

**Amazing Grace:
A Word for the Less Than Abled-Bodied**

Denise Franklin
Wake Forest University School of Divinity, Winston-Salem, NC

Introduction

I am an amputee. Upon my disability I immediately became a member of the one minority population to which anyone may belong at anytime any place under unanticipated circumstances. An infection in my leg resulted in gangrene. I was later told I came within hours of dying. The below the knee amputation saved my life and gave me, a woman of color, yet another view of what it is like to be considered “less-than.” I quickly felt the physical, mental, and financial aspect of such a life-altering change. I also had to navigate my way around sites that were not wheelchair accessible. Signs giving directions or prices on top of store racks were constructed for people of normal standing stature. Doors were heavy and awkward. Hallways and bathrooms were narrow. However, navigation is possible with patience, strength, and the determination to back up and look up higher than I had before.

Backing up and looking up is also a mantra I have used to affirm my faith. Backing up and reviewing my relationship with God and looking up to the Divine Creator was and is something I do every single day now more than ever. But this research is more than a personal pursuit. As a graduate student pursuing a Masters of Divinity degree I thought the Almighty really wants those to whom I minister to “see less of me and more of thee.” Still, there was the imago dei that students seek for themselves and others. There are many lenses through which scholars and theologians are considering what it means to be made in the image of God when the Western Canon is comprised of books with stories compiled by men whose lives did not reflect the narrative of our existence.

Therefore, I began my search for my latest marginalized self through those biblical stories I thought I knew as well as through the lives others who found themselves a part of this burgeoning population that is often looked at but not always seen. My journey led me through and to amazingly saving grace and the discovery that we are all more than able-bodied.

In his book *God Will See You Through* author Max Lucado writes of the challenges people face and how God has moved them through and praised Him for reconciling their grief to the joy of what only the Almighty can do. Many of the circumstances are unforeseen. Lucado writes, “You carry something of God within you, something noble and holy, something the world needs – wisdom, kindness, mercy, skill. If Satan can neutralize you, he can mute your influence. What Satan intends for evil, God, the Master Weaver and Master Builder, redeems for good.”¹

¹ Max Lucado, *God Will Carry You Through* (Kansas City, MO: Hallmark Gift Books, 2014), 4.

People experience physical life-altering changes a due to a number of reasons. No matter how one's body is considered less-than-abled, Kathy Black, a theologian and author of *A Healing Homiletic* theorizes that as a person struggles "to make sense of a disability in relationship to God, another rationale emerges: disability provides an opportunity for personal growth and character development by overcoming obstacles.... Some of one's personal growth comes because of the disability and some in spite of it."² Other medical professionals and caregivers, she argues, would say "... it is possible that God allowed these disabilities to exist so that others can learn something from the ones with the disabilities."³

One could assert this subject is worth discussing simply because of the data. Many of the injuries and thus the statistics overlap but according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention the number of adults unable (or very difficult) to walk a quarter mile is 17.1 million or 7.1 percent of the population. The number of adults with any physical functioning difficulty is 36.2 million or 15.1 percent of the population.⁴ When one considers a broad definition of disability a 2010 U.S Census report indicates that about 56.7 million people — 19 percent of the population — had a disability in 2010 with more than half of them reporting the disability was severe. However, this research found that those who dealt successfully with their plight leaned heavily upon God and community. Thus, we must turn to the Canon to read what God says, who God chooses as leaders to shepherd others, and to the best of our limited ability pray for enlightenment about how God applies a plan for those who at some point considers themselves to be less-than the image they once were.

Biblical Leaders and Characters

Congregants have heard many sermons around Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt. What many may not have heard is a sermon about the man God chose to persuade Pharaoh to release his people. Moses had a speech impediment that contributed to his anxiety about speaking to Pharaoh about leading God's people out of Egypt. But God had seen and heard his people cry in misery and because of their oppression. God's plan was to get them out of Egypt into the land of milk and honey. Therefore, the Lord said to Moses "So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt" Exodus 3:10 NRSV). Nonetheless, Moses continued to speculate about how the Israelites would respond to him and God's plan. The Lord answered all of Moses' questions. Moses finally revealed another doubt about himself. His question was about his inability to speak. He said he never had been eloquent and was "slow of speech and tongue" (Exodus 4:10 NRSV). The reader finds substantiation of God's love for those who may question the Lord's value for those often seen as less than able by saying "Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go; I will help you speak and will

² Kathy Black, *A Healing Homiletic Preaching and Disability* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 27.

³ Ibid.

⁴ <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/disability.htm>

teach you what to say” (Exodus 4: 11-12 NIV).

Moses still pleaded with God to send someone else. God was not pleased with Moses’ reaction and continuous objections but replied, “What about your brother Aaron the Levite? I know he can speak well....He will speak to the people for you, and it will be as if he were your mouth and as if you were God to him” (Ex. 4: 14-16 NIV). *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary* explains that “Yahweh is the maker of heaven and earth, birds, fish, creeping things, and human persons with speech and sight and hearing. Moses’ pitiful excuse disregarded his own status as a creature, and the fact that all of his life must be referred to the creator God who endows and invests human persons as it is expedient for God. Moses is not autonomous or abandoned in his difficult calling. He need, therefore, have no anxiety about his speech.”⁵

There was the blind man who was healed by Jesus but questioned by the disciples if his parents had sinned. Even today a disability is often told through an old wives’ tale undergirded by some with scripture. However, Jesus replied that it was neither the man’s sin nor his parents’ sin that caused his blindness. The man had been born blind “... so that God’s work might be revealed in him” (John 9:3). Jesus restored the man’s sight after which he was peppered with questions by skeptical Pharisees about who Jesus was. It is important to point to the layers this passage addresses. There is the miracle of healing by Jesus through God. The restoration of the man’s sight also reveals the conflict between the authority of Jesus and the government whom the Pharisees represented. Ultimately, Jesus had to explain to his own disciples, once again, the power of God.

There is the paralyzed man whose four friends had carried him to be healed by Jesus. There was a crowd of people waiting for Jesus all of whom had heard of his healing abilities and were gathered where Jesus was in Capernaum. The paralytic’s friends saw they could not get through the crowd so they made a hole in the roof and lowered the disabled man through it on the mat on which he lay. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven” (Mark 2: 3-5 NRSV).

Additionally, Jesus ordered the man to stand up, take his mat and go home. Jesus was demonstrating God’s authority on earth not simply by saying his sins had been forgiven but by making his authority visible to all by restoring the man’s ability to walk. As cited in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus said, “But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the paralytic—¹¹ “I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.” And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!” (Mark 2: 10-12 NRSV)

Perhaps the most compelling person to consider when discussing disability is the Apostle Paul. The fervent supporter of Jesus and the Apostle who authored at least thirteen books or letters in the New Testament refers to his infirmities or weaknesses. Infirmity is perhaps the closest Greek parallel to the word disability.⁶ Theologian and author Amos Yong poses the

⁵ The New Interpreters Bible Commentary (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1994) , 308

⁶ Amos Young, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 84.

question, “Was St. Paul the first theologian of disability?”⁷ Paul who was then known as Saul was struck blind by God while on the road to Damascus. However, Yong points to evidence beyond the Damascus road to Paul’s own admission of suffering from a physical infirmity and the size of the letters in his correspondence. Yong quotes Paul in letter to the Galatians:

There is no better place to begin that with Paul’s letter to the Galatians. In the middle of it, he writes, ‘You know that it was because of a physical infirmity that I first announced the gospel to you; through my condition put you to the test, you did not scorn or despise me, but welcomed me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus.’⁸

The physical condition is not clear but Yong says Paul is commending the Galatians for not rejecting him which they could have because at the time Paul’s apparent condition was “one cursed by disability and therefore oppressed by evil spirits. Hence, casting him out of their presence and region would have been an understandable and normal (normate!) reaction.”⁹

While Paul refers to his eyesight by way of referring to the size of the letters in his communiqués, Yong says that there has never been a scholarly consensus on Paul’s diagnosis. The speculation has ranged from eye disease to migraines to malaria.¹⁰ The author approaches this uncertainty by asserting that even if Paul did not experience impairment he can nevertheless be considered to articulate a theology of disability. For example, “for whenever I am weak, then I am strong” – in Christ. Or, “for he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live him by the power of God”(2 Corinthians 13:4 NRSV).

The other side of this debate is cited in Disability Studies and Biblical Literature which states:

A variety of factors lead to the conclusion that the hypothesis fitting the evidence best is that Paul had an illness that involved seizures, perhaps a form of epilepsy. The most detailed argument in support of this theory is... of Max Krenkel who points out that among ancient Jews, Satan was believed to be the ruler of demons and that demons caused pain and troubles for human beings.... The symptoms are clearly those of a seizure... the Greeks referred to those subject to seizures as ‘lunar’ because they inferred that the illness

⁷ Ibid. 83.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid. 84.

¹⁰ Ibid. 85.

was due to the influence of the moon or of Selene, the moon goddess.

The reader should also consider Paul's lengthy passage that, according to Yong illuminates Paul's theology of weakness. It is the familiar passage regarding the body of Christ and can be found in the first letter to the Corinthians.

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it (I Corinthians 12: 21-26 NRSV).

Author Kathy Black tosses aside the link between a lack of faith and those who are disabled. Neither does she believe in the sin of our fathers theory. She also recognizes that miracles still occur. However, when it comes to biblical application of modern medical maladies she asserts how difficult it is for many preachers to discuss disabilities according to scripture because of the differences between first century and current day cultures. For example, Black writes that a disability today "... often limits one's ability to 'do'; it usually creates some sense of dependency on something or someone, which limits one's sense of individualism..." She goes on to explain that in the biblical context, blindness or deafness do but rather limited one's ability to be in relationship with the community." Being able to do versus being accepted as part of a community are two very different value systems, according to Black.¹¹

When the Less Than Able-Bodied go to Church

So off to church we go. What happens when we arrive? What are we doing for and saying to the less than able-bodied when we make our churches difficult to access, to be seated and to participate wholly in worship?

¹¹ Kathy Black, *A Healing Homiletic Preaching and Disability*.

Author Amos Yong writes that “ecclesial communities need to ‘accessorize,’ by which I mean do whatever it takes to make their buildings, activities and ministries more accessible to people across the disability spectrum.”¹²

Yong suggests churches not only accessorize and wait for people with disabilities to show up but develop ministries programs perhaps modeled after such governmental programs that serve specific groups of people by collaborating with other agencies. Yong points to the United States Department of Veterans Affairs where the VA is moving from dealing with the medical aspects of its populace to a more centered approach that deals with the whole person and the various layers of life. Chances are that all churches have members of the armed services community who could contribute to such a ministry.

When and if a church considers actually implementing a ministry for the disabled the church might review the mission of Joni and Friends, a more than 35-year old organization whose mission has been to communicate the Gospel and to equip Christ-honoring churches worldwide to evangelize and disciple people affected by disabilities. The ministry has extensive recommendations based upon seven steps. Those are prayer, support, team building, small beginnings, education, assimilating and adjusting with growth.¹³

While the conversation about disabled congregants is increasing academically that’s where the analysis principally lies. Author Courtney Wilder concludes that “the writing has not translated to the presence of people with disabilities in the pews.”

My experience in the church to which I have belonged to most of my life is that there are aspects that benefit some disabilities but not others. For example we have accessible vans available for transportation, a few wheelchairs available at the door mostly available upon request and large monitors throughout the sanctuary to make the text and service more visible for all.

Despite such progress in my church and others Wilder writes while the academic conversation about congregants with disabilities and the gifts they have to offer, the analysis is not translated to an increase of people with disabilities in the pews.”¹⁴ Furthermore, Wilder points out that churchgoers who have children with disabilities say they are only asked what they need from a congregation about half the time.¹⁵

How does the church’s current lack of inclusion impact those who are less than-abled-bodied and trying to make sense of themselves through their spiritual journey? Once one has searched the canon for answers about a disability what should one’s personal reaction be an

¹² Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*. 106.

¹³ <http://www.joniandfriends.org>

¹⁴ Wilder Courtney, *Disability, Faith and the Church: Inclusion and Accommodation in Contemporary Congregations* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2016). 100.

¹⁵ Ibid.

altered life? In other words, why? Why me? As cited earlier in this research, Author Black identifies one rationale that emerges, an opportunity for personal growth and character development by overcoming obstacles. She goes on to surmise that some of one's personal growth comes because of the disability and some in spite of it. But that is different from believing God caused a disability in order that one might learn a lesson or two. Sometimes, she writes, God willed these disabilities to exist so that others can learn something from the ones with the disabilities.¹⁶

So off to church we go to affirm our oneness with God. Chances are great that a regular churchgoer will hear a sermon about healing. Of course the frequency of such a message depends on the pastor. According to Black, there are those whose theology is a "literal interpretation of the Bible.. with the text taken from its first-century context and applied directly to people today. This approach tends to focus on the faith or lack of faith of the person with the disability and the physical cure."¹⁷ At the other end of that spectrum, Black writes, "are some preachers who do not believe in miracles and avoid preaching the healing texts altogether.. or try to explain the healings scientifically.. or leave miracles in the realm of mystery..."¹⁸ Most mainstream ministers are somewhere in between using words that typically describe the disabled metaphorically such as being deaf or blind to the Word. Black is asserting that sermons are delivered casually with words that strike the less than able-bodied deeply using their conditions as "objects or object lessons."¹⁹

And one must consider the difference between healing and curing. Healing in the first-century meant Jesus restoring the afflicted person as they once were and therefore could return and be accepted as a fully functioning member of the community. Black contends that "Healing happens when the well-being God offers is experienced... in the case of permanent disability healing often happens in the midst of managing the disability rather than any kind of 'cure'."²⁰

Wilder chooses to respond more specifically through the characters of the canon by pointing out:

Just as the biblical texts tell us that humans are made
in God's image, God also takes on human experience
and from the recognition of Jesus as Christ Incarnate
comes the revelation of God.... In John 9, Jesus identifies
the man born blind as a capable witness to Jesus's identity;
he responds to the marginalization of the man by his social
and religious community and identifies him as a locus of

¹⁶ Kathy Black, *A Healing Homiletic Preaching and Disability*, 27.

¹⁷ Ibid. 43.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid. 44.

²⁰ Ibid. 53.

revelation of God's power and God's intention toward human beings. This modeling of communities of justice is also present in other biblical texts. Particularly in Paul's instructions to the church in Corinth we see God as having created human beings as distinct individuals, each with the capacity to contribute to the life of the church.²¹

My Conclusive Experience

My conclusion thus far in my journey of resilience and restoration is that one's reaction in the face of unexpected and inexplicable conditions can inspire others to see God at work within because the fact is every person has scars that could be "disabling" in that they alter one's life. Even the afflictions that place one in the category of the disabled are sometimes invisible at a glance. However, when dealing with the physical less-than-able-bodied the inability to do what one once could, can have a transformative experience when facing their injury or new way of life.

What I have noticed is that whoever you were before the trauma occurred is intensified after the trauma. If one was faith-filled, determined, hopeful and mindful, one becomes intent on retaining those attributes and overcoming barriers. If, on the other hand, if one was needy perhaps the less-than-able-bodied will have that part of their approach to life magnified. As a divinity student I am intensely aware that there is a lot of gray in between hope and despair. One can be surrounded by loved ones who mean the best but don't always do what's best because they simply don't understand the journey. Furthermore, they may be going on their own journey of seeing someone they love suddenly transformed physically. For example, they may want to takeover that person's life not realizing they may have lost a limb but have not lost their mind and their ability to make decisions.

In the interest of transparency, let me explain my experience. Throughout my professional life, personality assessments have always identified me as dominant; one who focuses on outcomes; one who is task oriented; one with a lack of patience for those who claim to know or promise to do but don't. Therefore, while my maturation in age and experience have both taught me patience in these areas with others, I do not always display them toward myself as an amputee. My mind moves but my body can't operate spontaneously as it once could even though my body continues to adjust and compensate for the loss. At first I was bed-ridden. Next came the wheelchair, a brief acquaintance with a walker and now an intermittent reliance upon a cane. I do my laundry, cook, clean, and perform and other tasks that therapists teach you how to do when going through rehabilitation. I have gotten better at all of those seemingly simple things.

²¹ Courtney Wilder, *Disability, Faith and the Church*, 128.

For me the nights remain the most challenging hours to get through. I happen to live alone and during those wee hours when there is not someone to whom I can turn, talk or receive comfort I have no one except my God. That is one of the many reasons for me that my faith relationship has increased. Because I cannot get up and move at will beyond the walls of my home I have to remain quiet. I have to talk to the Almighty more intentionally and intensively than I ever did before. I have to back up and look higher than I ever had before. I must be still, listen and let God work. I have to internalize Jeremiah 29:11-12 when he prophesized that the Lord said “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you.” (NIV)

I have to remember to “not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4: 6-7 NIV). That exchange allows me to absolve myself of any irritation that may bubble to the surface when I have to adapt physically, open heavy doors and navigate narrow doors and hallways. I know there is a door where God does all the heavy lifting. The Word also says “knock and the door shall be opened” (Matthew. 7:8). Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Mt. 11:28-30).

It is what one does *after* the trauma that can provide internal strength, be an inspiration to others to look beyond your marginalization to the Almighty, the Healer of the spirit and the Amazing Grace our God has for all of us.