



Disability Beyond the Law

An Invitation to a Kingdom-Minded Community

Seth Miller*

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My father was the pastor of Serenity Baptist Church, a small congregation of about 125 members, located in rural Three Points, Arizona. “The Rest Stop,” as it fondly nicknamed itself, is located in the Sonoran Desert outside of Tucson. The community of Three Points is known by most as a place of desperate poverty. Its residents are probably best defined as those who are trying to escape society and the community itself is as harsh as a June summer while sometimes as equally beautiful as a desert sunset. As many know, with poverty comes hardship: untreated health and mental health conditions, severe substance abuse, disability, violent crime, and frequent suicide. Yet, more important than those statistics is a deeply seeded resilience exuded by many who live there. In that social context, Serenity often acted as the only viable support system for people who were truly in need and determined to survive.

One would be hard pressed to find a community in more contrast to many of the Christian liberal arts institutions across American academia where I now work. Yet, there are two important themes that I have taken from my childhood that can be applied universally: The first being that, as Christians, it is foundational to our faith that our lives should be focused in some way on serving people experiencing isolation, poverty, and oppression. Secondly, it is vital within the body of Christ that the people who are most in need are empowered to take leadership and ownership of the work of the church. Being an image bearer of God is more than

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walking through an open door on Sunday or following levitical tenants of scripture, it is an invitation for all to be invaluable pieces of the work of the Body of Christ.

Central to the ministry at Serenity were members of the congregation who were consistently called into vital leadership and service positions. The church supported a failed jojoba farmer when he shifted his livelihood to become a licensed therapist and substance abuse counselor. Later, a man who experienced homelessness for most of his life was tasked with running the food bank. And, everyday members of the community who would otherwise rarely be asked to lead were elected to the church vision council. The church's community service was shaped by the lived experiences of the marginalized community members who took a direct role in its enactment of the gospel.

These same principles can and should apply to our higher education communities. A Christian liberal arts education is an exercise in pursuit. We pursue truth in the laboratory, beauty in the art studio, and wisdom in the texts of our tradition. We seek to learn critical thinking skills from one another that will be effectively applied throughout our lives. And ultimately, we strive to embody a community that reflects the God we worship – a God of justice, hospitality, and radical love. However, while undergoing these lifelong pursuits, it

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becomes evident for many of us that access to the benefits of this experience is not always equitably distributed. Because of this, it is my belief that we must constantly ask whether we are ensuring that every member of our community can fully join in this journey. Otherwise, how is it that any of us will ever reach our full potential of reflecting the work of Jesus Christ?

The conversation about disability on Christian college campuses has, for too long, been framed primarily in the language of compliance and logistics – of ramps, extended time, and note-takers. These accommodations are essential components of justice mandated by law. But for a community committed to enacting the work of Christ, this cannot be the end of our conversation. Compliance under the law is the floor, not the ceiling. Our theological convictions call us to something far deeper: a culture of true belonging. The tradition of liberation theology establishes this principle by highlighting a preferential option for the poor and marginalized, with Ignacio Ellacuria going as far as declaring that there is no conversion to God if there is no conversion to the oppressed.

Moreso, the Apostle Paul, in chapter twelve of his first letter to the Corinthians, offers a similar theology of community using the metaphor of a body. The emphasis, though, is not just

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on access to The Almighty: "On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable."

What does it mean to believe that members of our community with disabilities – visible or invisible, physical, neurological, or psychological – are not merely recipients of aid but are, in fact, *indispensable*?

In *My Body is Not a Prayer Request*, disability advocate Dr. Amy Kenny discusses Second Samuel Chapter Seven to advocate for moving beyond just accessibility and prayer for miraculous healing and towards a Church of systemic equity. In this passage, David embodies the redemptive values of God's kingdom by inviting Mephibosheth, the disabled son of Johnathan, to the kingdom table and permanently restores his land and grants. As Kenny highlights, this act reflects the inclusive and radical grace of God's covenant. It is an example of how we must shift our institutional mindset from a reactive model of accommodation to a proactive culture of inclusion.

Similarly, Wendel Berry argues in *Life is a Miracle* for a shift in our standards from professionalism and profitability to the health and durability of human and natural communities. To do this he calls for authentic multiculturalism that adapts our ways of life to

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the places we live rather than manipulating life around us to meet our standards. With the results being at the very least “a healthier, prettier, more diverse and interesting world” that is “less toxic and explosive than the one we have now.”

Reflected in all of these models of the Body of Christ is that accommodation is a private, individual process, a series of hurdles that a student must clear to gain access. Inclusion, by contrast, is a public, communal posture. It asks, “How can we design our environment – our classrooms, our worship, our social events, our very mindsets – so that all students can flourish from the outset?” rather than, “How can we help this one student adapt to *our* environment?”

This shift has profound implications for every corner of higher education:

For faculty and administration, it means embracing principles for our teaching and physical environments, such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL). This approach creates curricula and classroom experiences that are accessible to people with a wide range of abilities and learning styles as our default position. This isn't about “dumbing down” content; it's about providing multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression – an approach that should help everyone in our community, those with and without disabilities. It's a professor

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who provides both written and audio versions of a lecture without the prompt or demand of an accommodation letter, the department that allows a project to be submitted as a paper, a podcast, or a presentation. This is not just good disability practice; it is an educational environment that allows all the opportunity to excel, including those doing the teaching. This is an administration that draws concepts of full access and the impacts of intersectionality into long-term environmental, spiritual, and financial planning. This is not just as an obligation, but an asset and a source of pride for our communities.

For students, it means cultivating a community of grace and awareness. It's recognizing that the Body of Christ is not a collection of self-sufficient individuals but an interdependent whole. This looks like choosing the accessible path when walking with friends, using a microphone in a crowded room without being asked, or challenging the casual (or even sometimes overt) ableist language that can slip into our conversations. It means fostering friendships where vulnerability is met not with pity, but with solidarity and empathy. It is the quiet, powerful work of seeing and honoring the full personhood of our peers. It is inviting our colleagues who live with disabilities into leadership roles and trusting their experiential insights to the point where the overall student experience on campus is changed for the better.

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For parents and alumni, it means challenging our institution to take up a leadership role in modeling the radical love of Christ which consistently broke down social and cultural barriers by embracing those on the margins. Just as Jesus welcomed the outcast and the overlooked, Christian liberal arts institutions should be encouraged to embody this same ethos by actively dismantling barriers – both physical and attitudinal – so that all can fully participate in the community. This is not just about compliance with the law, but about living out a deep theological commitment to seeing every person as a valued image-bearer of God. An expectation should be set that we intentionally champion inclusion. Our extended college communities should foster, through advocacy and financial means, a campus where every student is truly seen, supported, and celebrated.

For our spiritual life, it means asking hard questions. Does our worship design assume a single mode of physical and emotional expression? Are our service and outreach opportunities accessible to all who feel called to participate? Is our worship experience designed to include individuals who are deeply impacted by their disability? Are students and faculty with disabilities asked to lead our worship? True worship and service should flow from the entire Body of Christ, and we are lacking when any member is hindered from bringing their gifts to the altar.

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Just as Serenity Baptist Church embraces the outcast as integral parts of service and leadership in their own community, just as Jesus healed the man with many demons (a likely reference to schizophrenia) and sent him back as a missionary to the very people who had shackled and ostracized him, we must embrace a Christian community that is led for and by the vulnerable and the ostracized.

At Westmont College, where I serve as the Director of Accessibility Resources, our mission is to cultivate thoughtful scholars, grateful servants, and faithful leaders for global engagement. It seems that each institution has a calling that echoes this same lofty faith and academic-driven focus. We cannot fulfill our shared Christ-centered vision if we are not first communities where every member is known, valued, and empowered. The presence of disability is not a problem to be managed; it is a divine invitation to live more fully in the Gospel. It challenges our shallow obsession with strength and productivity and calls us to the upside-down economy of God's Kingdom, where strength is made perfect in weakness.

Let us commit to moving beyond the law. Let us build a community that strives for more than accessibility as a checklist to be completed, but instead one where inclusion is core to our

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expression of love for one another. This is the difficult, beautiful, and necessary work of becoming the Body of Christ – whole, holy, and indispensable.

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