



Encountering God in Disability
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Three Models of Disability:

Traditional/Medical Model:

Focuses on individual functioning or medical diagnostic criteria

One is disabled to the extent that one cannot do certain things.

Social Model:

Focuses on external structures and political considerations.

One is disabled to the extent that one is treated as disabled.

Limits Model:

Begins by noticing that limits are a “normal” part of life.

We all are limited.

Need to be aware of experiences and assumptions.

Potential Images of God:

1. God causes disability and it is a good thing. Shows God’s all-powerful side; Examples of healing through prayer.
2. God causes disability, and it is bad. It is a punishment or a lesson to be learned.
3. Disability is an accident, and thus God is with us in the experience but not in the cause.

1. God is concerned with issues of justice and inclusion; in solidarity with those who are oppressed or outcast, including people with disabilities.
2. God understands disability.

1. Limits, including experiences of disability, are understood to be “normal,” and part of the goodness of creation.
2. A key challenge is to neither deny nor overstate our limits, nor God’s limits. We are not self-sufficient, but we are also not powerless.
3. Accepting limits means striving for authenticity in our sense of self, relationships with others, and relationship with God.

Judith Abrahamson

Encountering God in Disability

I'd like to take just a few minutes to share with you some theological images of God in relation to disability. This is part of a body of work by a Christian theologian, Debbie Creamer, with some adaptations and adjustments, of course, to fit into our Jewish frame of reference.

Creamer presents three models of disability, and describes potential images of God within each of these models. Her first model is the traditional model, the one we're most familiar with. She refers to it as the medical model, since it so often is based on diagnostic criteria of one sort or another. Within this model, a person is disabled to the extent that he or she cannot do things. Disability is caused by some sort of impairment, be it physical or mental or sensory. The individual has the problem.

In this traditional view, God, as the Creator of the universe, is responsible for a person's disability. We are born with certain characteristics, and they are often noted to be innate, or, we might sometimes say, we all have "God given abilities"- and by inference, God-given disabilities as well.

Now, this can be good or bad. For the person who believes in God's ability to perform miracles, God is seen as being capable of healing a person, of making someone whole again. And prayer then becomes a very powerful tool in the healing process. It can also be seen as something bad, a punishment from God, or perhaps a lesson that we need to learn. When someone comes up to a rabbi and says, Why me? Why did this happen to me and my family? What did I do to deserve this? That person is reflecting this traditional view of God's ultimate power to create wholeness and brokenness, to create disabilities.

There is also another way of looking at disability within this traditional model- and that is to say that disability just happens. There is no reason. God is not involved- not involved at all. And so, when a person approaches us with questions about why me, our answer may well be that disability, as well as illness and tragedy, just aren't part of God's makeup. Things just happen in this world, and God isn't involved in each personal case. It's then that we need to use our pastoral counseling skills to respond in a sensitive and supportive manner.

The second model Creamer refers to as the social model, because from this viewpoint people are not the problem. They are only impaired to the extent that society places barriers in front of them. In this social view, God is the champion of the oppressed, the one who demands justice and righteousness- the poor and the widowed, the blind and the deaf and the lame- all those in need must be included as important members of the community.

God also understands disability. After all, so many of our leaders had disabilities, and God chose them to be the leaders and messengers of the Israelites. And it is important to emphasize that the disabilities never detracted from their mission or their ability to perform God's will. They were considered equally holy and equally important to the well being of the community.

Professor Creamer has created a third category, one which she calls the limits model. In this model, we all recognize that both human beings and God have limits. Disability is seen as a normal part of life. God has limitations as well, and the world can still be seen as very good, despite limits. Disability needs to be accepted- and dealt with- just as we deal with all aspects of our everyday life.

For Creamer, this represents a challenge - to recognize that while we have some power over our lives, at a deeper level, we really don't. And we understand that we need each other, we need community, and we also need a relationship with God. Whether we currently have a disability or may acquire one in the future, we all ultimately depend on each other to create a world in which all God's children are valued.