

An Accessible God

Isaiah 25: 6-8; Luke 24:13-16,28-35; John 20:19-31

Given April 19, 2009 at the Union Church of Bay Ridge, ©2009 Mary B. Speers, pastor

In 1821, Charlotte Elliott, aged 32 and a daughter of one of those very churchy Victorian families, fell seriously ill, and as a result of that illness became what was then called “a permanent invalid”.

In 1834, while the rest of the family were getting ready for a bazaar to raise money to build a school—you can imagine all the activity bustling around her—Charlotte was sitting there, unable to join in the fun, feeling useless to her family, her church, and to God, when all of a sudden the poem came to her: “Just as I am, without one plea...” How could she help? There was the answer: “Just as you are, you can help by writing this poem.”

Charlotte Elliott’s brother, a clergyman, wrote many years later, “In the course of a long ministry, I hope I have been permitted to see some fruits of my labors; but I feel far more has been done by a single hymn of my sister’s.”

Now, did any of you see the obituary for Nancy Eiesland four weeks ago? It was the headline that grabbed my attention: “Nancy Eiesland, 44, Wrote of a Disabled God.”

By the time the theologian and sociologist Nancy Eiesland was 13 years old, she had had 11 operations for the congenital bone defect in her hips and realized pain was her lot in life. So why did she say she hoped that when she went to heaven she would still have her disability?

The reason, which seems clear enough to many people with disabilities, was that her identity and character were formed by the mental, physical and societal challenges of her disability. She felt that without her disability, she would “be absolutely unknown to myself and perhaps to God.”

“In presenting his impaired body to his startled friends, the resurrected Jesus is revealed as the disabled God,” she wrote. God remains a God with whom people with disabilities can identify, she argued — Jesus is not cured and made whole; his injury is part of him, neither a divine punishment nor an opportunity for healing.

Douglas Martin, The New York Times, Sunday, March 22, 2009

So here are these two women, Nancy Eiesland and Charlotte Elliott, one born with disabilities and one who acquired them in adulthood, writing one hundred and sixty years apart. And both of them, in their own idiom and their own time, are saying, “Just as I am, that is how God wants me, that is wholeness to God, that is how all of us are made in the image of God.”

“Well, of course,” we say. “We knew that,” we say.

And yet, say Nancy and many others, maybe not; it’s not so simple.

There are the Holiness Codes of Leviticus, for one thing, with all their prohibitions:

No one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles. No descendant

of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall come near to offer the LORD's offerings by fire; since he has a blemish, he shall not come near to offer the food of his God. *Leviticus 21:18-21*

This, and much else in the same vein, has been taken literally, and caused great pain, in some centuries and in some churches. Even among nice mainline Protestants, there's the general assumption that it's somehow rude to people with disabilities to acknowledge that you notice (our hymnal deletes Charlotte's verse about being blind...did you notice that?). But if you try not to be offensive, you delete a huge number of people, which is offensive anyway—and besides, there's more than that. There's a universality here, says Nancy.

All of us, she says, have a greater or a lesser disability at some point in our lives. Think about it: we start out helpless, and many of us wind up helpless, not able to feed ourselves or change our clothes or walk across the room, and we have varying degrees of ability in various ways all through life. And no matter what abilities we have or don't have, we can have all sorts of attitudes about it—just think of the range of these among the people you know.

I can tell you that for many years now I've been keeping a list. It's a list for St Peter when I get to heaven, a list of all the things I want fixed when I'm totally spiritual in the afterlife and finally get my spiritual body. Maybe they have a big body-parts swap meet on some cloud someplace.

Well, then, as I've gotten older and am no longer as omnipotent as I was sure I was when I was twenty, especially with last summer's toothpick in my foot, I've had the opportunity to learn about what it means to live less able than I was before.

It taught me the value of planning. If you have a disability, you wind up planning everything more. Planning is not a bad thing! The ability to plan can be a profession in itself. The ability to plan can keep us out of an awful lot of trouble. It gives you flexibility: when you have a plan, you can improvise better. When you don't have a plan, you're *always* improvising, and that tends to wear you down over time and make you grouchy.

A disability teaches you to slow down generally, not to be in such a hurry, because there's absolutely no way you're going to get there as quickly as you used to. And when you slow down, you notice more. Ever slow down enough to notice that?

It also teaches you to do things you never would have been caught dead doing before, like *asking for help*. And correspondingly, living with someone with a disability teaches you to plan, to slow down, and to *offer* help. So living with a disability teaches a surprising number of generally useful coping skills.

I wish I were as omnipotent as I knew I was when I was twenty, but I'm awfully glad that I don't spend quite as much time and energy scurrying around fixing the dumb mistakes I made because I was in such an almighty hurry—back when I was omnipotent.

Just think how free we could be to make really stupendous and original dumb mistakes, if we could only make them in a more relaxed atmosphere!

For Nancy, the fact that Jesus came back with his wounds intact is enormously liberating, not only for herself, but for all God's children—every one of us who thinks we have any imperfection, every one of us who has ever implored God to change our lot in life, every one of us who thinks we are being punished when, in fact, we are being led even through pain and misery and powerlessness into the glory of everlasting life. To Nancy, God with a disability was God finally, truly *accessible to all*.

The medieval mystics of the plague years would have recognized this. Their writings are full of meditations on the wounded Lord, on the humanity of God, on the ways in which Jesus feeds us with his body and his blood, through his brokenness and his wounds. The medieval writers even sometimes talk about the wounds of Christ as portals through which we may, in the Spirit, become a part of Christ, enfolded in his body: *places of access* through which Christ welcomes us and mystically incorporates us into his body.

“...And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him...he was known to them in the breaking of the bread.” Somehow it is in his brokenness that Christ is the most accessible to us. Something in us—not our pride, but the very Spirit God has placed in us, the Spirit that is God's breath, the Spirit that is *our* breath, recognizes Christ not in the absence of blemish, but in the *breaking* of the bread, in the broken body, in a broken world, in brokenness itself.

God is all-powerful not in *preventing* pain and suffering, but in *transcending* it, through the never-failing power of the Spirit, the wind of God at creation, the breath of God that made the human earth-creature a living being. Nancy, herself a lifelong powerchair user, envisions God in a sip-puff wheelchair, the kind Chris Reeve used, the kind that is driven with the breath alone.

Nancy Eisland's colleague Colleen Grant writes,

When I first began to reflect seriously on the role of persons with disabilities in the life and liturgy of the church, I belonged to a local congregation of one hundred and fifteen members. Among these people, I knew of three families struggling with the effects of mental illness, one woman coping with the debilitating effects of multiple sclerosis, one young man in the midst of completely restructuring his life due to a profound loss of hearing, another man losing his eyesight due to a degenerative disease, two members undergoing treatments for cancer, and one much-beloved man who had recently died of complications stemming from diabetes. I suspect that there were also members with other sorts of illness and disabilities of which I had no knowledge. I also suspect that the members of my church were not particularly unusual in their various struggles, but instead represented “one of the basic truths of human existence, namely that such an existence is through and through finite.” This human reality is attested to over and over again in the New Testament.

Last week on Easter Sunday, you had on your bulletin cover a detail from the Isenheim Altarpiece. It's now in a museum in Colmar in France, but it came from St

Anthony's in Isenheim in Germany, a monastery that specialized in healing of all kinds. This altarpiece is a triptych, that's three paintings that form a whole, and it was painted in the anguished days of the early 16th century to help wounded, sick, and dying people to approach as closely as they possibly could to the wounds and suffering of their Savior. Painting it must have been a powerful devotional exercise for Matthias Grünewald.

One of the other panels has on it one of the most gruesome and poignant images ever made of the suffering human Christ on the Cross. The panel you saw last week shows him risen against a starry night sky, and there, too, he is showing his wounded hands and side as a nimbus of light almost obliterates his features in its brightness.

Charlotte Elliott became an "invalid" — tragic but, if we are to believe the novels of the day, not all that uncommon—but what matters most is what she did with it.

Don't forget that thirteen long years went by between Charlotte's illness and the writing of her famous poem. We don't hear much about how she felt for those thirteen years, except in the verses she wrote: "tossed about with many a conflict, many a doubt: fightings and fears within, without...poor, wretched, blind...[needing] healing of the mind..." Think of her all knotted up, and her struggle to make some good of it (she *was* a woman of faith)—think how she must have felt as all around her—well, imagine yourself in, let's say, a sip-puff wheelchair, in the midst of all our Union Church wreath-making and hall-decking at Christmastime, how would *you* feel? And suddenly there it was, *there* was the way to participate: "Just As I Am". And her hymn has given hope to millions.

No matter what you think is wrong with you, you are whole, and complete, and *desired* by God, *just as you are*. No matter what you think is wrong with your life, what you think is wrong with the world, with the church, wrong with anything at all, the message of Nancy Eiesland and Charlotte Elliott is that whatever it is, it is complete *as it is*, it is loved and desired by God *as it is*. God has a purpose for you, and if there's anything in your life that seems incomplete, God has a purpose for it—not as you or anyone else thinks it ought to be, but *as it is*.

Stanley Hauerwas writes, "Nancy Eiesland's work makes it clear to the church that 'the disabled' are not just another victimized group seeking voice. Rather, persons with disabilities help all Christians rediscover the extraordinary character of Christian worship and life. Such a rediscovery," he says, "has everything to do with learning that the God who makes such worship possible is about the creation of a community that gives us the time to wait on one another."

Will you pray an old prayer with me?

Lord Jesus, stay with us, for evening is at hand and the day is past; be our companion in the way, kindle our hearts, and awaken hope, that we may know you as you are revealed in Scripture and the breaking of bread. We ask that you grant this for your love's sake: Amen.