

SACRAMENTAL BODIES

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

1 Corinthians 11:23-25

Do this in remembrance of me." Who is the one we remember in the Eucharist? It is the disabled God who is present at the Eucharist table—the God who was physically tortured, arose from the dead, and is present in heaven and on earth, disabled and whole. This is the dangerous memory of the crucified and resurrected one. For in Jesus' resurrection, the full and accessible presence of the disabled God is among us in our continuing human history, as people with disabilities, as the temporarily able-bodied, as church, and as communion of struggle.

Resurrection is not about the negation or erasure of our disabled bodies in hopes of perfect images, untouched by physical disability; rather Christ's resurrection offers hope that our nonconventional, and sometimes difficult, bodies participate fully in the *imago Dei* and that God whose nature is love and who is on the side of justice and solidarity is touched by our experience. God is changed by the experience of being a disabled body. This is what the Christian hope of resurrection means.

In the resurrection, Jesus Christ's body is not only the transfigured form that yet embodies the reality of impaired hands, feet,

and side; it also consists of the body whose life and unity come from the Holy Spirit active in our continuing history. In summoning us to remembrance of his body and blood at table, the disabled God calls us to liberating relationships with God, our bodies, and others. We are called to be people who work for justice and access for all and who incorporate the body practices of justice and access as part of our ordinary lives. The emancipatory transformation made possible through the person and works of the disabled God emerges from the solidarity Jesus lived out in his ministry, and it continues to be embodied as the risen Christ active in and through the church and in all who struggle for a new humanity and a more humane world. This emancipatory transformation is a liberation from sin and a calling to full participation in the life of Christ, a liberation from passivity and a calling to our own bodies, and a liberation from mutilating poverty and marginalization and a calling to be church.

THE CHURCH AS COMMUNION OF STRUGGLE

The resurrected body of Christ as the embodied church is reflected in 1 Corinthians 12:12-13, 27:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. . . . Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

Christ's body, the church, is broken, marked by sin, divided by disputes, and exceptional in its exclusivity. Church structures keep people with disabilities out; church officials affirm our spiritual callings but tell us there is no place for our bodies to minister; and denominations lobby to gain exception from the governmental enforcement of basic standards of justice. There is no perfect church as there is no "perfect" body.

Yet the church whose calling is to be a communion of struggle is made possible, though not made easy, by brokenness. The members of the church represent an essential diversity, interrelated by necessity and often hating the very differences that make us indispensable to one another. We recognize our differences and hold in trust our common calling as people of God, the foundation of church.

As a communion of struggle, the church's first challenge is a willingness to risk conversion. The process of repentance is vital and generally painful. Letty Russell says,

Seeing the value of diversity, both as a God-given gift of creation and also as an enrichment of our lives, becomes a possibility as we become aware of the way in which difference carries with it the negative value of dominance, of divide and conquer in our society, and take steps to change this.¹

Naming carnal sins against people with disabilities and other bodies relegated to the margins in the church and society and taking responsibility for the body practices of the church that segregate and isolate these individuals and groups is the difficult work of making real the possibility of conversion to the disabled God. Often these processes engender conflict and tension as marginalized people seek their place in the decision-making processes of the church and make their nonconventional bodies models for ritual practice and as people who have endowed and overseen the body of the church fight to maintain control.

The church as a communion of struggle, like our bodies, is not always agreeably habitable. Just as our relations with our own bodies involve elements of struggle that cannot be eliminated, a supply of grief seldom fully dried up, and pain whose source is not always entirely evident, so, too, our relations with the church. But the church is a communion of conversion that exists as its members struggle to discern the presence of the disabled God in its midst. Only through conversion is discernment of the body of disabled God possible.

For able-bodied people, discerning the presence of God with and for people with disabilities is a struggle, indeed. Sue Halpern observes:

Physical health is contingent and often short-lived. But this truth eludes us as long as we are able to walk by simply putting one foot in front of the other. As a consequence, empathy for the disabled is unavailable to most able-bodied persons. Sympathy, yes, empathy, no, for every attempt to project oneself into that condition, to feel what it is like not to be ambulatory, for instance, is mediated by the ability to walk.²

Nonetheless, the experience of disability is an ever-present possibility for all people. A greater than 50 percent chance exists that an individual who is currently able-bodied will be physically disabled, either temporarily or permanently. Thus for the temporarily able-bodied, developing an empathy for people with disabilities means identifying with their own real bodies, bodies of contingency and limits.

For the most part, the bodies of the temporarily able-bodied do not conform to the idealized bodies upheld by sports-shoe commercials and magazine covers. Real bodies are seldom the icons of health and physical attractiveness that popular culture parades as “normal.” Yet these are the bodies of desire and imagination. As Susan Wendell writes:

Idealizing the body prevents everyone, able-bodied and disabled, from identifying with and loving her/his real body. Some people can have the illusion of acceptance that comes from believing that their bodies are “close enough” to the ideal, but this illusion only draws them deeper into identifying with the ideal and into the endless task of reconciling the reality with it. Sooner or later they must fail.³

In struggling to identify with the disabled God, temporarily able-bodied people work to become known to themselves as their actually existing bodies. Breaking the silence about their real lives as bodies makes possible a “return to the body”—a positive body awareness that comes not from pursuing an ideal but from accept-

ing the reality that bodies evolve, become ill and disabled, and die.⁴ As the church becomes the site for the difficult work of finding that oneself includes a body, the temporarily able-bodied as well as people with disabilities may come to understand what bodily integrity means as a spiritual and physical practice. Conversion then is, in part, learning to love what is carnal and our own already existing body.

Awareness of our bodies has taught people with disabilities about the reality of injustice in the world and in the church. Thus we seek in the church a communion of struggle for justice. It is the church “already” in its recognition that struggle is necessary and its willingness to engage the struggle. It is the church “not yet” in the realization that the rigors of discernment and the work to change structures and attitudes that cause marginalization, exclusion, and exploitation and to heal wounds those structures and attitudes inflict will not be finished so far as can now be seen. The struggle for justice entails the physical practices of relating to and caring for people with disabilities as central to the mission of the church. It entails making program, buildings, and ritual spaces accessible for those whose bodies need specific care. It means creating and supporting paid positions for advocacy within denominational structures. Justice for people with disabilities requires that the theological and ritual foundations of the church be shaken. As it communes together, the church emboldens and enlivens the struggle for justice within existing church institutions and the struggle for a transformation of church and social structures.

EUCCHARIST AS BODY PRACTICE

This struggle for justice is part of the ordinary life of the church.⁵ The struggle for wholeness and justice begins with the practices and habits of the church itself. As noted in chapter 3, the Christian church has not only been complacent to the struggle of people with disabilities, it has too long provided the ideological funding and charitable practices that have marginalized us in society. The

church is thus called first to discern the presence of the disabled God in its midst.

One place to begin is to consider the body practices of the church. The body practices of the church are a physical language—the routines, rules, and practices of the body, conscious and unconscious. In the church, the body practices are the physical discourse of inclusion and exclusion. These practices reveal the hidden “membership roll,” those whose bodies matter in the shaping of liturgies and services.

Receiving the Eucharist is a body practice of the church. The Eucharist as a central and constitutive practice of the church is a ritual of membership. Someone who can take or serve communion is a real Christian subject. Hence inclusion of people with disabilities in the ordinary practice of receiving and administering the Eucharist is a matter of bodily mediation of justice and an incorporation of hope.

My reflections on the practice of giving and receiving the Eucharist come from my own experience in several congregations and from the experience of other people with disabilities. The bodily practice of receiving the Eucharist in most congregations includes filing to the front of the sanctuary and kneeling at the communion rail. When I initially attended services, I would often be alerted by an usher that I need not go forward for the Eucharist. Instead I would be offered the sacrament at my seat when everyone else had been served. My presence in the service using either a wheelchair or crutches made problematical the “normal” bodily practice of the Eucharist in the congregation. Yet rather than focusing on the congregation’s practices that excluded my body and asking, “How do we alter the bodily practice of the Eucharist in order that this individual and others with disabilities would have full access to the ordinary practices of the church?” the decision makers would center the (unstated) problem on my disabled body, asking, “How should we accommodate this person with a disability in our practice of Eucharist?” Hence receiving the Eucharist was transformed for me from a corporate to a solitary experience; from a sacralization of Christ’s broken body to a stigmatization of my disabled body.

The exclusion and segregation of people with disabilities from receiving and administering the Eucharist has been the “normal” practice of the church. The experience of other people with disabilities bears witness to this hidden history. Stuart Govig, a theologian with disabilities, writes of being denied entrance to seminary until he could prove that he could perform the eucharistic ritual appropriately, meaning without altering the able-bodied practice.⁶ Marilyn Phillips recounts the religious experience of Margaret Orlinski, a young Polish-American woman with polio. Margaret reports her ambiguous relations within the Christian community. “I was called a saint. ‘God loves her so much to have given her this cross to bear.’ I heard that so many times. I felt an enormous amount of pressure to be perfect because I was ‘one of God’s favorites.’”⁷ On the other hand, Margaret’s impairment made her different and led to her segregation.

For First Holy Communion, ordinarily an event celebrating one’s spiritual growth in the collective setting of one’s age peers, Margaret not only was tutored separately but also received the sacrament not in the church, but in an individualized ceremony in her home. Although the event was not celebrated in the traditional manner, among age peers and in the church, nevertheless it was designated for collective celebration: “People flooded the living room with tears! Here’s this little crippled, pathetic girl receiving Jesus for the first time!”⁸

For many people with disabilities, the Eucharist is a ritual of exclusion and degradation. Access to this celebration of the body is restricted because of architectural barriers, ritual practices, demeaning body aesthetics, unreflective speech, and bodily reactions. Hence the Eucharist becomes a dreaded and humiliating remembrance that in the church we are trespassers in an able-bodied dominion. For many people at the margins of the institutional church, the Eucharist is what Letty M. Russell identifies as “a sacrament of disunion.”⁹ In making the Eucharist a physical practice of exclusion, the church demonstrates a tangible bias against our nonconventional bodies and dishonors the disabled God.

Instead, the Eucharist must become a bodily practice of justice. Russell says:

The sacraments are about God reaching out on the cross, to make things right, and about God's continuing action on behalf of groaning creation. Here we find the gift of righteousness and justice and are called to right administration of those gifts, together with others in need of God's justice within and beyond the rubrics of our particular traditions.¹⁰

Hope and the possibility of liberation welling up from a broken body is the miracle of the Eucharist. At the table, we remember the physical reality of that body broken for a people broken. At the table, we understand that Christ is present with us. As the disabled God, Christ has brought us grace and, in turn, makes us a grace to others as physical beings.

Jesus Christ, the disabled God and the incarnation of hope, requires that eucharistic theology and ritual be a sacrament of actually existing bodies. It is the beginning of discerning and remembering the disabled God in the body practices of the church and situating our struggle for justice within the church. As a sacrament of the church, the Eucharist is an outward and visible sign of a physical and spiritual grace. It is prophetic symbol, realizing and celebrating the presence and action of God. It is a bodily practice of grace.

Hence a body practice of Eucharist that excludes or segregates people with disabilities is not a celebration of the real body of Christ. Gutiérrez suggests,

Without a real commitment against exploitation and alienation and for a society of solidarity and justice, the Eucharistic celebration is an empty action, lacking any genuine endorsement by those who participate in it.¹¹

The eucharistic practices of the church must make real our remembrance of the disabled God by making good on body practices of access and inclusion. For some eucharistic traditions, this commitment will necessitate changes in the "normal" rituals of institution

that exclude ministers with disabilities from presiding at Holy Communion. For others, it will enjoin kneeling as the "normal" posture of the ritual. For all traditions, it means constituting eucharistic rituals so as to discontinue the exclusionary body practices that treat people with disabilities as exceptions to the rule or deviants. Through the Eucharist, people with disabilities reject the church's stigmatization of our nonconventional bodies and call for its reconciliation with the disabled God.

Incarnating the disabled God through the Eucharist also means affirming the unexpected participant. Emerging from the Seder, the Eucharist involves welcoming the invisible guest, that is, opening the door to Elijah. For people with disabilities who have been visible but invisible, seen and stigmatized but not acknowledged, Eucharist as a body practice of justice and inclusion welcomes us and recognizes the church's impairment when we are not included. The church is impoverished without our presence. Our narratives and bodies make clear that ordinary lives incorporate contingency and difficulty. We reveal the physical truth of embodiment as a painstaking process of claiming and inhabiting our actually existing bodies. People with disabilities in the church announce the presence of the disabled God for us and call the church to become a communion of struggle.

An altered body practice of the Eucharist is the evidence that the grace of God comes through bodies. Hence, it is at once a call for justice and a recognition of the value of nonconventional bodies. Often the Eucharist institutes a glorification of suffering, rather than a repudiation of injustice and an affirmation of the potency of the body. A call for justice comes from the disabled God's experience of torture. Acts of injustice are also inscribed on the bodies of many people with disabilities. War and malnutrition as major causes of disability underscore the role of injustice in creating disabled bodies. Nonetheless, the Eucharist symbolizes that our nonconventional bodies cannot be reduced to artifacts of injustice and sin. Most people with disabilities see our bodies not as signs of deviance or deformity, but as images of beauty and wholeness. We discern in our bodies, not only the ravages of injustice and pain, but also the reality of surviving with dignity. We,

who through the Eucharist meditate on Jesus Christ, the disabled God, recognize in ourselves the imago Dei. We see in Christ the affirmation of nonconventional bodies.

The Eucharist as body practice signifies solidarity and reconciliation: God among humankind, the temporarily able-bodied with people with disabilities, and we ourselves with our own bodies. In the Eucharist, we encounter the disabled God, who displayed the signs of disability, not as a demonstration of failure and defect, but in affirmation of connection and strength. In this resurrected Christ, the nonconventional body is recognized as sacrament. Christ's solidarity with the more than 600 million people with disabilities worldwide is revealed in the Eucharist.

This understanding of the Eucharist, therefore, must reject the image of the "perfect body" as an oppressive myth. In the United States where a fetish for perfect bodies drives people to self-flagellation in overzealous exercise, to mutilation through plastic surgery, to disablement in eating disorders, and to warehousing and stigmatizing people with disabilities, young and old, the eucharistic message that affirms actually existing bodies is desperately needed and offers healing body practices. This affirmation differs from a romanticization of the body, male or female. Instead it acknowledges the ambiguous character of embodiment and affirms our existence as painstakingly, honestly, and lovingly embodied beings.

LAYING ON OF HANDS

Reconceiving the body practices of the church necessitates that other physical rituals be examined, as well. As a person reared in a Pentecostal church, I have great appreciation for body practices such as laying on of hands, practices largely absent from the worship services of many denominations. Yet the practice of laying on of hands can become an ordinary ritual of inclusion for people with disabilities. Our bodies have too often been touched by hands that have forgotten our humanity and attend only to curing us. A religious body ritual that redeems our bodies from mechanistic

practices of rehabilitative medicine enables us to connect with our bodies as spiritual forms. Such experiences have transformative power.

My own history with laying on of hands has been an ambiguous one. Often the practice has been closely associated with ritual healing. I, like many people with disabilities, have experienced the negative effects of healing rituals. Healing has been the churchly parallel to rehabilitative medicine, in which the goal was "normalization" of the bodies of people with disabilities. As Nancy J. Lane writes, "Healing is expected to change the person who has a disability into one who does not. The burden of healing is placed totally on the person who is disabled, causing further suffering and continued alienation from the Church."¹² Failure to be "healed" is often assessed as a personal flaw in the individual, such as unrepentant sin or a selfish desire to remain disabled. Thus for many people with disabilities, laying on of hands is associated with their stigmatization within the church.

Yet I have also experienced laying on of hands that was restorative and redemptive. These physical mediations of God's grace have often kept me related to my body at times when all of my impulses pushed me toward dissociating from the pain-wracked, uncomfortable beast. For example, as a child after spending several months in hospitals having my body rebuilt surgically, I was a participant in a powerful service of laying on of hands. In a charismatic meeting in a rural North Dakota parish, I experienced the body care of several elderly nuns schooled in physical attendance as nurses and touched by the spirit as Christians. Their touch and tears were the body practices of inclusion. My body belonged in the church. From that early age, I recall the physical sensation of having my body redeemed for God as those spiritual women laid hands on me, caressing my pain, lifting my isolation, and revealing my spiritual body. For people with disabilities, such experiences of physical redemption and ordinary inclusion are rare.

The work to create rituals of bodily inclusion is vital to the church as a communion of struggle. The efforts to recover the hidden history of people with disabilities and to restore our bodies within the church is our conversion to the disabled God. The

eucharistic prayer offered here is part of my own struggle to practice my body as sacred space with other believers. This ritual is generally accompanied by reciprocal laying on of hands as the Eucharist is administered and received. It is offered here as illustration of new bodily practices that create liberating spaces and rituals for our sacramental bodies.

A EUCHARISTIC PRACTICE

Let us place ourselves in the presence of the disabled God and ask ourselves—how is God with us?

[God,] it was you who formed my inward parts;
 you knit me together in my mother's womb.
 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
 Wonderful are your works;
 that I know very well.
 My frame was not hidden from you,
 When I was being made in secret,
 intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
 Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
 In your book were written
 all the days that were formed for me
 when none of them as yet existed.

(From Psalm 139)

May God be with you.

And also with you.

Open yourselves to God and one another.

We open ourselves to God and one another.

The time is right to remember our God.

Thanks be to God.

Wise and gracious God, Creator of all good things, Redeemer of this broken world, you who are present with your people and the earth itself, we pray to you.

Remembering . . . the truth about your fear and anger and grief. You were forsaken and ignored and depressed.

We pray to you, the source of love in the world, the beginning of justice in history, the origin of peace on earth. You are God for us. *Remembering . . . the binds and bonds of your body. You create the space of encounter, the holiness of supping from another's cup, and the ambivalence of breaking.*

You lead your people out of bondage into freedom. You receive us into your body and we are made complete. You make the wounds part of the whole body. We pray to you.

Remembering . . . we have nothing but our flesh to offer you for yours. You give us ourselves and you risk everything.

All: We remember that on the night before Jesus was executed by those who feared both him and you, he ate a Passover meal with his friends, in celebration of liberation of your people from bondage. Remembering your power, Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and broke it, and gave it to his friends and said, "Take. Eat. This is my body, which will be broken for you. Whenever you eat it, remember me."

After supper, he took the wine, blessed it, and gave it to them, and said, "Drink this. This is my blood which will be shed for you, and for others, for the forgiveness of sins, to heal and empower you. Whenever you drink it, remember me."

Remembering Jesus in the breaking of his body and spilling of his blood, we ask you to bless this bread and this wine, making it for us the Body and Blood of Jesus the Christ, the disabled God. Bless us also that we may be for you living members of Christ's body in the world.¹³