So sometimes it's the messiness of engaging the person, or people in their community. So if it's a child, talk with their caregivers. Or if it's a person who's a part of another group, talk with other people in that group. So if it's in my women's group and now it's going to be in a full sanctuary meeting, talk with other people in that women's group about how they've been adapting or what kinds of practices have made inclusive space for everybody, and travel that over. But also I would say don't be afraid to ask the person, but sometimes you are going to be afraid. So in the midst of your fear and uncertainty, ask. And then screw up, and then try again. So with the black vest here, yeah?

**Participant:** First of all, I want to thank you so much for your talk today and the information. It was very, very good. And a lot of things that you talked about—and I know for me, in my own journey, that trying to find answers to, like the self-help books really weren't very helpful and, but the Bible, the Scripture passages were very helpful and have become more helpful for me as I continue to study or read them. And in John 9, the thing that I liked about, the part about, is "the glory of God is shown through him." And that's the thing that turned it around for me, when I was there, because I think what a lot of us look for is we're looking for a cure, and we miss the healing. That's what happened with me when I saw that.

And I often ask the question to people, did God create disability? And some people, there's a lot of variety of answers to that, but I think one thing that I've come to understand about that is that he may not have created it but he allowed it. And I think one reason that he allows different things to happen with different people, and part of the glory that is shown through people is the compassion and mercy of others to these people. So it becomes a challenge for people with disabilities to think of it in those terms. It has for me. It's required a lot of humility in some ways. And another passage is, "to more that is given,

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more is expected," that type of thing. And that definitely becomes a challenge as well. Again, it's all there. It's all in the Scripture. There are things there.

And one thing that I got today too, and I was thinking about this before, is that, and you mentioned about Leviticus, and I believe that's Old Testament stuff. And then we talked about John 9, of course, which is the New Testament. And see, the Old Testament was Law, God's Law, and the New Testament is what Jesus did, which was, "I didn't come to abolish the Law but to transform it." And I think he did that with the love of God, which makes all the difference, because he turned it all around and he made it more personal. And I think a lot of the, you know, the difficulties about differences in life he made a little bit more acceptable in some terms, but in different ways—and I'm maybe not using the right terms—but I've always believed that Jesus has and always is the first advocate for people with disabilities.

And anytime I challenge people and priests especially, when they make homilies and they include all the other categories of people but they forget people with disabilities, I walk up to the priest and I say, "You did such a great job, you know, wonderful, but you forgot one group." And I tell them, I say, "What about people with disabilities?" And the light dawns afterwards. So it's, you know, there's an educational part to this for us to get out there, and becoming less aggressive with it and more. I guess more compassionate in some ways, because of different experiences, and more knowledge about, my mother always said this to me when I was younger too. She always said, "You can get more people to do things with honey than you can with vinegar." I have to remember that. Thank you.

**Dr. Creamer:** Yeah. Thank you. A couple of things there, too, that I want to just kind of echo, and one is that it's really only been recently that issues of disability have been addressed at the seminary or the graduate school level, so most of our folks who are in formal leadership positions may not have engaged this in school at all. It's actually still pretty rare, which is a little bit sad, that that's engaged at the training level or at the educational level.

And so for those of us who are advocates or those of us who have had access to some of this, some of that responsibility does fall to us, whether we identify as having a disability or not. And I think different people, different engagements, so for some of us, it is going to be the angry fist-pounding piece, and for some of us it's going to be sweet and compassionate, and for some of us it'll be other sorts of things.

The other piece, because again of the newness of this, at least at the academic side, is that stories of how people with disability themselves are interpreting texts and tradition is also fairly new. So I told you, I think Nancy Eiesland's book was 1994. I started doing this work around 1991. And most of us who are doing it in ways that are published, are right around those early nineties or later. So that's not a lot in the history of Christian theology, not to say people weren't talking about disabilities before we started doing it at the academic level, but it's still fairly new.

And so what we're getting now more recently is Bible commentaries by people either with disabilities or for whom advocacy about disability is really important. So in the last five or

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six years, a couple of important Bible commentaries have come out addressing this. And that gives some of the range of both the informed scholarship and also the what made sense to me piece. And it's fun for me to see how that differs, just like if I ask any roomful of people, how do you make sense of X Gospel story or of whatever, people with disabilities are going to be across the board too, but those are voices that often haven't been heard or stories that haven't been told. And so I thank you for telling your story, and I hope all of you will keep telling stories.

**Participant:** [inaudible] Civil Rights Act [inaudible] '64 [inaudible].

**Dr. Creamer:** Right. So the Civil Rights Act of '64 engaged some folks with identity difference but not disability, and so disability really took. . . . Actually, independent living movement in Berkeley in the late seventies was really where we start from, and that's also, in the big scheme of history, not a lot of time. So great, thank you. Who else? The red sweater here?

**Participant:** Thank you very much. I really enjoyed your alternative visions of Jesus and disability, especially; I'm a disability rights activist and advocate. I am involved in the independent living movement. I'm director at an independent living center here in Massachusetts.

And I really appreciate many of your points, especially the personal God, that's how, I forget how you called him/her, and I'll go for her, as far as person-first language. I very often, after the paralytic and the lame and the blind, and I'm a person first. I'm legally blind. And when I went up and told the priest, "You know, could you have just said the person who's paralyzed," you know, or the man who is, or the woman, he said, "I never even thought about that, the diabetic, the this, the that. So thank you very much."

But more to the point, and I like the Advocate version of God, obviously, since that's my role right now, but how do you help incorporate more the voice of the person with the disability? You did in this answer a couple of persons ago, but I find that we're still with the attitude of let me help, let me help too much. I receive communion.

And one in particular Eucharist[ic minister], and I don't want to be mean or anything, right, she puts my hands on the cup. I can get the cup myself. I can figure it out and/or they shove it into my mouth, rather unsuspecting, not in my parish but when I visit a parish, they've got it in my mouth. I actually take it out of their hands and say I'll do it myself, honestly. And this is all at Communion, you know? So I'm like, "Please ask us. Ask us. Let us have a voice. Let us let you know what it is."

There's too much of that, I hate to say this, with the Catholic Church anyway, too much patronizing, too much patriarchal, too much, and not knowing how to ask us, how can we help you? Even the position of you get them in the front door or the back door or whatever with the elevator—person with a wheelchair—but can they personally go up to get Communion? They don't necessarily want a Eucharistic minister to come down to them and treat them differently.

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They actually want to go. They want to wheel around, get in line and go get Communion all by themselves. And yet they're up front, because that's the only place that got cut out. They're up front and they have the Eucharistic minister coming down to them. Sometimes that happens to me. And I don't even know they're coming towards me [laughter], and like, oh, okay, this is a little awkward. Do I stand? Do I kneel? Do I, what do I do?

So it's really, I would just like to say that, and please incorporate that a little more in your talk about how to engage the person with the disability in all of these phases of a committee, not a committee, Eucharistic minister, liturgist, you know, all that good stuff. Thanks very much.

**Dr. Creamer:** Yeah. Thank you. Yeah, my sense with part of that, I mean a little bit of my optimism is that some of this is slowly changing, partly because of the work that you all are doing, partly as I see educational institutions becoming more inclusive of people with disabilities. So kids who grew up under the ADA and were able then to have easier access to college under the ADA are going to seminary now.

So I do a summer institute each summer. We were in Chicago last year. We'll be in Toronto this year, and it's a weeklong program really for faculty and for seminarians. And this last summer, we had a couple of priests or priest candidates who were wheelchair users. And they were talking about both the novelty of that and the challenges of that. And if you think churches aren't accessible, think about old seminary buildings or monastery spaces, right, but that their presence was then also having ripple effects on the communities that they were serving. Or the effect of now having folks in the academy who are writing books about disability from the perspective of people with disabilities as that relates to religion, has ripple effects. The work that you all are doing has ripple effects.

So I hope that we're shifting a little bit away from that kind of patronizing culture of, 'Oh, I'm going to go serve you,' or 'I'm going to go do ministry to those people with disabilities.' But it's a slow and uphill battle. So thank you for that.

**Participant:** I really appreciated the things you said about the authenticity and the God with limits. I've been working on thinking about a vulnerable God or a God with vulnerabilities, and this helped my thinking there. And I also wanted to add I've done some work with the Massachusetts Council of Churches and Rhode Island and then the World Council of Churches. And just like seminaries are beginning to have courses on disability, there are theological statements available that the Massachusetts Council put out. I could give people links to that. It's a pretty good document.

And the World Council of Churches put one out that was endorsed in 2003 and we're getting ready to revisit that. And that was a document, that's not the first time the World Council of Churches looked at disability issues. The one that we did that was endorsed in 2003 was really drafted by a group of theologians with disabilities. A few were parents but nearly everyone else were ordained or theologically trained people with disabilities. And those are available as reference points for anybody that's looking at finding some material to back up some of the theological ideas.

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**Dr. Creamer:** Yeah. Thank you for mentioning those. Another source is EDAN, the Ecumenical Disability Advocacy Network, which is another nice international place that's done a lot of thinking about the theology as well as action statements. So, but yeah, and most denominations and traditions and communities have got some sorts of resources, either policy statements. Or there's a lot of best practices from places online, so there are a lot of good resources out there.

And again, that's another one of those pieces that I hope has ripple effects that we have statements coming from the top, we have statements coming from people who are on the ground and really all these levels of engagement. But thanks for mentioning that. Yeah?

**Dr. Creamer:** Hi. Thank you. First of all, I just want to say thank you for your talk today. I feel like, as an undergraduate student, I've learned more in the past couple of hours than I have in a couple semesters here. [laughter] Professors, if you're watching, you're all wonderful, so just remember that. This is actually a question about elevators. At my church, we have an elevator but it's kind of off to the side and it's not very visible, and you actually need three keys to get into it. You need a key for the cart to come down. You need a key to get in, open the door. And then you need a key to go back up. And there's a gate.

It just, I don't, I've been. . . Actually, I've been known as the elevator guy, because you actually pretty need like a degree in engineering to be able to use this. So for me, I guess, accessibility in some ways, it's there but visibility is the issue and ease of use. So I guess, what would be your advice to churches or just organizations that are dealing with trying to make it easier for people with disabilities?

**Dr. Creamer:** Yeah, that's a really good question. And it highlights again the thing that access isn't enough and that there are varying degrees and levels of access. So I had a similar experience. When I went to college, my dorm, I was on the fourth floor, and so I had the magic key to the elevator, which first off made me special because everybody else wanted that for their luggage or for move-in day or for whatever. But then also meant that my main way of accessing my dorm room was the way the garbage went out. And I felt that. I mean you feel that, right?

So I think, as congregations and communities deal with that, there's a couple levels. One is, I would rather be in the garbage elevator than not be there at all. On the other hand, the garbage elevator isn't enough, and it's not a good sign of inclusion and community.

So I encourage. . . Actually, when I do this talk at local churches, I invite them, as one of their homework assignments, to do an accessibility audit. And there are a few nice ones available online, if you just do a Google search for accessibility audit for church. It's a lovely, the one I use is about a 12-page checklist done by folks who are familiar with the ADA and a variety of mobility and sensory differences. And to do it not as an attempt to be perfect but as a way to get information about how well your church or community is doing.

I actually have a sense that none of us can be perfect in terms of our access, but we can be aware of where our limitations and difficulties are. So if it's the elevator that's out to the



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side, there are ways to make that more welcoming. So you can make sure that it's got the same sorts of signs that you would put on the front door are in there, and maybe the poster about upcoming activities this week and other senses that this is a space people actually use and are welcome and invited to use.

At local church level, the church I participate in now has a kiosk near the front door. So after you come in, there's the greeter, but there's an accessibility kiosk there. And at that kiosk are the large-print hymnals, and is the assisted listening device ready to check out with batteries in it even. I've been to a number of churches that, yeah, there is one somewhere. And if you find the right usher and if the batteries are still good from the last time, then, sure, you have at it, but if not, not, which is almost worse than not having one, right? So they have a kiosk there. And it's well signed, all the ushers know about it. And so there's easy access then.

Something like that elevator, like I would want to make sure a couple different people knew where the keys were, that other folks felt like they could use that space in a way that doesn't make it inaccessible to the people who need it as their only point of access, but that doesn't stigmatize it as only these three people are allowed to use that space. Right? I would think about making sure that my whole congregational vision had awareness of that, so if there is an elevator and it goes out, what do we do? That plan ought to be made before the elevator goes out, because if it's like the one at my school, it goes out. And then you have to figure out what to do. Make that plan in advance.

And think about, then, other ways to make the space both as welcoming and as authentic as you can. So it's okay to say, "I'm sorry, but the only elevator to the youth room is down in the back. Can I go with you as we go find that room?" And to be honest and open that way, so, and then again, always responding. So when something doesn't work, then regroup. And whether that's your. . . In my church, we have a staff parish committee. I'm Methodist. We have a lot of committees, so, but we have a committee that looks at the worship life or that looks at the physical plant. And to then bring those questions back, so it's not just me as the whiner problem but me as naming a genuine issue that the whole community's going to work together to try to address, so.

And then for those of us who do use those facilities to feel free to speak up, to say the bathroom says it's accessible but it's really not, or part of the facility is, but I can't reach the paper towel dispenser, or I appreciate that you've made this effort but this is the effort that would actually be more helpful to me. And I think empowering us to also speak up is important. And then living in a community of vulnerability that doesn't get defensive when that happens but says, "Oh, we didn't think about the paper towel dispenser. Let's work on that." So, but thank you. For me, it's always an ongoing and constant process, so thanks. Maybe one more question. Great. Right here.

**Participant:** So one thing I would add is, what's in it for the church? And it seems to me like what's in it for the church, in addition to doing the right thing and all that, is renewal and growth. And how many families are saying now, "We don't come to church because it's

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boring and we can't get our kids up for it," when really what they mean is our kids don't read that well and have ADD and we just can't; I'm tired of yelling at them for an hour.

And the story of John 9 is a rich one—got to come back to that again. Some people say that “the glory of God will be shown through him” meant Jesus was going to heal him. So God made him blind and marginalized in the community so that God could come along and go booyah, thanks. I think, unfortunately, this is one of the two most common interpretations. The other is spiritual blindness, which bothers me because I don't see very well and I have to start working on Wednesday to come to church. I have to find a ride. I have to see if things are going to be in large print. Nothing's in large print today. And I'm not spiritually blind. I'm spiritually persevering, if that's what that means.

What would happen if we challenged all our notions of what people are comfortable doing and turned the way we normally do things in worship, committee meetings, educational events like this today on its ear? Well, we would welcome a lot more people and some of them, like the guy in John 9, would have been marginalized enough all along that they would have the guts to witness to Christ far more courageously than anybody else. That's the story of John 9. Read it, you'll see what I mean.

And some other people, let's never forget, with disabilities are also socially powerful, like Stephen King, famous author. He's losing his eyesight to macular degeneration. Are you ready to welcome him to your church, because, you know, might help with the revenue. [laughter].

**Dr. Creamer:** [laughter] Nice. Yeah, and I think, I mean that's a really lovely takeaway at the end, too, for you to walk out, to have your. . . . Actually at school, we call them elevator speeches. So if my students are doing dissertations, I say have your elevator speech, so in the time it takes to ride an elevator with someone, you can tell them what you're working on.

It's actually a really nice kind of wrap-up for my talk, I guess, to say I hope you all have an elevator speech so that, if you're with someone from your congregation or community, that in the time it would take to ride an elevator, you can say to them why this matters to us. And that can be that people with disabilities are just as much a part of the family of God as any of us. It can be the parable of the lost speech—if one is lost, then that's what our focus has to be. It can be any of these stories of God or Jesus as being on the side of inclusion and justice. It can be whatever narrative makes sense in your community, but yeah, to come up with that little elevator speech to know, so that you can say why this matters, whether that's Stephen King or the lost speech, it all works, so great.

Thank you very much. [applause]

**Ms. Donovan:** This has been a wonderful morning. Debbie, thank you so much. And I especially thank you for stretching us—stretching us in the way we think about disabilities, think about the church and think about God. Thank you. [applause]