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Redefining Disability through Eucharist: That All Must Receive

Emily-Howard's squeals and gurgles curled like tendrils through the small, white-walled Episcopal church. Her voice leapt from the ceiling and between pews and congregants while the priest solemnly dribbled holy water from the baptismal font over her forehead. His voice resonated with a low tone as he pronounced the words of her baptism, "Emily-Howard, I baptize you in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." He then placed the sign of the cross on her forehead saying, "Emily-Howard, you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever."¹ Yet rather than presenting, or parading, Emily-Howard up and down the center aisle as the priest normally does after baptism, he quietly passed her back to her parents. After the close of the eucharistic service several women gossiped in the sanctuary. "That poor little girl. What will she ever be able to contribute to the church?" I realized they were discussing Emily-Howard and her recent baptism. "And the eucharist, will she ever understand it?" Another woman interjected with a paraphrase of 1 Cor 11:28, "How can she receive? She can't think before taking the bread and wine; she's retarded."²

Retarded. Emily-Howard has Down Syndrome. I found myself stepping out into the sunlight after the service with my mind scurrying through dozens of questions. Some of those very questions now set up the parameters for this exploration of disability and eucharist. Does an improperly formed chromosome separate one from the love of God? As a person with a mental disability, is Emily-Howard welcomed into the body of Christ? How does the eucharist, both theologically and liturgically, enable the Church to be more fully the body of Christ in, through,

¹ *Book of Common Prayer* 307-8.

² 1 Cor 11:28 reads, "Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup" (NRSV).

and for those with mental disabilities?³ I will pursue elements of these questions from an Anglican perspective to avoid issues surrounding open table and to provide a framework in which all baptized members of a community are understood as ontologically changed and welcome at the eucharistic table. I explore the relationships between mental disability and eucharist to suggest an alternative understanding or definition of disability as a sign under which not a few but Christians *all* are called and named.

It is necessary to begin with a discussion of language and make clear the ways in which we speak and write about disability. Within the last half-century a number of terms have been applied to those with disabilities, generally, and mental disabilities, specifically, including: handicapped, retarded, impaired, crippled, persons with disabilities, and disabled. Feminist theologian Nancy Eiesland explains several of these terms and highlights their differences. Impairment describes “an abnormality or loss of physiological form or function” whereas disability pertains to the consequences of the impairment, the “inability to perform some task or activity considered necessary.”⁴ For this discussion, I will employ the term disability or mental disability. Handicap proves less useful to this exploration since the term refers to “a social disadvantage that results from an impairment or disability.”⁵

The secular or legal understanding of disability stems from civil rights legislation signed into law on July 26, 1990: the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). This act, Pub. L. No 101-336, defines disability in a three-fold manner as “a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of an individual such as walking,

³ Work has been done by scholars such as Nancy Eiesland and Brett Webb-Mitchell on the subject of physical disability and the body of Christ through the lenses of feminist and liberation theology and focusing on issues of embodiment. Very few scholars specifically address mental disability and none, that I have found, connect it explicitly to the eucharist.

⁴ Eiesland, Nancy. *The Disabled God*. 27.

⁵ *Ibid* 27.

speaking, and breathing” and as “a record of such an impairment” or as “being regarded as having such an impairment.”⁶ The document *Loving Justice* makes the observation that 17% of religious congregations have persons with one or more disabilities. This percentage reflects the American public at large, which amounts to more than 49 million Americans with disabilities.⁷ While the ADA’s understanding of disability pervades our congregations, its legislation is not applicable to them unless a congregation fires an employee based on disability or runs a service program that receives federal or state funding. But does the ADA’s understanding of disability and assurance of rights address biblical questions like those of the Old Testament prophet Micah, “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”⁸ From my perspective, the rhetoric of the federal law falls short of addressing the alternative disability enacted in the eucharistic ritual precisely in its exclusively secular focus. That is to say the ritual of the eucharist embraces each person who receives as fundamentally disabled. A secular lens does not allow space for a theological perspective; it maintains binary oppositions of enfranchised and disenfranchised, of able and disabled.

Anglican theologian John Macquarrie helps to shift the discussion of disability from a secular context into a more explicitly Christian situation. He examines ability and consequently disability from the perspective of the exercise of human potential when he writes that “[e]ven when all natural possibilities have been reduced to the lowest conceivable level, when sight and thought and movement and decision are all in abeyance, for the Christian one still has not come to the point where that person can be written off as nothing [...] for the Christian believes in

⁶ Thornburgh, Ginny. *Loving Justice*. 3. The legal definition of disabilities is quite broad and includes: “mobility and sensory impairments, mental illness, mental retardation and learning disabilities [...] diabetes, cancer, HIV/AIDS, arthritis, respiratory and cardiac conditions, and chronic back pain” (3). According to this definition, individuals who function at a high level receive the designation of disabled. In this discussion, I will call an individual without one of the disabilities listed by the ADA able-bodied. Able-bodied connotes not only full physical but also mental abilities.

⁷ *Ibid* 1-3. More than 600 million individuals world-wide live with disabilities (Eiesland 116).

⁸ *Harper Collins Study Bible*.

resurrection”⁹ From this standpoint, Macquarrie can move beyond the ADA’s legalistic, medical interpretation of disability as the limiting of major life activity to disability as the limiting of human potential. From the perspective of limited human potential, living with a verbally abusive spouse and having lung cancer would both fall under the category of disability. For Macquarrie, not just the physically or mentally disabled warrant recognition, but also the millions of earth-dwellers who have unrealized life-potential due to economic handicaps.¹⁰

Another step towards a theological understanding of disability that is eucharistically grounded comes in reclaiming the language of disability through baptism. Secular legalese lumps individuals with disabilities into an amorphous category of “people with disabilities,” thereby effacing individuals’ particular identities. The disabled become identified by their perceived disability, by one particular attribute, rather than by the whole potential of their person. Anglican baptismal language, in the sacrament which precedes eucharist, reclaims the individual status for a “person with disabilities.”¹¹ Emily-Howard was not baptized in the name of the triune God into the body of Christ as Down Syndrome, as an item on a list of traits constituting legal disability, but as Emily-Howard. She is part of the body of Christ as no more and no less than herself. Through baptism, and consequently at the eucharistic table, mentally disabled individuals, all individuals, have names. One might also expand Gal 3:28, “[t]here is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” to include those with perceived disabilities and those without

⁹ Macquarrie, John. “Theological Reflections on Disability.” 29. Macquarrie’s writing reflects the Christian perspective that we are indeed a people of resurrection; that individuals live with the hope of reconciliation to God at death. Creation is not a completed act in this life but continues in the resurrection. This perspective does *not*, however, condone or affirm the suffering that does take place in a human’s life.

¹⁰ *Ibid* 36.

¹¹ The naming of baptism as a step towards claiming a new definition of disability is not particular only to the Anglican tradition but to any Christian denomination that baptizes individuals by name through water, spirit, and the triune God.

disabilities.¹² In baptism,, where individuals are named these markers are no longer of primary importance.

Perhaps the next step in the journey towards a new understanding of mental disability and disability more generally comes in revisiting biblical passages traditionally used to emphasize the correlation between disability and sin— Leviticus 21:17-23, Luke 5:18-26, and John 9:2. This is not to suggest an attempt to disregard our canonical scriptural texts but rather to acknowledge the exegetical perspective of the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries that perceived disability as sinful, deserved, and somehow unworthy of inclusion. Eiesland points out that unfortunately, rather than approaching disability as an issue of justice and empowerment, churches have supported the “societal structures and attitudes that have treated people with disabilities as objects of pity and paternalism.”¹³ The negative response to Emily-Howard’s baptism suggests that such biblically-based notions still pervade the contemporary communal mythology in the pews.

Leviticus 21:17-23 sets out the temple regulations for the holiness of priests. The Lord told Moses that no one with a blemish could appear before God. According to Leviticus, none can draw near to the temple “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.”¹⁴ The reader wonders why these blemished individuals might be excluded from the temple until arriving at verse 23 where the Lord explains that the blemished man ought not enter the sanctuary so that he does not *profane* the sanctuary. Levitical teachings forge a bond between physical blemish and absence of holiness, between disability and the profane. Many worshiping communities affirm this

¹² *Harper Collins Study Bible*.

¹³ Eiesland 20.

¹⁴ Leviticus 21:18-19.

connection between disability and the profane. In the case of mental disability such affirmation arises in a misunderstanding of *how* to incorporate perceived otherness into everything from the ritual of the holy rite to a Sunday school class.

In the New Testament, Luke 5:18-26 describes Jesus' healing of a paralytic man. The Pharisees and teachers of the law have crowded into Jerusalem at the news of Jesus' ability to heal through the power of the Lord. A group of men attempt to bring a paralytic to Jesus for healing, but due to the crowds they take the rather extreme action of lowering the man, on his bed, through the roof to the place where Jesus sat. When Jesus sees the paralytic he says, "[f]riend, your sins are forgiven you" and later "I say to you, stand up and take your bed and go to your home."¹⁵ A simple, literal reading of this incident equates the healing of paralysis with the forgiveness of sins, underlining an implicit connection between disability and sinfulness.¹⁶

John 9:2-7 describes Jesus' healing of a man, blind from birth, and his disciples' struggle to understand the cause of the man's blindness. The disciples attempt to discern if blindness stemmed from the man's own sin or from the sin of his parents. Jesus responds, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."¹⁷ Initially, Jesus' response to the disciples appears to have a positive connotation for the disabled because he disassociates the disability, blindness, from sin. But his following statement raises problematic questions surrounding theodicy and the manner in which God's revelation happens in the world. Are the disabled merely tools for God's work in the world, or do disabled individuals, do mentally disabled individuals, have worth outside of their utility for God's purposes? Perhaps one might follow the argument of protestant theological anthropology that

¹⁵ Luke 5:20, 24b.

¹⁶ A literal reading of this passage misses the richness of the passage— the paralytic was healed because of the faith of his friends. Perhaps the message of the parable rests not the healing of disability itself, but in the fact that Jesus had the power to heal sins on behalf of God to the dismay/disbelief of the Pharisees.

¹⁷ John 9:3.

humans are born ‘so that God’s works might be revealed.’ In this reading, all of humanity rests in the category of the blind man. That is to say Jesus’ words to the blind man undercut the distinctions of disability or ability, of blindness or sight, and affirm the ontology of humans as revealers of God’s good works.

Currently in academic discourse, there are two categorical strains of response to the biblical correlation of disability with sin— a reinterpretation of creation theology and theologies of a disabled God. Dawn DeVries writes about reclaiming creation theology in an article titled “Creation, Handicappism, and the Community of Differing Abilities.” She targets several elements of creation’s interpretation as particularly problematic for the understanding of disabilities. DeVries notes that common interpretation of Genesis 3 forges causal links between sin and resulting evil.¹⁸ To move beyond what she considers a false association, DeVries suggests a theology of re-creation that does not assume creation as an act completed, finished, and final. She begins with the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. God created all life from nothingness. The doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* eliminates the lording of ability by the able-bodied over the disabled. This perspective offers a non-hierarchical view of the created order because all creatures had the same root (nothingness) and are fundamentally dependent upon God and God’s grace in the creative act for their being.¹⁹

Problems arise when creation is considered a finished act. If God’s presence and action in creation is in fact finished, then humanity’s fall and the entry of sin, evil, and disability into the human order seems *not* to be part of God’s plan. In an understanding of a finished creation, it becomes far too easy to point to disability as the result of sin or as a manifestation of sin in the world. Disability, in a world of finished creation, can be thought to contradict God’s “original

¹⁸ DeVries, Dawn. “Creation, Handicappism, and the Community of Differing Abilities.” 135.

¹⁹ *Ibid* 134.

perfection” in creation.²⁰ But if, as DeVries asserts, creation is an ongoing process, then humanity in its current state is moving, with the help of God, not from but towards this original perfection. An ongoing concept of creation calls humanity not to moralize sin and place blame on the mentally disabled but rather to participate with God in reconciling the world to Godself.²¹ DeVries’ non-hierarchical view of creation also connects with the baptismal ecclesiology of individuals gathered around the eucharistic table. Each is known not by exterior labels but in particular relationship to Christ. All the baptized are called to participate in this process of ongoing creation especially through the eucharistic ritual.

Nancy Eiesland and Burton Cooper present two perspectives on the disabled God. Rather than re-creating creation, as DeVries does, Eiesland and Cooper refashion our very concept of God.²² Burton Cooper proposes that God be conceived of as disabled. For Cooper, a disabled God provides a forum in which he can address three theological issues he identifies as particularly troubling to the disabled: the meaning of perfection language in biblical faith, issues of theodicy and how God can allow suffering, and the hope of salvation for the disabled.²³ The disabled God enters human experience Christologically. God’s perfect love becomes suffering love in the person of Christ. Cooper also points out that “Jesus on the cross is God disabled, made weak and vulnerable to worldly powers because of the perfection of divine love.”²⁴ In Cooper’s conception of a disabled God, the disabled population “adds to the divine richness of

²⁰ *Ibid* 139.

²¹ *Ibid* 140. DeVries’ argument holds together from an intellectual standpoint and contributes a necessary and valuable perspective in the academic dialogue. Her work also has implications for an eschatological emphasis that could be emphasized liturgically through prayers, hymns, and preaching that might form parishioners in the notion that perfection lies *ahead* and not *behind* us.

²² Eiesland and Cooper are not the only scholars to use the term disabled God. Elizabeth Stuart in “Disruptive Bodies: Disability, Embodiment and Sexuality” and Kimberly Anne Willis in “Claim the ‘Fearsome Possibility:’ Towards a Contextual Christology of Disability” both use Eiesland’s construction of a “disabled God” through a Christological lens for their respective arguments.

²³ Cooper 56-7.

²⁴ *Ibid* 61.

God's being and all other beings. Insofar as the reality of the disabled participates in God, God can be said to be disabled."²⁵ I affirm that the disabled, generally, and mentally disabled specifically, participate fully in the richness of God's divine being. Yet Cooper, on a number of occasions, uses language that suggests the usefulness of the disabled population as a mechanism for the able-bodied to discern a disabled God through Christ crucified. He reads John 9:3 in a positive light because Jesus, in response to the disciples' question, effectively disassociates sin and disability. He does not, however, problematize the utility of the disabled person as a tool for manifesting God's work in the world.

Eiesland claims the disabled God as a new symbol of God and as an authentic process of perceiving God through a contextualized Christology.²⁶ She looks to Luke 24:36-9 where the crucified, wounded Jesus appears to his disciples on the road. The disciples experience Jesus' pierced body and his wounded side. The crucified Christ, disabled on the cross, gives assurance, Eiesland explains, that bodies participate in the *Imago Dei* through their very impairments.²⁷ She looks to the wounded Christ's resurrection as hope for the full participation of the disabled in the body of Christ. Eiesland's explicit feminist theological critique and consequently her focus on embodiment leave little space in her construction of a disabled God for disabilities outside the realm of the physical, bodily experience.

Both Eiesland and Cooper, not surprisingly, focus on the image of Christ crucified as the anchor point for a theology of a disabled God. Theirs are cogent explorations but seem narrowly Christological with little emphasis on other aspects of the Trinity, God the Father and God the

²⁵ *Ibid* 70.

²⁶ Eiesland 94, 98-9.

²⁷ *Ibid* 101.

Holy Spirit.²⁸ The most problematic aspect of both Eiesland's and Cooper's approaches rests in their reliance on a cognitive approach. Altering patterns of thought proves useful for academic discourse and for able-bodied members of congregations with full cognitive abilities. But the reliance on cognition undermines these scholars' liberatory approach. It is not a liberating act for one with a mental disability to *think* about a disabled God. Reconceiving God as disabled requires a level of cognition that precludes meaningful participation for our mentally disabled brothers and sisters. Their perspectives do, however, challenge the mentally able to reconsider their relationship with the mentally disabled. Additionally, neither Eiesland nor Cooper offers any gesture towards an understanding of disability outside the parameters of the legal definition offered by the ADA legislation. A step to include the mentally disabled and to broaden the definition of disability might come in *being* God through the Church, in liturgy, rather than thinking about God in the Church and academy.

Another way to problematize the work of Eiesland and Cooper is to challenge its reliance on binaries. Both scholars draw heavily from the work of liberation theology which places the oppressed in opposition to the oppressor, the victim in opposition to the perpetrator. In such constructions, God and God's justice is called to one side of the binary, that of the oppressed or the victim. Perhaps one could move beyond such binary structures by engaging Miroslav Volf's theology of embrace in *Exclusion & Embrace*. In his construction, like that of Eiesland and Cooper, Christ remains central to the theological project. It is Volf's notion of Christ's embrace that moves the conversation forward and claims Christ and God's justice not to be on the side of the oppressed but beyond such binaries entirely. In the exploration of the metaphor of embrace

²⁸ One way to enhance the concept of a disabled God might be turning to the thought of the Eastern Church Fathers. In *On the Unity of Christ*, Cyril of Alexandria can be interpreted to say that not only Christ but also God suffered in the crucifixion. God breaks the manacles of human suffering through the crucifixion because suffering is not part of God's ontology. Perhaps Eiesland and Cooper also adopt a Barthian approach to Christology, that Jesus Christ offers humanity all they can know of God the Father and the Holy Spirit through Christ's own mediation.

Volf writes that “the will to give ourselves to others and ‘welcome’ them, to readjust our identities to make space for them, is prior to any judgment about others except that of identifying them in their humanity.”²⁹ Christ’s ‘embrace’ in the ritual of eucharist enacts this process of welcoming, of adjustment, and of making space for all people in baptism, including those with mental disabilities, and lifts up each person’s humanity.

In Stanley Hauerwas’ article “The Church and Mentally Handicapped Persons,” he notes that “[i]f the word is preached and the sacraments served without the presence of mentally handicapped people, then it may be that we are less than the body of Christ.”³⁰ That is to say, in excluding the mentally disabled from sacramental ritual and performance, we cease to be the body of Christ. In denying Emily-Howard’s fitness for the eucharistic table based on her mental disability, the Church is no longer being the Church. Eucharistic theologian Michael Welker affirms Hauerwas’ sentiment when he notes that, “[o]nly the interconnection of word, element, and symbolic action of the [full] gathered community constitutes the sacrament.”³¹ In his writing, Hauerwas challenges readers that a way of counteracting the exclusion of mentally disabled in the Church might be through Christian imagination. This form of imagination is explicitly not a cognitive exercise but a way of “knowing” the world in and through liturgy, “through the practices and habits of community constituted by a truthful story.”³² For a community to move towards the practical inclusion of mentally disabled and towards a new definition of disability might well require such a Christian imagination. Yet it also might consist of revisiting a fundamental celebration in the Church’s articulation of salvation history—eucharist.

²⁹ Volf, Miroslav. *Exculsion & Embrace*. Abingdon P, 1996. 29.

³⁰ Hauerwas, Stanley. “The Church and Mentally Handicapped Persons.” 59.

³¹ Welker, Michael. *What Happens in Holy Communion?* 61.

³² Hauerwas 51.

A brief exploration of sacramental theologian Louis-Marie Chauvet's understanding of sign, symbol, and their relationship to sacrament provides necessary background for the applicability of eucharist to the redefinition of disability and the inclusion of the mentally disabled. The concepts of sign and symbol work together in a liturgical setting under two different systems. Sign, Chauvet explains, "belongs to the order of knowledge or information or value, whereas the symbol belongs to the order of recognition or communication between subjects as subjects and is outside the order of value."³³ Chauvet is quite clear that symbolization, in its very nature, is pure act.³⁴ Symbolization is action rather than idea, which would belong to the order of signs. Additionally, a symbol does not carry any sort of value—not commercial value, not use value, not aesthetic value, not cognitive value, and not emotional value.³⁵ Chauvet emphasizes that symbols also function to highlight differences.³⁶

Symbolization has power because it is action. Likewise eucharist, as a symbol, is powerful because it is action. Eucharist's nature as symbolic action underlines its ability to include those with mental disabilities at table. As a symbol, eucharist is explicitly not about knowledge and carries no cognitive value. Cognition is not required to participate within the symbolic action of God's grace, through Christ and the Holy Spirit, broken and shared with the worshiping community. Chauvet's thoughts on cognition and symbol echo the sentiments of the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church USA, The Most Rev. Frank Griswold. When asked about eucharistic hospitality for baptized mentally disabled Christians, Griswold affirmed that all

³³ Chauvet, Louis-Marie. *The Sacraments*. 76.

³⁴ *Ibid* 84.

³⁵ *Ibid* 84.

³⁶ Chauvet's notion of the power of symbols to heighten and draw out difference calls to mind Gordon Lathrop's discussion in *Holy Thing* of primary liturgical theology and the juxtaposition of holy things to create meaning in the *ordo* of worship.

baptized Christians are welcome to receive. He explained that eucharist is not a function of cognition but of God's gracious love through the embrace of Jesus on the cross.³⁷

As Chauvet notes that symbols are not freighted with values, those who participate in the action of the eucharist are welcomed into a valueless realm. Eucharist overcomes the temptation to place emotional value on a mentally disabled person by deeming their presence as anything from anxiety-inducing to warranting pity. Participation of mentally disabled in eucharist also precludes the attachment of use value to their participation. One cannot claim that mentally disabled should be welcomed to eucharist for useful purposes, in order, for instance, to remind able-bodied participants of God's grace. Mentally disabled partakers of bread and wine are not a transaction of usefulness to able-bodied just as eucharist is not a simple transaction between God and humanity. Participation in and through the symbolic action of eucharist is fundamentally not about utility or cognition and serves to make the category of disability or ability irrelevant for the purposes of the ritual.

The sacrament of eucharist manifests, in coalescing moments of action, liturgy's goal of communicating the gratuitous gift of God's grace and humanity's entrance into the mystery of Christ's passion through the Spirit. This is accomplished through the totality of the sacramental action, not just the reception of the consecrated element. Eucharist enables two directions of action, horizontally in equality among participants, and vertically, between individual participants and the Trinity. Eucharistic action repairs for the mentally disabled, and indeed for all people, the gaps left by a theological and intellectual construction of a Christ-centered disabled God. The eucharist offers Volf's image of the outstretched arms of Christ in embrace, in the identification of each person's humanity. The eucharist incorporates all participants without regard to cognitive ability and also manifests the presence of all parts of the Trinity.

³⁷ Griswold, Frank. Personal interview. 9 April 2004.

Maybe, as Bonaventure suggests, the performance of and participation in eucharist is not just being the body of Christ but actually thrusts one into the mystical body of Christ.³⁸

Ought a congregation to alter its eucharistic liturgy in an effort to synthesize its liturgical practice with the theological construction of a disabled God? Eiesland adapted a eucharistic Practice from a liturgy created by Carter Heyward in *Our Passion for Justice* that could be used in lieu of, for instance, the Episcopal Holy Eucharist Rite I or II.³⁹ This eucharistic liturgy does present powerful images and through word repetition draws connections between the brokenness of the world, of Christ's body, and of the communion bread. The prayer also ostensibly encourages the full participation of the gathered community in requesting that all, rather than just the celebrant, utter the words of institution. Yet the language of the prayer focuses primarily on physical disability and does not encompass the concerns of mental disability either in the language or the practice of the prayer. Eiesland's Eucharist Practice creates a new and unfamiliar liturgy that requires the ability to read.⁴⁰ The necessity of reading skills only further disassociates the mentally disabled from practical inclusion in the liturgical celebration at table.

Anglican theologian Stephen Sykes might not affirm the congregational practice of Eiesland's eucharistic prayer since he notes that "[i]mposing a liturgy is [...] a very considerable act of power, locating the worshippers in a particular social space, constructing the horizons of their world, and prompting them to, or dissuading them from, certain courses of action."⁴¹ The decision to include such a revised liturgy would almost indubitably not be made by congregants with mental disabilities. Perhaps Eiesland's eucharistic liturgy intended to empower the disabled

³⁸ Chauvet 94.

³⁹ Order for Holy Eucharist found in the *Book of Common Prayer*. For Eiesland's Eucharistic Practice please see Appendix A.

⁴⁰ This is as compared with the Eucharistic Rite of the *BCP* 1979, which has grown familiar through twenty-five years of repetition in congregations.

⁴¹ Sykes, Stephen. "Ritual and the Sacrament of the Word." 158.

through the emblem of the disabled God. But the imposition of a liturgy that requires reading abilities effectively ostracizes and further excludes those with mental disabilities from eucharist. A liturgy meant to liberate actually subverts itself in excluding mentally disabled from participation in the ritual based upon its highly textual nature and sophisticated theological challenges.⁴²

For Sykes, a liturgy's value comes in its repetition of elements in the biblical narrative, elements that subconsciously become ingrained in a worshipping participant. Hauerwas seems to affirm this notion when he explains that "mentally handicapped people are often better received in more 'liturgical' traditions— that is, traditions that know what God is doing through the community's ritual is more determinative than what any worshipper brings to or receives from the ritual."⁴³ Such innovative eucharistic liturgies as Eiesland's might be more aesthetically pleasing or intellectually challenging, whereas more traditional eucharistic liturgies leave theological issues of disability unaddressed. But perhaps for mentally disabled to be included in the action, in the symbol of the eucharist, the liturgy must rest on the imperfect tradition of rituals held in common. Sykes suggests that these common rituals, that of eucharist, are "vehicles of that freedom which is promised in the gospel."⁴⁴ The rhythm of constant repetition of the traditional eucharistic language embraces members of the mentally disabled community because of, as Chauvet notes, the very symbolic efficacy of the word.⁴⁵

Encounters with myriad individuals with different disabilities will occur for every lay and ordained persons, in secular and explicitly religious situations. Awareness of issues surrounding disabilities have recently been heightened in both Christian and secular contexts. For an

⁴² The imposition of such a eucharistic liturgy is likely to be uncomfortable for a large portion of the able-bodied congregations simply because of its lack of familiar phrases and suggestion of new understandings of God.

⁴³ Hauerwas 58.

⁴⁴ Sykes 167.

⁴⁵ Chauvet 93.

Anglican or Episcopal congregation awareness of disability comes to its fullness in the eucharist. Eucharist has power that is dramatically absent from ADA legislative language. The eucharist, in its full sacramental action, accomplishes two things. Firstly, it welcomes all mentally disabled to full participation in the supper through its nature as symbol— one that is, as Chauvet notes, beyond either cognition or use value. Additionally, the eucharist elbows out a space within secular legalese for a different definition of disability, for a Christian recontextualization of the term rooted in baptism and enacted through eucharist. Eucharist is justice-making in that it is a community activity, it exists in a “sphere of mutual obligations that extends through the whole community, rulers no less than subjects, rich and powerful no less than weak and poor, one culture no less than the other.”⁴⁶ In Galatians, Paul notes that in baptism “in Christ Jesus, you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”⁴⁷ Through baptism one is no longer a tax attorney, a social worker, a trombonist, or a mentally disabled person but rather Lin, Ginger, Mark, and Emily-Howard. Baptism replaces the laundry list of an individual’s skills or titles with a name and a common identity as a child of God. Each of these children, whether the President of the United States, an astrophysicist, or a marathon runner is broken in their human existence, is disabled by sin and finitude. Each comes to the foot of the cross to participate in the eucharistic action of take, bless, break, give, to receive the broken body of Christ. Each is in desperate need of God’s grace given through the action of the eucharist. Eucharist functions as an initiation to justice and as an acknowledgement of disability for all peoples gathered at the table.

⁴⁶ Volf 196.

⁴⁷ Galatians 3:26-8.

Appendix A: A Eucharistic Practice from Eiesland's *Disabled Body*, adapted from Carter Heyward's *Our Passion for Justice: Images of Power, Sexuality, and Liberation*.

**[God], it was you who formed my inward parts;
 you knit me together in my mother's womb
 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
 Wonderful are your works:
 That I know very well.
 My frame was not hidden from you,
 When I was being made in secret,
 Intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
 Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
 In your book were written
 All the days that were formed for me
 When none of them as yet existed.**
 (from Psalm 139)

May God be with you.

And also with you.

Open yourselves to God and one another.

We open ourselves to God and one another.

The time is right to remember our God.

Thanks be to God.

Wise and gracious God, Creator of all good things, Redeemer of this broken world, you who are present with your people and the earth itself, we pray to you.

Remembering...the truth about your fear and anger and grief. You were forsaken and ignored and depressed.

We pray to you, the source of love in the world, the beginning of justice in history, the origins of peace on earth. You are God for us.

Remembering...the binds and bonds of your body. You create the space of encounter, the holiness of supping from another's cup, and the ambivalence of breaking.

You lead your people out of bondage into freedom. You receive us into your body and we are made complete. You make the wounds part of the whole body. We pray to you.

Remembering...we have nothing but our flesh to offer you for yours. You give us ourselves and you risk everything.

All: We remember that on the night before Jesus was executed by those who feared both him and you, he ate a Passover meal with his friends, in celebration of liberation of your people from bondage. Remembering your power, Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and broke it, and gave it to his friends and said, "Take. Eat. This is my body, which will be broken for you. Whenever you eat it, remember me."

After supper, he took the wine, blessed it, and gave it to them, and said, "Drink this. This is my blood which will be shed for you and for others, for the forgiveness of sins, to heal and empower you. Whenever you drink it, remember me."

Remembering Jesus in the breaking of his body and spilling of his blood, we ask you to bless this bread and this wine, making it for us the Body and Blood of Jesus the Christ, the disabled God. Bless us also that we may be for you living members of Christ's body in the world.

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