

A Disability Homiletic: Opening the Church to the Fullness of Our Humanness

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There is a tremendous power and exquisiteness about the art of preaching. To take the word of God, to shape it and form it in such ways that others can hear the God of the universe talking with them in the midst of the preachers words, is both humbling and beautiful. As preachers, the fact that our frail human bodies can be inspired by God in ways that enable us to be communicators of divine truths is remarkable. As we preach, our words become conduits for Grace which reveal the holiness of God and participate in the movement of the healing power of God's Spirit. To preach God's word is truly a gift.

Preaching is an act of the imagination. Our imaginations contain the concepts, ideas, values, morality, and plausibility structures that help us to make sense of the world. Walter Brueggemann has pointed out the way in which Scripture is intended to expand the imagination;¹ to give us concepts and ideas, narratives, and perspectives that we could never create on our own. When we allow Scripture to recreate our imaginations, we are enabled and empowered to preach stories that transform the world. In Romans 12:2 the apostle Paul talks about the way in which in the power of the Holy Spirit, we are required to have our minds renewed. The renewing of our minds means expanding our epistemological universe in such a way as to allow us to begin to see and to understand the beauty of the revelation given to us through the Scriptures. As we preach God's word, so we provide our hearers with God's gift of a changed world. The world of course has not changed, but now as our minds are renewed, the preaching of the word helps us to see the world from a different angle. When we frame the world differently, so it looks different. As we move to the rhythm of that difference, we become more faithful in our discipleship.

Disability theology

The faithful proclamation of the gospel helps us always to be open to God's surprise. The surprise that the disciples encountered when they discovered the empty tomb of Jesus is paradigmatic for the surprise that each one of us can and should encounter as we engage creatively and thoughtfully with God's word. The developing area of disability theology is based on the premise that if we listen to voices that are often excluded from the ways in which we understand Scripture and develop theology and tradition, we will be surprised, and that surprise will be a blessing to the whole people of God. The theology of disability has come into existence as Christians with disabilities and Christians who do not share that experience come together to ask questions of Scripture and tradition with a view to enabling the whole people of God in all of its diversity to see the world differently and to come to comprehend the broad range of possibilities that make up the essence of humanness.

Disability theologians have noticed the way in which certain human experiences, and questions emerging from those experiences, have tended not to have been at the forefront of the development of a biblical interpretation and a theological reflection.²

This has meant that key questions about the nature of God, church, and humanness have been asked, but only from a certain perspective. Traditionally theologians and biblical scholars have questioned scripture and tradition from their position within the academy. The range of questions that can be asked is determined by their particular context and situation. These questions and the answers that people come to are important. They are not, however, the only questions that can be asked. Theologies of disability seek to facilitate the asking of questions that emerge from theological reflection on the experience of human disability. Such questions can be challenging and new. The point is not to challenge orthodoxy, but rather to open up that which we think we know to the possibility of surprise and awe as we look at it from a slightly different angle.

For example, we might consider what it is to proclaim the gospel to people with advanced dementia or profound intellectual disabilities, that is, those who have either lost their words or never had any in the first place? How does our ministry of preaching reach into the lives of these folks? Do we put them to one side and say that such people, whilst obviously an object of pastoral concern, need not be the focus of our preaching ministry? Or do we preach into the experience; do we through our preaching seek to enable congregations to think through the issues of what it might mean to be a disciple of Jesus and to have forgotten who Jesus is, or never to have known him with their minds. How are we to understand Paul's words in Romans 10:9, "If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved," in the light of lives which cannot declare with their mouths or conceptualise the resurrection with their minds? What kind of community might our preaching seek to form in response to such diversity of experience? It is exegetical and proclamatory issues such as this that the theology of disability seeks to bring to the theological and homiletical table of the church.

A disability hermeneutic

Disability provides us with a hermeneutic that enables us to see things within texts that perhaps we were completely unable to see previously.³ In Exodus 4:10-17, Moses receives his call. At first he is resistant. Moses said to the Lord, "Pardon your servant, Lord. I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue." He asked that God send somebody else. But what does God do? Does God heal Moses? Does God take away his stutter and send him out better able to communicate that which he has been given? No. God simply says, "This is your vocation, and here are the people who will help you. Now go and do it!" Even more mysteriously God says, "Who do you think does these things?"

"The Lord said to him, 'Who gave human beings their mouths? Who makes them deaf or mute? Who gives them sight or makes them blind? Is it not I, the Lord?'" What are we to make of such an odd statement? One place where we might begin to preach out of Moses' experience and into the issue of disability relates to the temptation to equate disability with sin. It seems clear that in Moses' case, human disability was not a barrier to divine calling. It seems that one does not need to be healed in order to fulfil one's vocation. More importantly perhaps, for those who want to equate the origins of disability with sin or the demonic, God's statement as to the divine origins of certain forms of disability is clearly a challenge. God does not indicate that these

forms of disability are bad things; God simply says that he made them. If the creator God is in the midst of disabled lives, then this offers a fascinating and mysterious answer to the question of whether disability can actually be explained in terms of it being the product of sin.

As we allow these new questions that emerge from reflection on human disability to enter into our preaching hermeneutic, so we are opened up to new possibilities and new perspectives as we find ourselves called to form a very new kind of community. As we reflect on the life of Moses and the life of Paul with his thorn in the flesh that was never healed (Does this mean that Paul did not have enough faith to be healed?), and as we realise that redemption is wrought through the broken and bleeding body of Jesus, so we are opened up to the complicated fact that in Christ there is “no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, [able bodied or disabled], Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all” (Colossians 3:11). In this way reflection on human disability expands our imagination and helps us to break free from a modern anthropology that assumes that such things as freedom, choice, intellectual knowledge, autonomy, beauty, power, and competitiveness are the essence of humanness and of salvation.

Preaching disability: Re-imagining Acquired Brain Damage

“For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.” (Col 3:3)

It will be helpful at this stage to think more directly about how we might preach into a particular experience of disability. One form of disability that raises interesting questions for any congregation and those who desire to preach into it is the issue of acquired brain injury. The term acquired brain injury relates to all types of traumatic brain injury as well as injuries that occur after birth such as strokes or any other lesion that leads to lack of oxygen to the brain. One of the effects of acquired brain injury is that very often people encounter what is often described as a change in personality, that is, a sometimes radical change in the particular group of characteristics or qualities that are perceived by an individual and others to constitute the essence of identity and character.

The author Floyd Skloot’s experience gives an insight into what it feels like to encounter acquired brain injury and some of the issues that can arise. On December 7, 1988, he woke up to discover that the Floyd Skloot who had gone to bed the previous evening was very different from the Floyd Skloot who woke up the following day. Skloot was on a business trip, attending a conference on national energy policy. When he woke up in his hotel room, everything had changed. He could not remember how to shut off the alarm on his watch. He could not work out why he could not get into the elevator when the door was closed. He literally developed dementia overnight.⁴ Skloot had contracted a virus that targeted his brain. The virus had left lesions on his cerebral cortex which, amongst other things, seriously damaged his long and short term memory and his basic ability to think. As he puts it, “My entire brain, the organ by which my very consciousness is controlled, was reorganized one day ten years ago. I went to sleep here and woke up there; the place looked the same but nothing in it worked the way it used to.”⁵

For Skloot, life changed in ways that were mystifying and frighteningly different. The changes he went through meant that he felt that he was in some senses a quite different person from the person he was before. Skloot’s experience will sadly be

replicated in lives of many people within our congregations as they encounter strokes, head injury, and all sorts of different kinds of trauma that bring about changes that make them feel like they are strangers to themselves and to others. How are we to preach into such lives? What possible message of hope could address such an apparently tragic and apparently hopeless situation?

Hidden in Christ

In Colossians 3:3 Paul informs us, “For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.” This is a truly mysterious passage. Paul pushes us to realise that as Christians, we are not who we may think we are. We no longer think of ourselves in terms of what we think we already know. Our identity is not comprised of our memory, knowledge, and current capacities. We are who we are in Christ and even that is hidden from us. If we begin to read this passage from the perspective of the experience of acquired brain injury, an interesting transformation in perspective begins to emerge. This change of frame comprises two aspects. Firstly, Christians identify themselves first and foremost as being “in Christ.” If someone asks me who I am, my first response is no longer “I am John and I come from Aberdeen in Scotland,” or “I am a minister and a preacher,” or “I am a university professor.” I am of course all these things, but first and foremost who I am is who I am in Christ. My identity no longer comes from my capacities or self-knowledge. Only Jesus knows my true identity.

Secondly, who we are, our true identity, is always a mystery for human beings. We will never truly know who we are until we meet Jesus in glory. “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Learning who we are, finding our identity in Christ, is always a process of encounter and discovery. Before I met Jesus, I thought I was doing quite well in life; I thought I knew who I was. But once I met Jesus, I realised that I was a broken sinner and the whole of my life as I perceived it had been quite different. The self is always a mystery.

Paul’s insight and language about the mystery of the self and about its hiddenness in Christ helps us to re-imagine and renegotiate the experience of personality change following acquired brain damage. It is certainly the case that our brains are traumatised and that certain things within our lives change, sometimes quite radically. It can be extremely difficult to see precisely how we might bridge the gap between “who we were” and the ways in which we inhabit the world now. But Paul tells us that the gap between what was and what is is not unbridgeable. Everyone’s life is fundamentally a mystery; none of us truly knows who we are. The experience of brain damage simply exacerbates and sharply brings to the fore the uneasy reality that everyone’s life is hidden in Christ. Although things may have changed, we do not lose ourselves. We simply encounter a focused experience of the way that life is for everyone: hidden ... at least for now. We may in one sense become quite different, but Jesus bridges the gap. Our task is to trust that Jesus holds us even when we seem to have become strangers.

Re-imagining acquired brain damage in this way begins to break down the barriers between those with brain damage and those who do not share that experience and provides us with a hopeful theological grounding and reframing that can

help to bridge the seemingly unbridgeable gap between who we were and the ways in which we inhabit the world now. Our task is to trust that Jesus holds who we are even though we can't quite work it out for ourselves. However, the theological task does not end there. Building theological foundations needs to be matched by a movement towards revised faithful practice. What kind of practices might enable individuals and communities to build on this theological foundation and creatively manage the changes that come with brain damage?

Befriending the stranger within

In his book *Befriending the Stranger*, Jean Vanier draws attention to Carl Jung's response to a Christian woman wherein he makes an interesting and somewhat disturbing observation:

I admire Christians, because when you see someone who is hungry or thirsty, you see Jesus. When you welcome a stranger, someone who is "strange," you welcome Jesus. When you clothe someone who is naked, you clothe Jesus. What I do not understand, however, is that Christians never seem to recognize Jesus in their own poverty. You always want to do good to the poor outside you and at the same time you deny the poor person living inside you. Why can't you see Jesus in your own poverty, in your own hunger and thirst? In all that is "strange" inside you: in the violence and the anguish that are beyond your control! You are called to welcome all this, not to deny its existence, but to accept that it is there and to meet Jesus there.⁶

Jung draws upon the imagery of Matthew 25 and the powerful statement by Jesus that "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25: 40). Christians are called to be loving and compassionate towards the weakest members of our society: strangers and outcasts, those alienated and vulnerable to the capriciousness of an inhospitable world. Why? Because that is where Jesus lives. As we act in hospitable ways towards the poor, the outcast, the stranger, so we minister to Jesus as he takes up residence within the stranger. If it is the case that "Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith" (Ephesians 3:1), then it could be no other way.

However, Vanier's point in using Jung in this way is not simply to highlight Christian attitudes towards strangers in general. He is pushing us to think about the possibility that the "stranger" might actually be within us. The outcast and the stranger are not simply "out there" or "over here." We can become strangers even to ourselves. Vanier points out that

Jesus calls us not only to welcome the weak and the rejected ... but also the weak and the broken person within us and to discover the presence of Jesus within us. ... In order for us to be men and women who give life to others we have to live in the truth of who we are; we have to find an inner wholeness, no longer to deny or ignore our wounds but to welcome them and to discover the presence of God in these very places of our own weakness.⁷

As we reflect on the experience of acquired brain damage, the importance of Vanier's words and the way that he draws us into the Christian tradition of befriending strangers comes strongly to the fore. How might we go about befriending the stranger if the stranger is within us; if we ourselves feel like the stranger?

From disorientation to reorientation: finding ourselves in a strange new world of change

In his work on the psalms of lament, Walter Brueggemann teaches us that the lament Psalms are intended to take us from the place of suffering and disorientation to a place of reorientation.⁸ The structures of the Psalms move within the dynamic of orientation to disorientation to reorientation. Much of our lives are comprised of ordinary day-to-day experiences. Everything seems fine, God is in his heaven, and life is even and stable. Then something terrible happens, and we find ourselves in a place of disorientation; none of the old roadmaps seem to lead us home; our normal coping mechanisms fail to enable us to cope; we are lost, disoriented, and alone. But then, for no apparent reason, in the midst of the Psalm, something seems to change. For whatever reason, the psalmist realises that even in the midst of deep disorientation, God's hesed, God's unchanging love remains firm and provides hope. Nothing changes. The pain, suffering, loss, and alienation do not instantly go away. However, the recognition of the presence of God brings about deep change in our perspective. Psalm 13 is a good example of this movement:

How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?
How long will my enemy triumph over me?
Look on me and answer, LORD my God.
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death,
and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him,"
and my foes will rejoice when I fall.
But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.
I will sing the LORD's praise,
for he has been good to me.

What Vanier urges us to consider is that the great reorientation for the followers of Jesus who encounter brain damage is that they may feel that they have become strangers to themselves and to others, but it is precisely because they are strangers that they can be assured that Jesus is with them and for them, holding and remembering them in the mystery of their hiddenness. The disorientation is terrible, but it is not irresolvable. Jesus moves with us into the great unknown as he takes up residence in the heart of this newly formed stranger. What we as individuals and as communities are called to do is to learn what it means to offer hospitality to the stranger within and the stranger without.

Those encountering personality changes that make them feel like strangers can be assured of two things. Firstly, that they have not lost themselves, nor have they been

completely alienated from the rest of humanity. The mystery of who they are may be particularly acute, but it is not unusual. Who we are for all of us is always hidden in Jesus. Secondly, the task of the individual and the task of the community is to learn what it means to offer hospitality to the newly formed stranger. Such hospitality holds in critical tension who we were, who we have become, and what we are in Christ. Such hospitality provides a vital conduit for healing, Christian friendship, and the creation of positive identities even in the midst of deep change and disorientation. It is of course right that people should lament for the things that have been lost, but that lament should lead to a mode of reorientation that desires to make strangers into friends and to live faithfully and hopefully within the strange new world that brain damage has brought to our communities.

Preaching hope into apparent hopelessness

This example of the way in which we can rethink a text in the light of human disability indicates some of the ways in which preaching disability not only helps people at a pastoral level, but also offers challenging new theological perspectives that impact upon the whole people of God. Such preaching can speak hope into a situation that, at first glance, seems hopeless and tragic. Bringing such new hope and fresh possibilities is the essence of a disability homiletic. Thinking through issues of disability in the context of preaching is not something that is a “specialist enterprise” or that only has significance for those who are “interested in such things.” Rather, preaching disability takes us to the heart of the gospel and draws us into the presence of Jesus in new ways which bring healing and revelation to those who have ears to hear. Preaching the word in such ways enables the people of God to enter into the fullness of human experience and in so doing opens the church to the wonderful healing power of the gospel as it takes that which seems to be hopeless and turns it into something that is reassuring and potentially beautiful.

Notes

- 1 Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).
- 2 Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994).
- 3 Kathy Black, *A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).
- 4 Floyd Skloot, “Wild in the Woods: Confessions of a Demented Man,” *The Missouri Review* 22.3 (Fall 1999): 4.
- 5 Floyd Skloot, *In the Shadow of Memoir* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003).
- 6 Jean Vanier, *Befriending the Stranger* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2005): 63-65.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984).