

“Our Disabled Christ”

Good Friday

Matthew 26:14-27:66

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From the Pulpit

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A meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Good Friday, April 14, 2017, as we gather at the foot of the cross this sermon is dedicated to Grace Glaros, to all the Christians attacked in Egypt on Palm Sunday and to all who have suffered the pain and loss of loved ones and always to the glory of God!

“Our Disabled Christ”

Matthew 26:14-27:66

At the foot of the cross we kneel tonight. Along with the women who remained faithful and present to the end, we kneel in prayer.

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Dr. Paul Brand was a Christian missionary and hand surgeon who worked for years in Vellore, India. His patients were mostly men, women and children suffering from Hanson’s

disease, more commonly known as leprosy. So few people would approach and touch the lepers, that he often worked alone. He often found himself looking at their hands – their missing fingers and toes – sometimes finding his patients missing all their digits.

He once said, *“Palm readers look at your hands and tell your future. I look at hands to tell your past. I can tell your trade and your character from your hands. I love hands.”* Reflecting on Christ’s hands, Paul Brand reflected, *“There were the hands of the small boy, the hands of the student of scripture holding a brush or stylus, forming letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Then there were the rough hands of the carpenter, gnarled with broken finger nails and bruised from hammer and saw. Then there were the hands of compassion – of the physician, the healer – touching the eyes of the blind, the diseased and needy. Finally, there were the crucified hands – driven through with spikes at the center of all the bones, tendons, nerves, blood vessels, and muscles.”* (Phillip Yancey, *Where is God When it Hurts?* Zondervan Press, Grand Rapids, MI, 1977).

The crucified hands were the hands of our disabled Christ. With his hands, he identified with all who were themselves disabled and carried the marks of suffering and pain. With his feet, also driven through with spikes, on the cross our Christ

was bloodied, beaten **and disabled** from the top of his head to the soles of his feet.

To understand Christ's total identification with all who are disabled, we can learn from one who lived and wrote from her own experience. Nancy Eiesland was such a person. By the time the theologian and sociologist Nancy Eiesland was 13 years old, she had had 11 operations for the congenital bone defect in her hips and realized pain was her lot in life. By 44, having battled all her life with disabling conditions, Dr. Eiesland was dead at too young an age – just as her Savior was dead at too young an age - 33 years old.

So why did Nancy Eiesland say she hoped that when she went to heaven she would still be disabled? The reason, which seems clear enough to many disabled people, was that her identity and character were formed by the mental, physical and societal challenges of her disability. She felt that without her disability, she would “be absolutely unknown to myself and perhaps to God.”

In her groundbreaking work, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*,” Nancy Eiesland referred to Christ as our “disabled God.” From his painful suffering on the cross, Christ becomes disabled by the violent act of the crucifixion. And, as she notes, he appears in the Gospel of

Luke in a resurrected body that contains the markings of his disablement - showing that the God we look to is not embodied as some sort of 'perfect way of being human.' Looking at Christ's disabled body, we understand the embodied God in Christ to be disabled.

God remains a God the disabled can identify with, she argued. Christ is not cured and made whole; his disabling injuries inflicted by the Roman Empire's crucifixion of him remain part of him, neither a divine punishment nor an opportunity for healing. He simply bears the open wounds of his disabling crucifixion for all time.

In his ground-breaking work, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, (published, 2011), Dr. James Cone shakes the conscience of America to see the link between the crucifixion of Christ and the crucifixions of upwards of 10,000 African-American men, women and children from the Southern lynching trees of America.

Like Jesus, blacks were publicly humiliated, subjected to the utmost indignity and cruelty. They were stripped in order to be deprived of dignity, then paraded, mocked and whipped, pierced and derided and spat upon and often tortured for hours in the presence of jeering crowds for popular entertainment. Lynchings were meant to terrorize Black

Americans, just as Jesus' crucifixion was meant to scare the living daylight out of his followers (James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Orbis Press, Maryknoll, NY, 2011, p. 30).

Most all of these victims of lynchings were killed by practicing white Christians who would show up on Sundays proclaiming the greatness of God in their all white churches. All while their "sisters and brothers" in Christ who were African-Americans were in worship "down the road" wailing and weeping for their crucified loved ones.

Dr. Cone quotes New Testament Scholar Paula Fredrickson, as she writes: *Crucifixion was the Roman form of public service announcement: Do not engage in sedition as this person has, or your fate will be similar. The point of this exercise was not the death of the offender, as such, but getting the attention of those watching. Crucifixion first and foremost is addressed to an audience* (Paula Frederickson, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews: A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity*, New York, Vintage, 2000, pp.233-234).

As Dr. Cone continues, "*the crucifixion of Jesus by the Romans in Jerusalem and the lynchings of blacks by whites in the United States are so amazingly similar that one wonders what blocks the*

*American Christian imagination from seeing the connection”
(Ibid).*

Our disabled Christ suffered the brutal penalty of death by the executioners of his time in his state. Still today, it happens. Executions continue to this day. People are disabled unto death by executioners across the globe – who seek to instill terror in all who witness their crucifying acts. They can wear the executioners garb of ISIS or the prison uniforms of Arkansas and Ohio. The cross and the lynching tree are cut from the same wood and the same mentality of terror and torture unto death. They are meant to disable and cause fear in all around. While they do disable, through the power of Christ they do not cause us to fear. Rather, they empower us for living lives of love and justice and overcoming the evil of this world with the hope of God’s saving power for life!

Whatever it is that disables you – your state of mental health, your conditions of physical challenge and pain, your attitude about other people, your willingness to turn away from evil and wrong in this world, I pray this night that our Disabled God would hold you with his torn-in-two hands, that he would walk with you as he limps with his disabled and disfigured feet, and that he would release you from your mindset that look backward and thus misses the forward

movement of healing and resurrection from the dead. Our disabled Christ loves you.

See from his hands, his head, his feet, sorrow and love flow mingled down,

did er' such love and sorrow meet, or thorns compose so rich a crown? Amen.

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