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Attitudes toward people with disabilities

Modern Americans are blessed to live in an age of relative enlightenment concerning disability. While there will always be room for improvement, things are much better than they once were for Americans with disabilities, or than they still may be in other parts of the world. Americans with disabilities attend school, work, receive assistance, enjoy the benefits of medicine and science and technology, and are protected by law from discrimination and exclusion. People with disabilities are appreciated for their contributions to society. Advocacy groups abound, services are available as never before, access to public spaces is assured, and negative attitudes are quickly silenced.

Life has not always been so good. Folklorist D. L. Ashliman writes about northern European folktales and legends that reveal how people with disabilities were treated in former times, and how maltreatment was based on ignorance and fear. Many medieval cultures explained the existence of misshapen infants or children who failed to develop as being Satanic and “not the human parents’ offspring at all.”

“From pre-Christian until recent times, many people have sincerely and actively believed that supernatural beings can and do exchange their own inferior offspring for human children, making such trades either in order to breed new strength and vitality into their own diminutive races or simply to plague humankind. These beliefs continued to exert influence well into the nineteenth century, and in some areas even later.”¹

Abuse or even infanticide was justified as the means by which changelings could be returned to their origins and the rightful child restored to his or her parents. Ashliman credits the advance of science and medical explanations with the erosion of arcane beliefs and the adoption of enlightened attitudes. Medicine and science have not, however, always been advocates for people with disabilities. Social Darwinism and the eugenics movement gave society new excuses to dehumanize them.

“Supporters of eugenics called for government policies to improve the biological quality of the human race through selective parenthood. They linked physical and learning disabilities to a range of social problems including crime, vagrancy, alcoholism, prostitution and unemployment. Eugenics quickly gained many backers on both sides of the Atlantic, including leading politicians and opinion formers.”²

Out of this grew the Nazi holocaust in which thousands of people with disabilities were “euthanized” by lethal injection in medical centers two or three years before the erection of gas chambers and ovens for the extermination camps. But it wasn’t only mad men who embraced eugenics. The cream of society – right and left – advocated and carried out programs to prevent the immigration and procreation of the “unfit.”³ Programs to forcibly sterilize people with disabilities were adopted into American law long before their introduction in Germany. In 1927, the Supreme Court upheld these laws as constitutional, and compulsory sterilization continued in some states into the 1970s.⁴

“In 1937, a Gallup poll in the USA found that 45 percent supported euthanasia for ‘defective infants.’ A year later, in a speech at Harvard, WG Lennox argued that preserving disabled lives placed a strain on society and urged doctors to recognize ‘the privilege of death for the congenitally mindless and for the incurable sick.’ An article published in the journal of the American Psychiatric Association in 1942 called for the killing of all ‘retarded’ children over five years old.

“After World War II, the Nuremberg court established by the Allies did not order reparations to be paid to the families of disabled people killed by the Nazis nor that those responsible be punished. German doctors accused of murdering disabled people defended themselves by claiming (with some justification) that they were only implementing ideas which had found support in other countries, including America.

“What’s more, the Allied authorities were unable to classify the sterilizations of disabled people in Nazi Germany as war crimes because similar laws either did exist or had recently existed in America and other European countries.”³

The subsequent repudiation of eugenics did not end the horrors for people with disabilities in “civilized” lands. Before the disability rights movement gained strength, they were often segregated into institutions and schools, neglected or tortured, subjected to experimentation, and exploited.⁵

Sadly, it wasn’t until passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990 that many churches began creating access and opportunities for people with disabilities. Much more can certainly be done. Church bodies should be encouraged to evaluate not only whether their facilities, services, activities, and outreach programs comply with relevant laws, but also reflect the biblical principle that people with disabilities are made in the image of God.

The account of the man born blind in John 9 is indicative of attitudes toward people with disabilities in Jesus’ day. The disciples supposed that blindness was a punishment for sin, either the man’s or his parents’. This idea flowed from an Old Testament explanation of blessing for obedience and curses for unconfessed sin, as found in Deuteronomy 28. As the book of Job makes clear, however, there’s not always a one-for-one relationship between sin and its consequences. Jesus corrected the disciples by saying that sometimes a person has a disability in order to show the glory of God. This is exactly what happened when Jesus healed the paralytic (Luke 5:25-26).

Jesus encountered many people with disabilities during his sojourn on earth. One notable instance was when he healed Bartimaeus, a blind man. Several significant points can be made

from the account in Mark 10:46-52 that relate to the subject of disability:

- A. Society had sidelined Bartimaeus. He literally sat at the side of the road. And when he excitedly called out to Jesus for attention, the crowd tried to silence him. They weren't overtly mistreating him, but they were violating the spirit of Leviticus 19:14 – "You shall not curse the deaf, nor put a stumbling block before the blind." They were like the disciples when they attempted to bar children from meeting Jesus (Mk 10:13-16). They hadn't figured out how to do anything to help people with disabilities other than giving them a handout. Rather than helping him find gainful employment at a task he was capable of doing, blindness and society's shortsightedness had reduced Bartimaeus to begging.
- B. Bartimaeus was capable, nonetheless, of spiritually discerning who Jesus was. While others identified Jesus as a man from Nazareth, Bartimaeus somehow understood that Jesus is the Messiah, having called him "Son of David." He also correctly discerned his own spiritual condition in relation to Jesus, being in need of mercy (see Luke 18:13). How many able-bodied people made that discovery during Jesus' earthly ministry?
- C. He boldly and bravely persisted in his cry for help despite being outnumbered and outshouted. When others counted him out, Bartimaeus refused to comply. When called, he made his way to Jesus.
- D. Jesus' refusal to by-pass Bartimaeus instantly turned the crowd's annoyance over an "interruption" into elation over a poor blind man's inclusion. Truly, God does exalt the humble! (Psalm 113:5-7) "Cheer up! He's calling you!" is not only the call of God to people with disabilities, but to every one of us. He is truly filling His banquet hall with "the crippled and blind and lame" (Lk 14:21).
- E. Jesus courteously asked Bartimaeus what He could do for him. To put this in contemporary terms, even though He knows all things, Christ "empowered" him to articulate his own need. Christ-like caregivers likewise do not assume they will know what a care recipient wants or needs, but are patient to solicit and submit to their choices.
- F. Jesus acknowledged Bartimaeus' faith and once again gave him a choice: "Go your own way." Unlike the rich young ruler of Mk 10:17-22, once he was healed Bartimaeus dropped everything to follow Jesus. God's way was his way.

The question for all of us is do we reflect the compassion that Christ had for Bartimaeus and other people with a disability or chronic illness? Following His example, the early church immediately adopted a gracious response toward children born with disabilities, literally rescuing them from the trash heaps of the Roman Empire.⁶ Today, with all the advantages that our government and society offer, Christians have no excuse for creating welcoming and nurturing environments for people with disabilities. How might your church's LIFT program bridge any gaps in the services they receive from schools and community agencies?

¹ D. L. Ashliman, "Changelings: An Essay," 1997, <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/changeling.html>

² Victoria Brignell, "The eugenics movement Britain wants to forget," *The New Statesman*, 12/9/2010, <http://www.newstatesman.com/society/2010/12/british-eugenics-disabled>

³ Victoria Brignell, "When America believed in eugenics," *The New Statesman*, 12/10/2010, <http://www.newstatesman.com/society/2010/12/disabled-america-immigration>

⁴ Lutz Kaelber, Associate Professor of Sociology, University of Vermont, "Eugenics: Compulsory Sterilization in 50 American States," <http://www.uvm.edu/~lkaelber/eugenics/>

⁵ Victoria Brignell, "When the disabled were segregated," *The New Statesman*, 12/15/2010, <http://www.newstatesman.com/society/2010/12/disabled-children-british>

⁶ David WT Brattston, "The First Christian Voices Against Euthanasia," <http://www.orthodoxytoday.org/view/the-first-christian-voices-against-euthanasia>.