



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Articles:

📖 The Cult of Normalcy
(*Disability*, pp. 25-33)

Suggested Article:

📖 Travelling in the Ark
(*Disability*, pp. 83-88)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Disability and the Cult of Normalcy

Against the cult of normalcy, disability foregrounds vulnerability as a fundamental condition of sharing life together. It reminds us that wholeness is not self-sufficiency, but is the genuine communion that results from sharing our vulnerable humanity with one another in light of God's grace.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 45:9-12

Reflection

Disability is, in part, a social construction; it is not something we find in the world, but a way we happen to label and sort things. "Disability, of course, usually involves a bodily impairment—an inability to perform some task or activity considered necessary within a social environment. However, not all impairments are disabilities," Tom Reynolds notes. For example, much visual impairment is not labeled a disabling condition when we can "correct" it with glasses, while mobility impairment that requires crutches or a wheelchair is considered a disability. "Society disables people by representing impairment as a flaw or deficit, by constructing what is 'normal' and thereby creating the difference between bodies that are 'able' and those that are 'disabled.'"

The social construction of disability is just the flip side of what Reynolds calls "the cult of normalcy." Understanding how this works and resisting its sway are essential to our "sharing the radically inclusive love of God without representing some people as 'abled' and others as 'disabled.'" Reynolds identifies these elements in the rise of the cult of normalcy.

- ▶ *Certain kinds of bodily appearance and function that are valuable in particular situations of exchange are held up as standards for all people's bodies.* It starts innocently enough: we would like our interactions with people to be predictable. So, if ways of persons' looking or acting prove useful in certain exchanges, we "inscribe these standards across daily life—through media, education, economics, moral codes, etc.... We are habituated into mechanisms of normalcy." Once we have formed these expectations of one another, notes Reynolds, "disability appears as a disruption, a disorienting surprise that throws into crisis what has been taken for granted."
- ▶ *To maintain a group identity, certain kinds of bodies are privileged and others are considered deviant.* This "ableism" manufactures an "us" by diminishing a "them." It stigmatizes some folks "as abnormal and in need of care through curative practices, normalizing management, or exclusion." A normal-abnormal binary may infect our good intentions: "Even language of 'caring for the needy' can still function as a way of maintaining a regulative 'us' (giving from an abundance) over against 'them' (receiving from scarcity)," Reynolds warns. "Often church communities participate in the cult of normalcy inadvertently...[when] a paternalistic and unilateral mode of giving emerges that 'does for' others as if they are helpless subjects with nothing to offer."
- ▶ *Human vulnerability is misunderstood as a flaw in human nature when we only value "what counts for 'ability'—for example, the capacity*



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to think rationally, act autonomously, and look slim, healthy, and agelessly beautiful." Disability can open our eyes to great truths that the cult of normalcy is hiding: "All human beings share a capacity for giving and receiving, which is grounded in their vulnerability.... We do not just need others in order to survive as helpless infants, but also to flourish as people who can love and be loved by others, and eventually die in their care."

"Full humanity is neither diminished by disability nor confirmed by ability. Instead, it is based on the interdependent relationships we share with one another as creatures loved into being by God and in the image of God," Reynolds concludes. "The *appearance of disability*, manifest variously through different bodies, calls us prophetically into acknowledging our common human vulnerabilities and weaknesses, and this opens us more radically to God's grace."

Study Questions

1. What is the "cult of normalcy," according to Tom Reynolds? How is its sway over us similar to a cult?
2. Why does the cult of normalcy usually lead to ableism – the discriminatory attitudes and practices imposed, sometimes unconsciously, by non-disabled people, structures, and policies, on those with disabilities?
3. Discuss Frances Young's observation that disability is "a kind of judgment" on society, for it "shows up people and their relationships and their values for what they are."
4. According to Heiki Peckruhn, what can we learn from L'Arche, the international network of residential communities where people with developmental disabilities (core members) and caregiver assistants live together?

Departing Hymn: "When Hands Reach Out" (verses 1, 2, 4, and 5)

When hands reach out and fingers trace
the beauty of a loved one's face,
we thank you, God, that love relies
on gifts of grace not seen with eyes.

When fingers spell and signs express
our prayer and praise and thankfulness,
we thank you, God, that hands can sing;
you bless the silent songs we bring.

And when the ways we learn and grow
are not the ways that others know,
We thank you, God, that we have learned
your love's a gift, and never earned.

Your Spirit gives us differing ways
to serve you well and offer praise.
When all are joined as one, we'll be
your able, strong community.

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette (2001)[†]

Suggested Tunes: O WALY WALY or TALLIS' CANON

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Disability and the Cult of Normalcy

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand the rise of the cult of normalcy.
2. To explore why the cult of normalcy veers so quickly into ableism.
3. To consider how disability plays a prophetic role—exposing the social pretensions of the “normal” and allowing us to see our humanity as a vulnerable gift of God.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Disability (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “When Hands Reach Out” locate one of the familiar tunes O WALY WALY or TALLIS’ CANON in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

“Across many cultures, disability signifies an unruly body that does not conform to familiar expectations,” Tom Reynolds writes. “It seems to be a body gone wrong and in need of remediation through cure, healing, or rehabilitative adjustment to participate fully in society....

“In my experience as a parent advocating for my son, Chris, these harsh realities are commonplace.... I cannot see his body as ‘wrong’ and ‘lacking,’ as just a thing in need of remedy or cure. Certainly, Chris’s way of being does not conform to social expectations. For example, in a grocery store he is sometimes overwhelmed and overstimulated by the crowds, noises, and tight spaces with shelves stacked high with colorful packages. It becomes clear his reactions are ‘maladjusted’ and disruptive for other shoppers, who pass by shaking their heads and staring disapprovingly at both of us. He ‘should behave’ and ‘contain’ himself, someone once said to me. But I wonder precisely ‘who’ it is that should adjust, behave, and contain themselves. When perceived from a different vantage point (Chris’s), the grocery store is in fact an overwhelming place, bombarding the senses with excess noise and enticements to purchase merchandise, far beyond what is needed. Whose reaction is ‘normal,’ and why?” (*Disability*, 25-26)

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by thanking God for the common human vulnerabilities and weaknesses that can open us more radically to God’s grace.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Isaiah 45:9-12 from a modern translation.

Reflection

In this study Tom Reynolds introduces a social model for understanding human disability. He does not see disability as just a medical impairment in functioning of the individual, but as a socially constructed interpretation

of that impairment which effectively excludes the person from participating in common social activities. He helps us see that much of the “problem” of disability is not in individuals, but in societal attitudes (which he calls “the cult of normalcy”) that remain unacknowledged and unexamined. For this reason, disability can play a prophetic role in exposing the social pretensions of the “normal” and revealing to us the nature of our humanity – namely, that the deepest relationships with one another and before God are grounded in our common vulnerability.

Study Questions

1. Tom Reynolds explains, “The cult of normalcy takes the exchange values associated with bodily appearance and function – that is, how useful, productive, or valuable certain bodies are in particular social exchanges – and it routinizes them through systems of power and associated rituals. It takes these socially constructed attributions of value from particular situations and holds them up as standards for all people’s bodies. It makes them seem natural and even ideal. Rituals of socialization inscribe these standards across daily life – through media, education, economics, moral codes, etc. This is why ‘cult’ is a helpful way to understand how normalcy is communicated and internalized by members in a society. We are habituated into mechanisms of normalcy.” Encourage members to select a condition that is considered a disability in relation to another condition thought to be “normal.” How is that idea of “normalcy” reinforced through media, education, economics, and moral codes?
2. “We define ourselves by what we reject,” notes Reynolds; “the things we exclude outline the ‘identity’ by creating an ‘us’ over and against ‘them.’” Once disabilities are socially constructed, they often become the basis for this group-definition. “Language itself becomes a vehicle for this process, inscribing ‘the normal’ into our everyday sense of who we are. For instance, recall how terms like ‘cripple,’ ‘blind,’ and ‘deaf’ are used pejoratively as metaphors of delinquency.” The next step is easy: we develop (sometimes unconsciously) the prejudicial attitudes and systems that exclude or hide the “disabled.”
3. Frances Young does not mean that disability is “some kind of punishment for sin. It is not usually anyone’s fault. But it is a kind of judgment, a *krisis*, because...[s]ociety is judged by the way it treats handicapped people and our society is ambiguous.” Her point, Reynolds suggests, is that “disability prophetically holds up a mirror to each society and to each person, reflecting back values, attitudes, and practices that nurture treatments of disability as a tragic flaw, the product of circumstances and bodies ‘gone wrong.’”
4. Divide into several small groups. Assign to each group or let each one choose a particular disabling condition and discuss our society’s strengths and weaknesses in regard to persons with that condition. What are your congregation’s strengths and weaknesses in regard to that condition? Does the congregation exhibit counter-cultural practices in its regard?
5. Heiki Peckruhn commends the practice in L’Arche of reflecting on the meaning of our humanity “in relationship with those commonly found on the margins of society, who are denied full humanity and opportunity for reflection due to their developmental disabilities.” We will uncover our ableist tendency to “exclude because we are afraid of difference, of being challenged, and of losing what is important to us, including our image of ourselves.” We will also “discover together our unique contributions to our communities.”
6. She notes (with Stanley Hauerwas) that “L’Arche can be a powerful sign to congregations today...because churches too often fall into the temptation of conforming to the speed and placelessness that marks life in the modern age.... L’Arche ‘helps the church find the gospel’ by embodying gentleness, being present for one another, and caring for each other in physical ways through mutual patience, profound interdependence, and honesty.”
7. Finally, she says we will challenge “hypercognition, the attitude pervasive in Western society that privileges cognitive abilities and makes strong connections between intellect and being human. Rather, as Stephen Post argues, humanity is constituted by ‘other-regarding’ love, love that brings to life persons with disabilities and caregivers alike.”

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.