

Power, Trauma and Spiritual Abuse: How Disability Ethics Can Help the Church
FE 400: Transition into Vocation Ministry
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The church misses out on a massive opportunity by trying to heal everyone when the childlike faith God asks us to seek out can most clearly be demonstrated in those we label incapable, other and not worthy of paying attention to. Through a study in Luke and Acts, this paper seeks to encourage churches through the works of Jesus and His disciples while providing tools and ways the church can reframe services and doctrinal thinking to embrace those of difference into church communities, with acceptance and fellowship, allowing them to use their giftings to teach and inspire others. Everyone is welcome in the body of Christ and has a role to play; the question is whether the church is ready to embrace it.

What if the church began to see those alienated within it as Jesus saw the oppressed of His time? How can we learn from Jesus's encounters with those overlooked and segregated from their communities due to strict purity as an example of how to welcome those we encounter? How can the church remove stereotyping semantics in sermons, greetings, prayer, and interactions with the disabled community to see everyone's uniqueness?

This paper seeks to break down how differing forms of power struggle, trauma, and abuse label individuals of difference as outcasts within and outside of the church. Breaking down the segregation of prayer semantics and labelling based on first-glance judgment, the church alienates those Jesus calls us to welcome into the body of Christ with openness and embrace.

Trauma is something that every individual will face in some shape or form throughout their life. However, there are very different types of trauma and how individuals respond to trauma. In her book, Joanna Naomi Douglas states that "to live with trauma is to challenge the very meaning of the cross," and this is at the very heart of the human struggle and how that

relates to where we turn to in that struggle.¹ “Traumatic loss lies at the very heart of the Christian imagination.”² Every day, the heart of the believer and the unbeliever is bombarded with social media, advertisements, magazines, and media on television, dictating how we look, live our lives, and act within modern-day society. The media portrays what society claims is the picture-perfect individual based on unrealistic Hollywood standards, and anyone outside of those margins does not fit within the status quo of societal demands. We wonder why there is a mental health epidemic surfacing all around the world; it's because the expectation placed upon our teens, our children, our young adults, and our adults is an impossible standard, an impossible norm to achieve. Perfectionism is an unachievable and not God-ordained demand placed on individuals daily through social means and norms.

Mental health is massive in society today. However, different classifications often become jumbled together to make sense of the complexities of the human brain and how what individuals experience in their day-to-day encounters shape the development and changes that alter and change the functionality of the brain structure itself. It is essential, therefore, to take a moment to acknowledge and define the difference between clinical-related mental illness, trauma-related mental illness and psychological trauma to understand how the church struggles to support and can adapt to change its approach to the hurt we see daily in the congregants and those alienated and marginalized from the church body for their otherness both in the church body of Christ and society.

¹ Douglas, Joanna Naomi. *Trauma: Building a Trauma-Informed Worshipping Community*. Cambridge: Grove Books Limited, 2023, p. 1

² Hunsinger, Deborah van Deusen. *Bearing the Unbearable: Trauma, Gospel, and Pastoral Care*. Grand Rapids Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Company, 2015, p. 1

“Clinically related mental illnesses are caused by chemical imbalances within the brain and can largely be treated with some form of talking therapy, such as counselling and medication as needed.”³ Often, these types of mental illnesses are more treatable than trauma-related mental illnesses in the sense that they do not physically alter the makeup of the brain, more so the wiring of the brain. To continue, “trauma-related mental illnesses are caused by a psychological wounding to the brain which has devastating life-long consequences to the survivor. The psychological trauma wounding takes the survivor beyond the capabilities of talking therapies, and a much deeper understanding of recovery processes are required by those pastorally and professionally caring for trauma survivors.”⁴

What exactly is trauma, and how is it defined? “Trauma can be “derived from the Greek word meaning root, a wound, tear, or rupture. Trauma can also be applied to any experience of pain, suffering, and distress which has wounded a survivor physically or emotionally.”⁵ Therefore, psychological trauma, unlike a diagnosed mental illness, wounds the brain in a way that sticks permanently. Psychological trauma can occur in many forms and is defined as “the experience of terror, loss of control. And utter helplessness during a stressful event that threatens one’s psychological integrity.”⁶ The wounding of the brain is a subconscious act. When the stress levels max out the tolerance window of the individual, they become too much to cope with. Once an experience becomes too much to cope with, it is too much to survive or endure the experience, which, in turn, by nature, makes the event too painful to overcome.⁷

³ Douglas, 2023, p. 2

⁴ Douglas, 2023, p. 2

⁵ Douglas, 2023, p. 3

⁶ Douglas, 2023, p. 3

⁷ Douglas, 2023, p. 3

However, it is essential to note that even people who live daily with trauma are people and “a traumatic reaction needs to be treated as valid, regardless of how that event induced it appears to anyone else.”⁸ What does this look like about the church? How can spiritual abuse lead to trauma-based responses, and what does the bible say about guiding those who live with trauma daily?

“Spiritual abuse is a complex issue that has a devastating emotional toll upon exiting active church attendants that beckons consideration.”⁹ Spiritual abuse surfaces in many different forms, such as not feeling included within the community for a variety of other reasons, disagreeing with the teaching taking place, being mistreated by a member of the church and much more. “People who experience spiritual abuse report that they arrive at a point in their Christian journey where grief and disappointment with previous church leadership and disenchantment with the previously held beliefs overwhelm them.”¹⁰ How can we change this dynamic as a church and keep the upcoming generations in the pews on a Sunday morning with a heart on fire for God? The first step is to recognize the church not just as a building individuals gather in on a Sunday morning with flashy lights, loud music, and a sermon but as a community, the body of Christ coming together in unity, in community and with inclusivity.

Pastoral care for those who feel outcasted or those facing trauma starts with a loving community providing a safe space to work through the difficulties that individual faces daily—a place where the traumatized God can shine, though. “The traumatized God is an image with which God Himself suffers, and for those who live with the wound of trauma, and through

⁸ Hunsinger, 2015, p. 5

⁹ Orłowski, Barbara M. *Spiritual Abuse Recovery: Dynamic Research on Finding a Place of Wholeness*. Eugene, Or: Wipf & Stock, 2010, p. 1

¹⁰ Orłowski, 2010, p. 3

identification and solidarity, He can directly relate to those who are survivors of trauma.”¹¹ God, through His son Jesus, walks alongside the survivor in their journey so that the individual can find solace in the traumatized God on the cross and the suffering that occurred while recognizing the redemptive actions through ascension, providing hope of easing pain and the reclamation of joy.¹²

As a church, as the unified body of Christ, we are there to first and foremost listen and then walk and guide those hurting through the pain. It is through “being able to consider all aspects of one’s pain in a safe place, receiving thoughtful and wise feedback to bolster one’s faith and identity in Christ and recognizing that God has been with them through this trail helps people walk through the dark valley to the light of the valley.”¹³ This starting point allows the individual to unpiece the subconscious wound that hurts but is often covered in foginess and flashbacks. “Healing begins as the traumatized begin to piece together a cohesive narrative, creating a web of meaning around unspeakable events while remaining fully connected emotionally to themselves and their listeners.”¹⁴

Healing can happen and begin when we provide a safe and welcoming community for those struggling within and outside our congregations. However, help is two-sided for the pastoral care staff and the individual. To conclude this section, Joanna Naomi Douglas's words impact how the community of God can support those struggling. “A survivor is responsible for working with Jesus, alongside trained professionals, to find their healing and liberation. A worshipping community cannot do more for somebody than they are willing to do for

¹¹ Douglas, 2023, p. 13-14

¹² Douglas, 2023, p. 14

¹³ Orłowski, 2010, p. 205

¹⁴ Hunsinger, 2015, p. 14

themselves. However, it is a worshipping community's role to provide a place of safety and belonging by walking alongside and profoundly witnessing the struggle of trauma in unity and community."¹⁵

However, as much as this seems like a simple solution, how often do we genuinely see churches coming together and supporting everyone, no matter their differences or abilities? Usually, the church cares for and supports those within its community who fit within the contexts of the standards of what their congregants should look and act like and exclude everyone else. However, God never called us to pick and choose who enters the kingdom of God; we are called to accept everyone. But we don't; a key example is the disabled community.

In the book of Luke, there are countless examples of disability ethics and ministry within the ministry of Jesus. The one that stands out regarding the selection of who fits the norms and who is discriminated against as others is the story in Luke 14:15-24, the parable of the snubbed host. This parable, often seen by Christians as a sign of liberation and radical inclusion of all, may appear differently than it is seen. "Although it seems that the Lukan Jesus wishes to communicate God's preferential option for the poor and disabled, the parable fails rhetorically to achieve this objective, undermining in part his project of bringing good news to Roman Palestine's poor captives and blind and oppressed while disclosing a latent frustration of his own with deity."¹⁶

¹⁵ Douglas, 2023, p. 21

¹⁶ Metzger, James A. 2010. "Disability and the Marginalisation of God in the Parable of the Snubbed Host (Luke 14.15-24)." *The Bible & Critical Theory* 6 (2): 1–15. doi:10.2104/bc100023, p. 23.1

One of the areas that Metzger argues for in his above points is the idea of the social model, which states that “all bodies are socially constructed – that social attitudes and institutions determine far greater than the ¹⁷biological fact the representation of the body’s reality.” Anyone during Lukan times who did not fit the idealism of the body, such as being disfigured or disabled, was oppositional. “The problem them lies not with the disabled persons themselves, whose diseased or defective bodies must be rehabilitated by the “norm,” but with social structures, policies, and attitudes.” ¹⁸ This idea of impairment then deals with the direct accompaniment of pain. Pain is physical and emotional; it is felt deep within the soul. The sharp knife of abandonment and loneliness, a nobody, shunned, left alone to suffer.

What if society found a way to remove all these barriers? “Even if society should find a way to remove all social and physical barriers... the disabled body is experienced as having “intrinsic” limitations that no amount of social engineering can overcome.”¹⁹ Luke 14:15-24 discusses immense pain and chronic pain; “its presence in the two antecedent healing stories may also help explain why Jesus treats both conditions with a sense of urgency.” ²⁰ Pain is both necessary for survival and excessive and useless. For some individuals, pain becomes “a deep sense of resentment, an abiding distrust of materiality as such, an irreparable breach in one’s relation to the very ground of one’s being, which for some may even take root as a fundamental religious affection.” ²¹

¹⁷ Metzger, 2010, p. 23.2

¹⁸ Metzger, 2010, p. 23.3

¹⁹ Metzger, 2010, p. 23.3

²⁰ Metzger, 2010, p. 23.4

²¹ Metzger, 2010, p. 23.5

How does this fit in the bigger story of Luke 14? While preparing the banquet, the host explicitly says, “Invite not family members or persons of your social class but the poor and disabled, since it is they who cannot return the favour; a wealthy host who takes his advice may rest assured that she “will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous. (vv. 12-14, NRSVUE) It is important to note that those of higher class disgrace the host for filling the room with those of lower classes as they don’t fit the status quo. This is precisely what we as churches do today, and it is something we must fix to be inclusive and embrace true unity as the body of Christ.

“Jesus works to tame these unruly forces, to push back “the dreadful violence of the divine world and create a pocket of habitable space free of pain.”²² This is what the church, the body of Christ, the kingdom of God is to represent and be the emblem of. Yet, we are from this point. Erin Raffety paints the picture that “cultural scripts on congregational ministry with disabled people often posit two seeming extremes: churches that call themselves welcoming and inclusive and churches that are not concerned about disability needs because they do not have anyone with disabilities within their congregation.”²³ We treat inclusion and the disabled community as transactional distribution of goods and services through programs, but is that genuinely inviting all to the table?

It starts with acknowledging that disability is represented and presents itself uniquely in everyone. “It is vital to remember that not every disability is visible. Some disabilities come with giveaway signs. Many other disabilities are invisible or hidden from most people.”²⁴ Society

²² Metzger, 2010, p. 23.9

²³ Raffety, Erin. *From Inclusion to Justice: Disability, Ministry, and Congregational Leadership*. Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2022, p. 21

²⁴ Tupling, Katie. *Being Disabled, Being Human: Challenging Society’s Perception of Disability and Personhood*. Cambridge: Grove Books Limited, 2022, p.1

thinks that disabled people are unable to have a happy and fulfilling life and, therefore, are not worth the same privileges and attention as non-disabled individuals. This is the ableistic mind of society that unrealistically defines the disabled population and culture. The key to welcoming and inclusion is accessibility, not programming that puts the individual back into the box society places them into daily. Accessibility does not mean parts of the church; it means every aspect of the church building and the mindset and welcoming hands of the community of God.

Where does inclusion go wrong in churches today? The problem with how the church defines inclusion is that it does not go far enough. The way church defines inclusion in a way where “it may give disabled people a seat at the table and allow them to participate, but it does not integrate them into the fabric of the Christian community. No one notices when they are missing; therefore, they do not belong. In other words, inclusion may be a beginning, but it should not be the end in ministry with disabled people.”²⁵

Having a caring and supporting group is so essential for the disabled community through genuine acceptance into the church because outside of the church, this is far from reality. “A disability label itself, regardless of your skills and potential, could severely restrict your choices in life.”²⁶ Oppression in society is rampant. The moment you are labelled as other in society, whether it’s a disability or another label, your rights and privileges substantially diminish. “An individual’s opportunity for education, employment, travel, and social relationships may narrow significantly, not because of personal aptitude but because of social attitudes that interpret a

²⁵ Raffety, 2022, p. 46

²⁶ Tataryn, Myroslaw I. *Discovering Trinity in Disability: A Theology for Embracing Difference*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2013, p. 13

person with a disability as a defective human being.”²⁷ Oppression is at the root, and oppression is what keeps those who have so much to offer, teach, and give from being able to share their giftings from the Father with others.

“Oppression refers to the vast and deep injustices with the poor and marginalized; our churches have been slow to champion the rights of those most rejected by judges of mainstream acceptability. Christian churches continue to reinforce social norms and practices that devalue and dehumanize people whose bodies cannot conform to arbitrary prescriptions of how a body should look or act.”²⁸ God does not call us to let others suffer and live in oppression because prejudice and judgment have been justified and normalized by society and the church. This is not living and walking in the way of Jesus; it is not a welcoming and accepting body of Christ. We scratch the surface to conform to the changing times, but it is time for the church to re-evaluate whether we conform to the world or our Father.

It is essential to note that often, we discriminate against and exclude others without even realizing we are doing it. Tataryn states, “Most of us do not imagine participating in a community that intentionally denigrates or neglects people because of disability.”²⁹ We must recognize the learned behaviours that have become complacent in society to break down barriers and begin to be indeed inclusive, where we accept and love everyone into the community of God not just on the surface level but as unique individuals with a set purpose and place in the family of God.

²⁷ Tataryn, 2013, p. 13

²⁸ Tataryn, 2013, p. 13

²⁹ Tataryn, 2013, p. 116

The church can make simple changes such as fewer flashing lights and eliminating smoke machines during services. Turning down speakers during worship or providing noise-cancelling headphones for those with sensory needs allows for a more inclusive and safer place for individuals to enter. They have gaps in rows for wheelchair users to sit amongst the community instead of in the back of the church and have sensory rooms and quiet spaces for individuals who may feel overwhelmed. This all allows for individuals to feel safe and included. What would it look like to have sign language interpreters at the front to sign out sermons, lessons in classrooms and worship songs on a Sunday morning? Or embrace dance and other forms of prayer instead of just the traditional songs we sing on a Sunday morning?

For children in classrooms, having a variety of sensory toys to fidget with, different styles of chairs, and different textures can also be a way to include interaction and make the child feel safe and included. Instead of making it obvious and singling out the disabled individual, what would it look like if we integrated them into our Sunday services with minor changes, grace, and love? These are examples of small ways to show the love of God to those who are marginalized and singled out. The community of God must see disability and trauma from a new lens. “Far from being abnormal, disability expresses human diversity, vulnerability, and strength. In all varieties, disability theory is a criticism of ableism and paternalism, a deconstruction of power hierarchies, and an effort to transform attitudes, values, and systems. It intends to empower our personal and collective thinking, to help us resist violence, make choices about our future and flourish in our ways.”³⁰

³⁰ Tupling, 2022, p. 24

To conclude, the church has a long way to go regarding inclusion and supporting those who struggle and are marginalized in the church. However, it is not the human responsibility to heal; it is God's responsibility, and it should be at the center of all change and all ministry that occurs. Prayer and God's guidance are at the center of change. To conclude, "God bears for us the full weight of both sin and death. If God in Jesus Christ descends into the worst hell imaginable to deliver us from the hells we inflict upon one another, then such a God is worthy of our trust."³¹ All things are possible when we trust God and desire change. Only here can the kingdom of God heal, and the marginalized are seen and welcomed into the kingdom of God.

³¹ Hunsinger, 2015, p. 13

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