

Invoking Deep Access: Disability beyond Inclusion in the Church

By Thomas E. Reynolds

Abstract: This article seeks to challenge the ways access and inclusion are thought about and practiced in church communities with the hope of encouraging a robust hospitality and deep accessibility among all in the body of Christ. A first step stresses the difference of disability over the sameness of human personhood underneath it. A second step considers possibilities for practices of receiving gifts from one another in ongoing gestures of vulnerable mutuality that negotiate access for all, and thereby create community. The article concludes by proposing this be cultivated by a spirituality of attentiveness that embodies hospitality.

Key Terms: inclusion, disability, church, vulnerability, hospitality, spirituality

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling (Eph 4:4).

Misunderstanding and Exclusion

I cringed as he told his story. Speaking to a group of about twenty attentive listeners was an articulate, compassionate, and successful businessman in his early sixties, quietly recalling his public rejection by a priest. Some years ago, as he approached a church altar for communion, a priest singled him out, exclaiming loudly and with disgust, “We don’t serve drunks here!” True, this man talks with slurred speech and moves with a jolted gait. Yet he does not drink. He has cerebral palsy.

This story is unsettling on a number of levels. It exemplifies how we can misunderstand someone and exclude on the basis of that misunderstanding. While the implications extend far beyond disability (just *who* does the priest serve?), in the case of this man, the rejection began there, iron-

ically in the very place where one would expect acceptance and inclusion to prevail. Of all places, Jennie Weiss Block notes, our churches should be exemplars of “accessible communities,” a point of entry into God’s love radiating through the lives of its participants, as “the Body of Christ presumes a place for everyone.”¹ Paul states the theology behind this in 1 Corinthians 12:13: “For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.” And again in Galatians 3:28: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ.”

This notwithstanding, access to such inclusive space is a difficult matter for persons with disabilities. Often rendered “deficient” or “helpless” by faith communities, people with disabilities are therewith either excluded altogether from participation or included in ways that paternalistically obscure the fact that having a disability doesn’t preclude someone from making real contributions to a community. After all, this man was a

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prominent leader, a model of success. He was neither lacking ability nor somehow “special” simply because of a weakness attributed to him by others. Tragically, stories like this one are quite common. And they provoke us—all of us in faith communities—to think hard about the meaning and practice of access.

But, I must confess, part of what unsettles me about this man’s story is not the overt gesture of exclusion by the priest, scandalous as it is. It is also my own reaction to the story that bothers me—my inner cringe—because it indicates my attempt to empathetically align with the one excluded and assure myself that I know better, that in a similar circumstance I would not be so presumptuous as to condescendingly reject someone on the basis of my own false pretenses; I would instead be welcoming and inclusive. What troubles me about this is not its well-meaning intention to connect with and affirm another human being, but rather its own, perhaps more subtle, kind of pretense, one that assumes the authenticity of its own understanding of another and thus the rightness of its own compassion and practices of inclusion.

Sometimes the stories we—those of us populating churches—tell ourselves about who we are, what we do, or what we have achieved interfere with the work of genuinely attending to other persons as they are—subjects of their own experiences and agents with their own unique voice and way in the world. I am speaking about communal practices of care that have inclusion as their focus, and I wish to scrutinize such care and inclusion as potential hindrances in making space for differences, specifically in processes of opening access for people with disabilities to participate fully in community life. The point I would like to stress is that the incorporative thrust of inclusion is not innocent, and sometimes is ill-suited to its stated intention of countering intolerance and exclusion. Put bluntly, efforts by non-disabled people to care for people with disabilities via welcoming and incorporating them in community life can—even with good intentions—be deceptively marginalizing, functioning implicitly as forms of exclusion.

Moving out from the Shallows

Because of this, a deepening is needed in the way access is considered and practiced by congregations. I propose that a move from shallow access to “deep access” is needed for churches, a practice of making accessible for all people that moves beyond what is often taken for inclusion. If the church is one body of Christ with many members, it is a communion of differences. What does this mean? First, as Amos Yong suggests, “the church is charged not only with *inviting* people with disabilities into its community but also with *bringing* them in and then honoring their contributions.”² The gesture of hospitality is only a self-congratulatory blank check when it is, in fact, impossible for people with disabilities to be present, that is, to access and participate in the community. However, the inviting and bringing-in of people with disabilities means more than simply making it possible for them to be present, for attitudes and gestures may prevail that reduce people with disabilities to subjects in need of healing, passive recipients of charity, or examples to non-disabled people of those “weaker members” that Paul describes as indispensable in some way or another (1 Cor 12:22).

In this spirit, Yong notes that “the Spirit’s gifts are distributed equally to *all* members of the body, including people with disabilities, and that these members are especially honorable within and vital for the body.”³ Honorable and vital not because they function as those “others” who are weaker, but because church becomes what it is through sharing lives vulnerably with one another, in humility and grace such that what appears weak according to normalizing standards is actually a strength, and vice versa. Vulnerability in this manner highlights the margins as a lively space of creative energy, a place of Spirit. Hence, genuine access means cultivating a barrier-free communion of vulnerable and caring mutuality that is created by all and for all, in which people with disabilities are valued among others as contributing members. The goal, as Brett Webb-Mitchell puts it, is to fashion togetherness

so that “people with disabilities and those without disabilities will not only see and hear, but relate and communicate to and with one another not as ‘us’ versus ‘them,’ but as ‘we,’ for we all benefit from learning, worshiping, praying, serving, and being in fellowship with one another.”⁴ This is deep access.

In this article, I attempt to highlight some salient features of deep access by constructing an argument that moves through two main sections to a short conclusion. The first section stresses the difference of disability over the “sameness” of human personhood underneath it. For, as Carolyn Thompson writes, “Disability is about difference; it is one of the characteristics that contribute to the diversity, the plurality of life.”⁵ Deep access is thus about minding the differences. But encountering differences is no easy matter, often disrupting the collective status quo. Hence, deep access is about heeding provocation and imaginatively responding as if being called, invoked by the Spirit into a conversion that receives difference as a gift multiplying forms of bodily flourishing. Life in the shape of disability is a gift that can teach and empower faith communities.

Because such a gift is missed or negated if communities are caught up in their own dramas of inclusion, a second section explores the perils of inclusion and moves toward exploring the practice of receiving gifts from one another as an ongoing negotiation of access, which amounts to the co-creation of community. Being together and sharing lives vulnerably in this way requires a fundamental openness to making mistakes and even failing, learning with each other to begin again and make adjustments along the way, and in the process reimagining what access is for us. Deep access is never completed, but is always on the way, much like the church itself points forward to the eschatological horizon of God’s future banquet where all will be welcome. It requires paying attention and minding differences. With this in mind, a brief conclusion proposes a “spirituality of attentiveness” as the practice of a hospitality robust enough to foster congregational life as a communion of differences, with each member welcoming the other.

The Difference of Disability

I begin by holding up the ideal possibility of caring for people—all people—as both equal and different. That is, *equal* without thereby being made over and assimilated into the image of what is taken by dominant visions as normal—effectively erasing differences—and *different* without thereby being marginalized as deviant and abnormal—effectively denying equality.⁶ There is an important circular tension between these terms that should be honored and never collapsed. For too long people with disabilities have been segregated and denied social access as equal persons, treated instead as bodies with defects needing curative fixes, remedial therapies to normalize them, or seclusion in institutions “for their own good.” Thankfully, anti-discrimination laws in most countries now make illegal the more egregious of such practices. But there is still a long way to go. Hence, disability rights language speaks of the personhood and dignity of people with disabilities to counter the reductive tendencies of ableist ideologies, which measure the person by her or his ability to function and perform in ways considered normal by society.

The Constructs of Normal and Disabled

This makes the question of what is disability a more complex issue. Recent literature on disability moves away from its common definition as a biological problem, one subject to medical administration as a condition of individual bodies needing management and correction in order to restore proper functioning. Now it is considered more accurate to view disability as the consequence of bodily impairment, that is, an inability to perform some task or activity considered necessary within a social environment. This highlights how the category *disability* functions as a social construct, a way of thinking about people that happens between bodies through their interchanges. Disability represents a diminishment relative to a context of

valuation and its conventions. Certain conventions have become status quo, constructing what is considered normal and thereby creating the difference between bodies that are “able” and those that are “disabled.” In recognizing that the normal is a socially imagined standard, there comes the capacity to critique and deconstruct it. This opens a pathway into acknowledging persons beyond their disabilities and impairments.

Usually, it is what Tanya Titchkosky calls “person-first” language that comes to play a prominent role in resisting normalcy and its tendency to render disability a flaw or liability attached to bodies, something which calls for cure, care, or containment: “Through people-first language, disability—and people identified as disabled—is made to serve as part of a labeling process that privileges personhood.”⁷ The person here is the locus of genuine value, a site of inviolable dignity, which is a condition of likeness or sameness among all humans—including those with disabilities—that animates human rights discourse and provides leverage to critique the ableist hegemony of normalcy. Thus the term *person with disabilities* is favored over *disabled person*, because the latter is seen to totalize disability and absorb the person into it, thereby devaluing him or her. Christian theologians recently have appealed to the imago Dei theme on similar grounds, namely, to reserve a site of irreducible value in the human, in this case given by God.⁸ Disability, then, is a social negotiation that is not constitutive of personhood. It is secondary, one of the many ways human life takes shape, and accordingly, calls for inclusion through various kinds of accommodation. Personhood is primary.

However, along with Titchkosky, I want to register hesitancy with person-first approaches, laudable as it is to value the person and not the disability. Basically, there is operative here a potentially more insidious kind of reductionism. Ironically, disability still appears as a diminishment, but it is merely attached to the person as a kind of non-essential aspect that she or he happens to have. Titchkosky points out the principal failure here: “The desire to shore up a firm separation between people and disability, by privileging the former and diminishing the latter, points to an im-

age of disability as a kind of danger.” The danger is that a disability could be confused with the person. Why is this so bad? Because if “people are rendered as their condition,” the moral standing and character of personhood “might simply disappear,” amounting to the loss of humanity.⁹ So it becomes important to inquire about what is the human and when is it diminished to the point of non-existence. Questions over whether personhood resides in agency, self-interested rationality, independent will, freedom, and so on, loom large. And answering in any particular way yields ethical dilemmas in cases of disability. Even treating human dignity as a gift of God opens up queries about precisely where disability resides in relation to it.

The point is that pushing disability to the background may be a way of preserving the dignity of persons, but it does so at the ironic cost of even more stridently treating disability as a catastrophe that diminishes life. As a danger to personhood, it has no power to enhance life.¹⁰ Or as Rod Michalko argues, disability is made a difference that should not make a difference, controlled and contained in its ability to negatively affect life.¹¹ Disability is a problem to be removed to the background of personhood. This re-inscribes into people with disabilities the very denigration of disability that it aims to resist.

Disability, Difference, Relationality

To avoid this peril, it seems crucial to shift focus away from trying to establish something in the human that deserves inclusion as a quality of likeness or sameness common to non-disabled and disabled persons alike. Thus, rather than grounding the equality of persons (including people with disabilities) in some abstract notion of likeness—e.g., personhood, dignity, or the imago Dei—and subsequently articulating differences among persons as secondary variations and diverse expressions of this core humanity (including persons with disabilities), I propose to do the reverse, beginning with bodily difference in the shape of disability to show how what is shared in

common is not sameness, but difference. After all, as was noted above, disability is a way of speaking about what happens between persons in a social horizon, involving interpretations based on relationships and their imagined meaning. So let us dare to ask how disability appears relationally and becomes meaningful.

Disability is about difference. Often its emergence signals a disruption of sameness that provokes and disturbs. Disability disorients, and in the disorientation new possibilities of meaning are made possible. How so? By throwing into question societal mechanisms of exchange based upon ideologies set up to privilege “normal” bodies. A big part of the church’s work, then, is to highlight and even intensify the disruption, not as something troubling but as potentially transformative. Calling normalcy into question by disrupting standardized expectations of what counts for worth and functioning and being human, disability can open up social reflexivity and self-critique. As Titchkosky puts it: “Disorientations are vital in the sense that they testify to the possibility of something new arising in the face of the same.”¹² But I run ahead of myself.

Most commonly the disruption of disability animates discrimination as an impulse to exclude by resisting what is perceived as abnormal. Unable to reside in the ambiguity created by encountering the different and strange—that which does fit into the alleged ordered scheme of things—communities judge according to basic fears. The different is frightening because it mirrors the weakness and vulnerability of a community’s sense of itself, its identity. It ruptures conventions of normalcy and forces the “us” to acknowledge that which a community may shun and seek immunity against: vulnerability. This shunning process produces what I have called the “cult of normalcy.”¹³ The cult of normalcy routinizes through systems of power and their rituals ways of being human that are taken to be natural and normal, thus status quo. Hence, disability is considered a weakness because it concretely reveals what is shunned by normalcy: lack of ability. Not only does this lead to representing vulnerability as a flaw; it also seeks to objectify such a flaw as an attribute of the other who is different. To the degree that the fear of vulnerability is projected onto

another, a community’s identity—its way of understanding itself—is cut off from the wellspring of its own flourishing: mutual dependence.

I depend here upon ways feminist and queer theorists have sought to expose and denaturalize masculine and heterosexual hegemony as normative ways of being human measured against an “other”—female and homosexual. The cult of normalcy naturalizes what are in fact social constructions, ascribing commonality to a particular standard that becomes prototypical for all. Judith Butler’s classic *Gender Trouble* highlights precisely this problem, suggesting that *woman* or *homosexual* is not an essence but a signification that has meaning in relation to a constructed and hegemonic system of binary discourse—*woman* as not-man and *homosexual* as not-heterosexual.¹⁴

I would add that, like heteronormativity constructs homosexuality as deviant or abnormal, ableist discourses construct disability as “other” in order to mobilize representations that uphold communal identities based in binary systems of exclusion—able/disabled, male/female, hetero/homosexual, us/them. Michel Foucault famously speaks of binary divisions (mad/sane, normal/abnormal, in/out) and the “power of normalization,” whereby exclusion is not so much ejection from community as it is productive of community.¹⁵ Exclusion has formative power. The excluded supplemental defines the identity, making language itself a vehicle for inscribing the normal into our everyday sense of who we are within a social identity. One has only to recall how certain kinds of bodies are labeled “deformed,” “crazy,” “retarded,” “abnormal,” etc., as a way of making them “other.” There is no “natural” able-bodied person. Because of this, there is the possibility of deconstructing ableism and opening up multiple ways of being human together.

Biblical Testimonies

It is interesting to note how biblical testimonies show people with disabilities playing an important part in this process of social disruption, not merely as targets for redemptive healing, but rather as

bodies whose presences challenge and disorient the power of dominant regimes. For example, the rallying cry of miracle-working (e.g., “the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear”) used in the Gospels may not signify the curing of bodies gone wrong, of individual blemishes, but rather, announce the Spirit-filled social reality of liberation from enslavement and captivity. For example, common practice often included slaves and prisoners of war being maimed by their captors to prevent them from fleeing. So, as employed in the prophetic writings, attestations to miracle healings are perhaps ways the Gospels announce the coming of God’s reign—the prisoners are being freed. The announcement of God’s reign in Jesus’ message kindles expectations of hope and raises possibilities for an alternative social ordering. The Gospel narratives lay the groundwork for resistance and insurgency against normalcy in the form of empire.

Thus I would contend that miracle stories are not merely about making-right bodies that have gone wrong, but instead function as a kind of anti-hegemonic discourse sparking the remaking of the world. Such is the cry for Jubilee found in the prophets and in Jesus’ teaching, a redemptive process aimed at canceling the burden of debt and thus restoring agency and freedom. Whether or not Jubilee was fully realized, it awakens consciousness, not to take pity on “those poor” or seek individualized wholeness, but rather to aspire to a new kind of community founded upon the kinship and interdependence of all.

Indeed, the disruption of disability’s difference can open up new ways of imagining life together. Disabled bodies speak back, calling into question normalizing claims of bodily sovereignty, autonomy, independence, efficiency and so on, exposing the pretension to control as a marginalizing mechanism.¹⁶ Disability’s difference is not a problem to solve, but rather a powerful presence that judges by problematizing relational structures caught up in the cult of normalcy. The problem is the system, not individual bodies. Thus it is that provocation can be an invocation into a new frame of relation that begins with difference and comes to negotiate imaginative ways of sharing life, a common life. Equality is a sameness that comes through sharing

differences—with all the bodily messiness, relational uneasiness, and disquieting failure it may involve.

Deep Love and Friendship

If we go along with this perspective, life in the shape of disability can be considered a gift that teaches and empowers communities. In a recent article in the *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Rev. Joel Hunter, pastor of Northland Church, a large, nondenominational congregation in suburban Orlando with an extensive disabilities ministry, claims: “Many religious organizations have yet to learn what many American families have learned . . . That is, that the extra work it takes to accommodate those with obvious disabilities is the price of experiencing the kind of deep love and fulfillment that only comes with self-sacrifice.”¹⁷

I would press further. Deep love and fulfillment comes from being-with and witnessing each other’s lives, learning from the gifts all bring to the table in different ways. This can build relationships of care and friendship, which means more than providing simply the right to access. Erin R. DuBois concurs, noting in *The Mennonite* magazine:

They have won the legal battle for inclusion, but by the time they land in the pew at church, they may be too exhausted to fight for something more precious than their rights. Friendship is a gift the law can never guarantee to people with developmental disabilities. Churches across the United States, however, are reaping the rewards of building genuine relationships with those in their midst who are epitomized not by their disabilities but by their rare abilities to deepen the congregation’s spiritual life.¹⁸

Another example comes from Julie Allen, whose work focuses on the effects of disability inclusion in educational environments. She reports on the classroom benefits for all: disabled students learned more and grew in social skills through the experience of being welcomed; and non-disabled students improved their social skills, felt positive about how they were contributing to social change, and most importantly, gained deep respect for the disabled students.¹⁹ Becoming witnesses to the lives of each

other, in and through differences, can be an enriching experience for all.

So it is important to stress the difference of disability not only because such difference is often stigmatized and excluded, and not only because disability itself is diverse and not singular—the lives of people with disabilities as varied and different as the lives of those without disabilities—but also because it is through such difference that relational interplay creatively negotiates communal life. And this is especially true in that community called church. Paul states it theologically in the language of grace: “We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us” (Rom 12:6). Each member of the body of Christ is given a gift, a talent, a service according to the one divine Spirit shared in common, who “allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses” (1 Cor 12:4-11). The togetherness of church is a gift of the Spirit that trades upon differences, in fact that welcomes differences as gifts of grace. But how does provocation move to welcome?

Welcoming Together in Accessibility

Provocation is honored when difference is welcomed via what I have been calling deep access. Yet when temporarily able-bodied people practice inclusion as “mainstreaming,” “normalizing,” or “rehabilitating,” people with disabilities come into view only as others in need of care. Superficial access may be granted through self-congratulatory and paternalistic gestures of kindness and grace, but left out are the deeper matters of making room for difference, disability treated as a positive difference, neither a danger to be diffused and minimized, nor pathology to be cured, or even a deficit to be filled, before being accepted as a contributing part of a community’s life. Deep access means recognizing difference and diversity, bodily and neurologically, and welcoming it as part of us—not something other and abnormal to be remade in the image of the same as normal. It is not so much a matter

of welcoming so you can be a part of us on our terms, but rather so you can be with and augment us differently, on your terms as well. Rather than communal conformity and homogeneity, a communal heterogeneity and diversity is introduced.

However, doesn’t being intentional about welcoming persons with disabilities involve a kind of negative “othering” process, a “making different,” by which people without disabilities reduce bodily and neurological diversity to “disability” as something needing access? Doesn’t recognizing disability, even to accept it as something other than pathology, require a negative expectation? There are serious problems of perception here. And they open up a host of thorny problems related to the ways communities think about including and caring for people with disabilities. This is why it is essential to acknowledge the dangers of inclusion, moving beyond it tentatively toward a welcoming gesture in which all participate in negotiating access.

The Dangers of Inclusion

In the last chapter of *Changing the Subject: Women’s Discourses and Feminist Theology*, Mary McClintock-Fulkerson notes the perils of progressive and liberal notions of inclusion. She appreciatively critiques feminist liberation theology for assuming that “the feminist experience of certain texts and practices as oppressive is adequate to describe all forms of gendered subjectivities.”²⁰ Differences of location require taking seriously the fact that the empowerment of women may take on language not immediately compatible with that of liberationist approaches, such as those of Pentecostal women, which on the surface may appear misogynist but at another level are liberative. McClintock-Fulkerson notes that feminist discourse is often certified as a universalizing discourse from a position of privilege.²¹ Thus, in an effort to include and empower women’s voices, many voices are actually excluded, the “inside” being lifted up and defined in a particular way that feigns universality and wide inclusion, an inclusion available to the “outside” only if they shun their differences. There is equality

among women and men, but at the expense of differences among women.

In her work at the vanguard of international feminist writing, Chandra Talpade Mohanty calls such inclusionary practices “colonizing,” and encourages caution when Western feminists speak of a “common struggle” among all women. She questions racialized and sexualized ideologies that mask privilege, and challenges them by seeking to reorient feminist solidarity via a democratization of women’s voices.²² Like McClintock-Fulkerson, Mohanty advocates holding differences up as a kind of mirror to dominant feminist discourse, inviting self-critical questions about elements of its identity that its social location obscures.²³ Here the recognition of differences helps destabilize normative assumptions about what constitutes an “us”; differences become a teacher opening up communities beyond inclusion toward acknowledging diversity as productive of life together, not a deficiency, differences being equal and not merely incorporated insofar as they might become the likeness of us.

Inclusion, then, can mean the denial of difference on three interrelated levels. On the first, difference is acknowledged as something opposite and outside a normative inside us, a projected other. Inclusion operates in this way by upholding binary divisions that trade upon mechanisms of exclusion—to be “us” we need “them” to be different and not equal. On the second level, difference appears only as something capable of being assimilated. The logic goes this way: to be an inclusive “us,” we need to engage “them” insofar as they can become us, incorporated into the same. On the third level, in light of this, inclusion can be uncritical and lack self-awareness, assuming the rightness of its own position as an inside, all the while masking the fact that the inside itself is a construction based upon othering an outside. For people with disabilities, then, inclusion often is experienced via logic that is exclusionary at first (based in a binary figuration), and subsequently assimilative (normalizing), all in the name of care and doing good.

Let me give an example related to disability. Liberal or progressive theologies commonly tout inclusiveness, but in so doing find themselves col-

luding with the cult of normalcy. They construe redemption as healing and rescue from social censure while privileging the very discourses of power that project otherness upon those whose disability (and race, gender, etc.) invalidates and sets them apart from the normal in society. Compassion, the drama of which convinces people that good is being done, quickly becomes, in the words of Sharon Betcher, the “fantasy of noble graciousness,” a condescending act of pity that invalidates the person in the name of an ideal, an ideal that is illusive and faulted.²⁴

A “Hero” Christology

Accordingly, Betcher is rightly critical of liberal authors like Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, who present a model of Jesus as healer and grassroots organizer, a Jesus who surveys his subjects as judge of health and inclusion, reaching out to society’s defectives. We might ask: what is wrong with this? For Betcher, it too easily falls into the kind of hero Christology that does not disperse social dominance, but to the contrary, enacts it by preserving the dominant community’s vision of normalcy, “within which the different are paternally accommodated.”²⁵ Jesus performs with compassion, making place for society’s invalids, actions that grant him special moral prestige and confirm his supreme (divine?) mastery, autonomy, and ability. But this only confirms dominant notions of individualized health and wholeness.

Furthermore, such a portrayal is unhistorical by betraying distinctly modern ideologies. Betcher notes that while the portrait of Jesus as a gifted and charismatic leader played well in the earliest communities to advertise Christianity in Rome’s competitive religious marketplace, it has expressed itself in modernity by appealing to the bourgeois ideal of individualism and self-sovereignty, creating the difference and neediness of disabled bodies.²⁶ Thus, Borg and Crossan fail to address within what ideological theaters, what socioeconomic systems, illness and disability are defined in the earliest Christian communities. Modern attitudes of normalcy are imported in the re-descriptions of Jesus’

life and ministry. This then glosses the more important problem: that is, how healing narratives can objectify deficiency and make it realistic, as if those with disabilities really are defective and in need of remediation in order to be saved. Redemption is too often seen in terms of a miracle story, a remediation of defect, which restores an appropriate exercise of bodily autonomy. The effect does not ameliorate but instead exacerbates social control in the form of a patronizing restoration to normalcy.

Spirit “On the Slant”

This is where it becomes evident that there is great need to rethink Spirit as a gift-bearing and community-building power. Indeed, Betcher proposes thinking Spirit “on the slant,” from the perspective of uneven and twisted bodies so as to disrupt dominant discourses, even those of liberal humanitarianism. The aim is to transform notions of Spirit, moving away from guarantor of miraculous bodily remediation and “toward the recognition of persons living the variability and vulnerabilities of bodies with real presence to life.”²⁷ Drawing from Jürgen Moltmann, Betcher affirms Spirit as the animating principle of all life, splaying in affective energies that surround us in human and non-human forms, which bind us in interdependent relationships with hospitality to difference.²⁸ Betcher further suggests the Spirit is not a transcendent wonder-working or curative force, but a power that connects members of the community, healing by empowering creative agency, not simply by including the helpless or by restoring somatic intactness, but opening a physical social space of non-domination and mutuality.²⁹

Betcher’s work here helps clear the way for a more robust sense of inclusion, a welcoming that is careful and circumspect about what it assumes, open to provocation and disruption, and attentive to the Spirit working in differences as having productive power to create community. Indeed, the community we call church is a gift of the Spirit that traffics in differences, holding differences as gifts of grace. True, as borne out since the earliest Christian communities, such grace is not had easily,

but it can come through the gentle, patient, and persistent practice of opening thresholds provoked and disrupted by difference, even unto conversion and transformation by way of an invocation that calls us into something more. I suggest that this something more is the deep access of togetherness as a church not ordered by pretensions to human achievements—which too readily function in the cult of normalcy—but as a gift received as an after-effect of welcoming differences. Provocation is an invocation, an invitation into a relational liturgy of mutual care, a koinonia fellowship outlining the shape of God’s presence. And in this, the communion of the church becomes what Paul’s words testify to in 1 Corinthians 12, where gifts are stressed as of the Spirit who overflows and gives to each in a manner suited to them as productive of life together. For, as Paul continues, “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Cor 17:7).

The Importance of Vulnerability

This is deep access of the divine kind. It is not an achievement accomplished and then put behind, but a gift received amidst a continual process of negotiation and vulnerable sharing life between all people, those with disabilities and non-disabled persons. Human vulnerability is key, not as a sameness that underlies difference, but as a feature that emerges in and through bodily difference. Judith Butler uses the term to suggest a way of imagining community. She suggests that “we are alike only in having this condition [of vulnerability] separately and so having in common a condition that cannot be thought without difference.”³⁰ Vulnerability is more than a way of noting human bodily limits. It also does not simply mean susceptibility to injury or harm, as something negative, but even more susceptibility to good, to joy and fulfillment through others.³¹ It is an acknowledgement of the fact that human beings are exposed to and receive life from each other. It highlights the deep connecting points human bodies have with one another, points that indicate a basic web of mutual dependence, but that all too often become cloaked by the exchange

of values that animate communities under the cult of normalcy. Vulnerability creatively holds together equality and difference, common sharing, and the gift of distinctiveness, and opens out into a relationality of interdependence.

Drawing from Butler, I suggest that Christian churches adopt a transformative sense of inclusion that connects members of the community in mutual gestures of vulnerable welcome and care, all of this rising together in a momentum of Spirit-filled deep access. Here the genuine recognition of differences (and their interruptive power) can help destabilize normative assumptions about what constitutes an “us”; differences become a teacher opening up communities beyond inclusion toward acknowledging diversity as productive of life together. Rather than being an anomaly, the disruption of disability is a gift that can transform communities.

Deep Access as Spirituality of Attentiveness

Inclusion involves the participation of all, which depends upon access by and for all. Participation is not a paternalistic “doing for” but an equitable “being with” in a fulsome community of vulnerable sharing life. Access is not a one-time minimalist achievement, but an ongoing welcoming accommodation to make such participation possible. The question arises: how does such access become possible and genuinely deep with matters of disability? I propose that it is through *paying attention* that life together becomes one of caring mutuality. Attentiveness to people with disabilities as not simply of blank worth, but as having gifts to offer and things to say, is key to deep access. Listening to what is communicated is important to the process of opening further and ongoing participation in community life. It is this paying attention that is the stuff of mutual relationships of vulnerable giving and receiving, grounding worth of all.

Perhaps what church communities need is a kind of “spirituality of attentiveness” to help hold open gestures of welcome to difference and its disruption,

and so to transformative possibilities. This entails several crucial features. First, this attentiveness entails a willingness to create space for difference to dwell. That willingness involves the courage to risk disorientation, to remain open to surprise and mystery, to that which cannot be predictably managed and controlled according to preplanned programs and expectations. Such willingness also means “letting be” difference in a way that privileges the margins as sites of wisdom instead of preserving the center. Second, then, attentiveness is a welcoming invitation that witnesses the stories of others, that honors and appreciates gifts that might previously have been ignored or devalued. More, it lets go of the need for control, and gives way to another’s unique life, yielding. Perhaps this means allowing lament a greater due in churches without hurrying to provide answers and quick fixes. Holding each other’s pain can be a way of embodying God’s solidarity with human suffering.

Third, such listening invites response to others as people who address me/us and whose particular ways of being may call for particular kinds of responses. It may entail disruption and confusion and require reorientation. But insofar as access is a turn toward the margins, attentiveness risks reversals—the center becoming the margins, the first becoming last, the weak being the strong. Is this not what we see happening in the great banquet of the reign of God, where all are welcomed in such a way that the normative and dominant group is unhinged from its privileged position and the outsiders, the deviant, the poor are honored and included?

Receiving others via such attentiveness is, as Letty Russell would say, the practice of hospitality at its best.³² There is no inside-outside binary, but rather a roundtable gathering into which each guest is invited as host to one another, joined in relationships of mutual partnership and giving and receiving rather than dependency relationships of unilateral caregiving. An attentive practice listens and receives, letting-be the speaking voice of another and hearing how she or he perceives. In this way, the margin and the center, the guest and the host, each circulates and shifts among the other, distinctions blurred.

The listener comes to confront the biases, false assumptions, and unequal power quotients that

obscure encountering the difference of another. Furthermore, the listener responds, adjusting to the way of another by entering into her story. And the speaking voice grows into itself and gains dignity by being heard and accommodated. The dynamic shifts, then, as each trades roles and becomes an other for and with the other in an ongoing exchange of mutual welcome. Communities of genuine partnership are built upon this transformational process. And these partnerships also entail a commitment to justice work—confronting enduring systems of power on micro and communal levels, because vulnerability is often not parceled out equally within such “ongoing exchanges of mutual welcome.”

If faith communities are about forming Christian care givers/receivers who reflect God’s compassionate attentiveness, there is need for a radically different set of criteria to think about care than presently exists. There is need for communities cultivated by more than generous attitudes and right beliefs. People of faith need apprenticeship into habits of care formed by a transformative spirituality of attentiveness *with* people with disabilities, habits that cultivate mutual partnerships of vulnerability open to the transformative power of God’s grace. And such grace often surprises and disrupts on the way toward transformation, coming in ways that are unexpected and uncomfortable, dislodging the sway of normalcy. Attentiveness risks exposure to something that calls us into question, undoing what has been taken for granted about us, opening up something more than we were before. What would happen to the man in my opening story if this kind of attentiveness were in play? What would our churches look like within the arc of such attentiveness?

Lively Grace Heals Us All

To bring the discussion to a conclusion, I want to suggest that what is spiritual about this kind of attentiveness is that it welcomes others as loved by God, and indeed, as a way of loving God. Love of God and love of neighbor, the stranger, are twin el-

ements wrapped in one dynamic. Perhaps this could even be taken further: attentiveness to others in relationships of mutual care is attentiveness to God, a spiritual act. Welcoming one another—with and without disabilities—is a conversion to one another that is at the same time a conversion to God. It is a divine liturgy of love where love of one another in vulnerable relationships of giving and receiving is a way of loving God. Perhaps this gets to Paul’s proclamation in 2 Corinthians 12, where God’s power is made “complete” and perfected in weakness. Wholeness is not self-sufficiency, but the mutual nexus of communion that results from sharing our vulnerable humanity with one another. This is transformative. The vulnerability of the difference of another is a window into our own vulnerability, evoking a sympathetic relation that eludes the tyranny of the normal, sweeping under the radar of the conventional economies of value exchange. In this way, disability is a gift that teaches and transforms, provoking deep access through inviting us beyond inclusion and into communion. And in the sweep of such communion, lively grace heals us all.

Endnotes

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2. Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 108.

3. *Ibid.*, 115.

4. Brett Webb-Mitchell, *Beyond Accessibility: Toward Full Inclusion of People with Disabilities in Faith Communities* (New York: Moorehouse Publishing, 2010), 19.

5. Carolyn Thompson, “Ableism: The Face of Oppression as Experienced by People with Disabilities,” in *Injustice and the Care of Souls: Taking Difference Seriously in Pastoral Care*, eds. Sheryl A. Kugawa-Holbrook and Karen B. Montagno (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 219.

6. See Thomas Reynolds, “Theology and Disability: Changing the Conversation,” in *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health*, 16 (2012): 43.

7. Tanya Titchkosky, *The Question of Access: Disability, Space, Meaning* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 53.

8 For different examples, see Thomas Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008), 177-88; Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007), 169-91; and Hans Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

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11. Rod Michalko, *The Difference Disability Makes* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002).
12. Titchkosky, *The Question of Access*, 67.
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14. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990). See also Mary McClintock-Fulkerson, *Changing the Subject: Women's Discourses and Feminist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 73-75.
15. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 29, 199.
16. For a detailed discussion of modern notions of self that feature bodily control and mastery, see Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, chapter 3.
17. Mark I. Pinsky, "The How-To's of Accessibility," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 39, nos. 3 & 4 (Summer/Autumn 2011), <http://www.hds.harvard.edu/news-events/harvard-divinity-bulletin/articles/the-how-tos-of-accessibility>, accessed June 6, 2012.
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22. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), e.g., 18-19.
23. See McClintock-Fulkerson, *Changing the Subject*, 389.
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25. Ibid., 87.
26. Ibid., 112-13.
27. Ibid., 70.
28. Ibid., 119.
29. Ibid., 120-21.
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31. Kristine A. Culp, *Vulnerability and Glory: A Theological Account* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 2-4.
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