

In Whose Image?

I am grateful to John Swinton, professor of Practical Theology at Aberdeen University, who expressed some of these thoughts in a lecture at a conference on Disability and Youth Ministry at Princeton Seminary last February. If you ever wonder what I do with my continuing ed. money, this sermon is one of those fruits.

Our church has been called to a mission to welcome all people into mission and ministry and to share God's love together as we worship and serve. That especially includes those who don't fit easily in other churches, especially those with disabilities and their families and caregivers. We got to this place not because we thought about it carefully, prayerfully and theologically – at least, not at first. We got here because a need and an opportunity for ministry was presented to us and we took it, not really knowing at the time what we were doing. I think there's something very biblical about that. If you look at almost everyone God ever called in the Bible, they had no clue at the outset what they were really being called to do, they just dropped their nets or left their sheep and followed. That's what we did, but as the session and I have talked about next steps over the last few months, it's clear that one part of this is to put some kind of theological framework around what God is calling us to do. Why is this mission to which we've been called important? What in our thinking and our actions needs to be changed and improved so we can do it in accordance with God's will and desire? So over the next few Sundays in July, I'll be trying to build a theological framework for the work to which we've been called. This isn't abstract theology. It's practical theology, theology with human flesh and practical applications. I will be talking about disability theology, a way in which the voice and experience of people with disabilities, people who had no voice in forming the biblical tradition interact with the tradition. When that happens, we notice some interesting things. I actually started a couple of weeks ago when we talked about being the body of Christ, and recognizing and appreciating the different gifts and roles each person has in the body.

I want to start today by talking about the images we have of God. That's important because it has to do with who we understand God is and it also has to do with what we think is good and important about ourselves as human beings made in the image of God. Where do we get our ideas about what it means to be made in the image of God?

John Swinton tells a story about a friend of his who was from Northern Ireland. She was a companion and caregiver for a young person who had Down Syndrome. They had to go to Southern Ireland, and every Sunday they were there they went to church. Now to you and me, that may not sound like much but you have to realize that there is still a great divide between the churches of Northern and Southern Ireland, with generations of animosity between them. A Northerner doesn't reasonably expect to find a welcome in a church in the south of Ireland. Yet because this woman was with the person with Down Syndrome, people went out of their way to welcome them and make a place for them in worship. John's friend asked, "What if Jesus had Down Syndrome?"

Now, that question makes some of us feel uncomfortable. It doesn't fit with our idea of who Jesus is. But look at it from her perspective: like her friend, Jesus broke down barriers and gave and received welcome in unexpected places. Jesus gave and received love from people who weren't like him and who were expected to dislike him. He opened ways to new relationships and new ways of being. What if Jesus had Down Syndrome?

My earliest pictures of God probably came from Sunday school pictures of Jesus welcoming the children. Let's unpack that a little: God is male, has a beard and long robes, loves kids, and is able bodied and good looking. I suspect a lot of you have that same picture in your heads. If you're thinking of God the Father, he has a long white beard. If you're thinking of Jesus, the beard is brown or black but otherwise, yeah, that's about it. Our first images of God come from the art produced by our culture, and they're shaped by what the

people around us look like and what they think is beautiful. If we go a little deeper than that, according to Karl Barth, they are shaped the characteristics our culture thinks is important. So during the Middle Ages, people's images of God were of holiness and power. During the Enlightenment, people talked about the God of reason, and the human ability to reason. We still have this idea today to some extent. We think, if we are the body of Christ, and God is like this, then the Christian community should be like this – shaped on reason and intellect. That's one of the reasons I had to go to seminary and learn Greek and Hebrew in order to become a Presbyterian minister. But here's the question: if God is a god of reason and the intellect, then where does that leave the person who is nonverbal and can't read? Outside the human community, which is why in western European cultures for the last two century people with intellectual disabilities have been institutionalized and forgotten, treated as less than human. Thank God, that has now begun to change.

But what if God is different than our cultural assumptions would make him? What if God is not intellectually superior and physically perfect? What is it that makes God God? What is the image of God that is in ourselves and in all other human beings?

The prophet Isaiah offers us another image, an image that was picked up by the earliest Christians in the days after the crucifixion and resurrection as a way of making sense of who Jesus was and what Jesus did. Here is the image we are offered:

For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;

and as one from whom others hide their faces

he was despised, and we held him of no account.

In this figure, we see one with a less than perfect body, one who knows our sickness and pain because he has experienced our sickness and pain. We see an image of a disabled God.

This is who he is not because it was forced upon him, or because of sin, his or anyone else's. It's what he chose, to give up his high and exalted place, and empty himself out in self-giving love and limit himself as we are all limited to a frail, wondrous human body.

If this is what our image of God is, then it doesn't matter if you can talk or if you can walk. It doesn't matter if you can't read or you can't see or hear. If you can love, then you are in the image of God and are able to be part of the body of Christ, the church.

As we become the church God is calling us to be, that's what we need to remember: that each person, including you, no matter what their ability or disability, color of skin, strength of mind or body, gender or identity, no matter how challenging they are to deal with, is made in the image of God. That image includes the image of a Christ's broken body, offered in love.

We, the church, are that broken body, striving in God's Spirit to be transformed by love and transformed to love. In that body, each person has a place and a purpose. We are called to love.