

2014 - Issue Three

Vulnerability and the Cult of "Normalcy"

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Thomas Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Brazos Press, 2008).

What is health? What does it mean to 'be' disabled? What is the relationship between "disability" and perfection; disability and church; disability and the new life found in Christ?

These are the questions that drive Thomas Reynolds's text, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality*.

Written from the heart of a father of a disabled son, the text remains theologically rigorous yet personal and concrete. Before launching into a social, philosophical, or theological reflection, most chapters begin and end with a story about Reynolds's son, Chris. Chris has been diagnosed with several neurological disorders, including Asperger's syndrome, bipolar disorder, Tourette's syndrome, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. It is from personal encounters with his son that Reynolds's reflections take shape.

In the introduction, Reynolds recounts the story of his son's removal from Sunday school on account of "inappropriate behavior." Though not meant in malice, the episode, which occurred in the early stages of Chris's diagnoses, was enough to turn the Reynolds family from the church. Reynolds concludes that this lack of welcome is rooted in an inadequate, modern, exclusionary anthropology, upheld by societal mores and what he calls the "cult of normalcy" (a phrase admittedly inspired by Stanley Hauerwas's expression, "tyranny of the normal"). It thus becomes Reynolds's mission in the text to dismantle this modern anthropology (with its accompanying visions of "health" and "normalcy") and re-cast disability in light of an adequate anthropology, rooted in the redemption of Christ. Further, he calls into question Christian charity vis-à-vis the disabled, noting that persons with disabilities are not simply a one-way occasion for Christian charity, but are themselves icons of the limitations and vulnerability common to us all.

The first chapter focuses on currents of social and theological thought regarding disabilities. Reynolds identifies the "medical model" of disability, which "tends to reduce disability to a problem requiring diagnosis and treatment, a broken object to be fixed, made better or overcome. In doing so...the person becomes reduced to a function of disabilities rather than vice versa" (25). In other words, the medical model reverses the order of things: it reduces a person to his disabilities, making disability the defining element of the person, and thus undermines the dignity and identity of the person (consequently, we speak of "the disabled" versus "persons with disabilities"). Further, according to this model, disability is an anomaly: something abnormal, common to "the disabled" alone, that must be fixed. Without this "fix," a person experiences limited quality of life.

This medical model is rooted in the “cult of normalcy” explored in chapters two and three. By “cult of normalcy,” Reynolds indicates the tacit, unquestioned set of beliefs held by modern liberal society regarding what constitutes “normal” human life and flourishing, “values such as freedom, equality, independence, rationality, productivity, efficiency, and prosperity” (70). So long as a person subscribes to these values, society is “tolerant” of him or her. Persons with disabilities, however, transgress these modern ideals, and thus threaten group identity. As a result of their inability to assimilate to modernity’s definition of normal (self-sufficiency, rational autonomy, productivity and so on), they are construed as un-healthy (health being the ability to realize liberal ideals in mind and body) and, further, are un-welcome (fail to be received in a mode other than pity).

Though this anthropology developed out of the 19th century secular liberal tradition, Reynolds observes it is widely accepted and unquestioned by Christians today. Persons with disabilities are thus construed as “the disabled”: human beings to be pitied on account of their inability to engender liberal ideals in mind and body (and who must, therefore, experience lesser quality of life). They may also be construed as potential “opportunities” to exercise “our” Christian charity. In either case, the person is reduced to his disability, and his disability is cast as something broken that must be fixed. The Christian model of disability, in other words, accepts as its basic framework the anthropology undergirding the medical model.

Regardless of where it is manifested, Reynolds identifies the most dangerous implication of this model as the lack of welcome toward the person with disabilities. Though liberal ideology touts “tolerance” as one of its cardinal values, Reynolds observes that we are tolerant only insofar as persons fit group identity. When one is unable to conform, the person is unwelcome. The effects of this are grave and offend against the deepest desires of the human heart. Reynolds insists that “[t]he basic question of human existence...is whether there is a welcome at the heart of things. Will I be received and embraced?”(51). This welcome is also essential in terms of our self-realization, for the human being subsists as one who is constitutively related to God and others, and receives knowledge of their “I” in and through these relations. In light of this, the walls built by the cult of normalcy gravely violate the dignity and identity of the person with disabilities. The *oikos* (home) we long for is traded in for an *oikonomia* (economy) of *exchange*, that “designates conventions and qualities that comprise what it takes to belong” (57). Being different, the disabled body is treated as a stranger, thus unable to experience welcome and self-realization.

In chapter four, Reynolds begins to “paint a more adequate portrait of being human, a vision grounded in themes of embodied relation, vulnerability, and love” (18). He asserts that “being human and whole means more than self-creative autonomy and productive efficiency” (18). Indeed, we are persons in and through our relations, and, further, as creatures, we all share a common vulnerability and finitude (limitation). The notion of autonomous self-creation is an “illusion” (105). I am a finite creature; thus, I am limited, held in being, and constitutively related to God and others. This vulnerability and dependence is more essential to me than what I can do or produce. Thus, Reynolds concludes, the sharp division between “the disabled” and the “non-disabled” is also an illusion. As he explains, “[d]isabled and non-disabled people do not count as two mutually exclusive categories of human beings. All people are linked indissolubly, sharing a fundamental condition: vulnerable personhood” (105).

In chapter five Reynolds explores this anthropology of vulnerability and dependence vis-à-vis creation, meditating on being as gift and the notion that all creatures have been loved and willed into existence. He re-casts welcome in light of *esse* and *creatio ex nihilo*: because I exist, I am welcome, I belong. I have been invited into being. “Welcome is at the heart of reality” (140). Therefore, the most appropriate posture of my being is one of gratitude and hope.

Chapters six and seven enter the specificity of the Christian faith, exploring themes of “image and likeness,” redemption, and church. Very much in line with St. John Paul II, Reynolds explores the idea of God-as-Trinity and the implications thereof. God is not simply autonomous and self-sufficient, but a communion of persons. Therefore, in the creaturely realm, human relationality does not “cross out” this image, but is indeed a very icon of it—a reflection of and participation in the inner-life of God Himself. Further, Reynolds turns to Christ, whose divinity was affirmed and made manifest precisely in his vulnerability. In Him, vulnerability is not rejected or hidden, but taken up and exalted as divine; disability and perfection are wed. “Far from something to be cured and gotten rid of...disability is a locus of divine relational power” (232).

This vision of Christ has radical implications for church life and ministry. Churches should live hospitality, not as a one-way, moralistic act, but as a participation in and act of gratitude for the welcome at the heart of reality. Further, the charity of Christians should be informed by our common vulnerability and the curious type of perfection revealed in Christ. Reynolds quotes Jean Vanier, who states: “This is my vision for our churches, that they become places of belonging, places of sharing...[among] broken men and women, like you and like me” (249). The “fuel” for this mutuality and inclusion is our creaturely status and reception by Christ, who loved us first (1 John 4:19).

In the end, it is clear that Reynolds accomplishes what he set out to do. In light of Christ, health is recast as dependence, gratitude, and relationality. The cult of normalcy is overturned, and disability is recognized as a property rooted in the creaturely status of the human being, and further embraced by Christ. The implication for Christian churches, then, is a movement from a model of pity, informed by liberal ideals, to one of empathetic welcome, rooted in a living awareness of our own vulnerability qua creatures of God.

While I am on the whole sympathetic with Reynolds’s argument, his position does raise certain questions. In Reynolds’s attempt to avoid the stigmatization of persons with disabilities, he comes dangerously close to implying that there are no natural norms for human health. He appears to collapse the distinction between the conventional and the natural. This raises a red flag insofar as it throws into question the end of medicine. While we certainly don’t want to subscribe to a cult of normalcy, neither do we want to deny medicine’s goal of restoring the body to good working order (which requires a notion of “good working order” as such).

Reynolds’s reflections clearly have positive implications for the question of health beyond persons with disabilities, such as the unborn child, elderly person, and the suffering body. Following the vision laid out in the text, we find the “golden thread” for interpreting these other states of being: namely, that every human being has been loved and willed into existence and is therefore worthy of love and belonging. Further, far from inhibiting true communion, these states of being draw us into it, as they call us to remember the vulnerability and dependence common to us all.

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