

**Created by**  
Elizabeth Kessler  
Chris Sison  
Mike Walker  
**Revised and Updated by**  
Bailey Eastwood, 2024

**for the Student Christian Movement of  
Canada**



[www.scmcanada.org](http://www.scmcanada.org)  
[info@scmcanada.org](mailto:info@scmcanada.org)  
[facebook.com/scmcanada](https://facebook.com/scmcanada)  
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# SCM's

## Disability Solidarity & Justice



## Devotional

### Guidelines to becoming a better ally to disabled folks

- Treat mobility aids (wheelchairs, walkers, crutches, etc) as an extension of a person's body. Never touch or move a person's mobility aid without their consent
- Know that disability & health can be variable and fluctuating - a person may be able to do certain things one day, and be unable to do those same things another day, or need accommodations or supports
- Never assume that someone is not disabled because they don't "look disabled" - many disabilities and illnesses are invisible
- When planning for the accessibility of an event or activity, or doing disability advocacy, make sure you are including disabled voices and perspectives in the process. If there aren't any disabled people on your team, seek out perspectives from the disabled community online
- Whenever possible, be pro-active in accessibility planning. It can be tempting to say "we'll make this accessible when someone asks us to," but this creates a barrier to people with access needs. While it's not possible to anticipate ALL accessibility needs, think about what barriers to participation might exist in your event/activity, and how you can plan to reduce or eliminate those barriers BEFORE its necessary

### Disability, Faith, and Justice

In the Bible, we see two different approaches to disability. The first perspective shows sick and deformed people as "unclean". The second perspective tells us about Jesus' radical refusal to prioritize purity laws at the cost of love and inclusion. In this perspective, God asks us to love the marginalized and the oppressed as we love ourselves. Jesus, who asked for consent before he healed the blind man, was also friends with those on the margins of society. He treated them with love.

This devotional is intended to help you reflect on what the Bible tells us about disability, and how we can work for justice, inclusion, and accessibility. This resource can be used in a group or on your own. Keep it simple. We encourage you to use the questions to help you begin discussion and reflection, and see where it leads you. The end of this devotional also includes some resources on meditation & prayer which you may find helpful.

### A note about language

While no community is a monolith, and some individuals may have different preferences, there has been a general shift in the Disability advocacy community towards using "identity-first" language such as "Disabled person" rather than "person-first" language like "person with disabilities" or terms such as "special needs". One of the reasons behind this is that the decentering of identity in person-first language can imply that disability is shameful or bad, rather than a neutral & integral part of a person's lived experience & identity. This resource will generally use identity-first language except when quoting a person or another work directly. For more background and perspectives on identity-first vs person-first language, see <https://www.accessibility.com/blog/identity-first-language>

Though we are all made in the image of God, disabled people have been excluded from society throughout history, and especially since the rise of capitalism. In biblical times, disabled people were usually on the margins of society, seen as the products of sin, and shamed for who they were. During the industrial revolution, disabled people were largely pushed into institutions, where they were cut off from their communities and often abused. Although these institutions have largely declined, many disabled people live without economic opportunity and are excluded from society. This is perpetuated by a lack of affordable housing, a scarcity of accessible buildings, discrimination in education and employment, and little community or economic support for those who cannot work.

This still is the case, even with current legislation to protect disabled people in Canada. People with disabilities have high rates of unemployment and homelessness, and they are less likely to be educated. Many disabled people report that they do not get all of the supports that they need and feel excluded from society, community groups, churches, and movements.

## Further Reading

- Betcher, Sharon V. Spirit and the Politics of Disablement. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007.
- Block, Jennie Weiss. Copious Hosting: a Theology of Access for People with Disabilities. New York: Continuum, 2002.
- Eiesland, Nancy. The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability. Nashville: Abingdon, 1994.
- Yong, Amos. Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Theology in Late Modernity. Waco: Baylor, 2007.

## Faith-Communities and e-Resources

- Disability and Faith Forum: <http://www.disabilityandfaith.org>
- L'Arche: <http://www.larche.ca/>
- Ragged Edge Online: <http://www.ragged-edge-mag.com/>
- Still my Revolution: <http://stillmyrevolution.org/>

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## Forms of Meditation and Prayer

Many faith traditions and religious communities teach devotees how to pray. Prayer is an embodied exercise that centres believers, seeks to align our will with God's, relieves some stress, and rejuvenates us in our commitments to justice and peace. Jesus often sought out times of silent prayer during his ministry, and so did the earliest monks and nuns who fled the Church's accommodation to Empire in the 300s CE. Meditative actions like prayer can inspire people in the midst of a world that seems bleak, and can give us joy when we feel sadness or pain. Prayer can have several components:

### Sacred Space

In our hyper-productive culture of consumerism, it's hard to find spaces that speak to us of the Divine. When you find one, hang onto it! Create a spot that holds meaning for you; that can include candles, a comfortable chair or cushion, and music appropriate to the activity.

### Time Set Apart

Set time apart for prayer. Prayer can happen at any time of day! Also, taking time for Sabbath—a day of rest from work and justice-seeking—can re-energize you for the week.

### Embodied Action

**Centring Prayer:** sit comfortably in your quiet space. Read the passage for the day, and be still for up to, say, twenty minutes. Pay attention to your body. You can close your eyes if you need to, and set an alarm if that helps. Say to yourself, "I welcome God's presence." When your thoughts start to wander, redirect your attention to your breath.

**Contemplative Prayer:** Use a simple word or phrase to centre yourself. Read your word or phrase aloud, and then repeat it silently. When your mind loses track, return slowly to the word(s). You can use the mantras suggested in this devotional, or words like, "Love," "Joy," "Peace," or "Maranatha," which means, "Come, Lord Jesus," in Aramaic. Physical objects like stones, candles, or books can also be very useful.

**Lectio Divina:** Read the passage for the day aloud, slowly; then be still and reflect. Notice words or phrases that stick out to you. Then read the passage again, and observe whatever comes to you. Record your thoughts, or share them with a group.

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## Saturday

### *Building the Republic of God*

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot were to say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear were to say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.

-1 Cor. 12:14-18 (12:12-18)

**Questions:** What is the Kingdom, or the kin-dom, of God? What is the Body of Christ? Who is included in the Kin-dom of God? How do we build the Kin-dom of God here on earth?

**Mantra:** *God, help us to have faith and work for your Kin-dom.*

Human bodies that are the temple of the Holy Spirit in this life...anticipate being hosts of the resurrecting power of the same Spirit in the life to come... The resurrection body is thus continuous and yet transformed...by the life-giving Spirit of God.

-Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*

Jesus' resurrection is the beginning of God's new project not to snatch people away from earth to heaven but to colonize earth with the life of heaven. That, after all, is what the Lord's Prayer is about.

-N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*

What if earth

Be but the shadow of heaven, and things therein  
Each to other like, more than on earth is thought?

-John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

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## Wednesday

### Breaking down Barriers

Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind, but fear your God. I am the LORD.

-Leviticus 19:14

The biggest barrier for many disabled folks is that others do not know how to accommodate them, or they do not make it a priority.

**Questions:** What are the barriers that face disabled people in your community? Think about all the buildings that you entered today. Do they all have ramps or elevators? Do you know where to get sign language interpretation if you need it? How much do you know about how to include people with intellectual or learning disabilities? Are you willing to learn?

**Mantra:** *God, help me to notice what barriers exist to those around me.*

The church finds its identity as the body of Christ only by being a community of faith and witness, a coalition of struggle and justice, and a fellowship of hope.

-Nancy Eiesland, *Disabled God*

Love recognizes no barriers. It jumps hurdles, leaps fences, penetrates walls to arrive at its destination full of hope.

-Maya Angelou

Adversity isn't an obstacle that we need to get around in order to resume living our life. It's part of our life.

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-Aimee Mullins

## Friday

### Love

God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female, he created them.

-Genesis 1:27

Sometimes, when a person becomes sick, or has a child who is disabled, the first question is "what did I do to deserve this?" It is helpful in these situations to remember that you, and your children, were created in the image of God. You deserve love.

**Questions:** The passage in Genesis repeats three times that humans are created in the image of God. What does it mean that it was repeated three times? If disabled people are created in the image of God, what does that mean for us?

**Mantra:** *Affirm me in my gifts, God, and help me to encourage gifts in others.*

We ought to think that we are one of the leaves of a tree, and the tree is all humanity. We cannot live without the others, without the tree.

-Pablo Casals

I am different, not less.

-Temple Grandin

I argue that human being is defined not by one's capacity for agency, symbol-use, or self-reflection, but rather by one's participation in relationships of mutual responsiveness.

-Molly C. Haslam,

*A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability*

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## Monday

### Confronting Ableism, Part I

As he walked along, he [Jesus] saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, neither this man nor his parents sinned, he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.

-John 9:1-3

Ableism, simply, is the exclusion of disabled people from society, or from particular activities. In Jesus' time, disabled people lived very much on the margins. It may be different now, but this kind of exclusion still exists today.

**Question:** How does the passage from John compare to how we treat disabled people in the 21st century? How is it different? How is it similar?

**Mantra:** *God, teach me to approach others with curiosity, rather than judgment*

In this climate, disabled people come under scrutiny on account of our very existence... In an ableist system that privileges human bodies that perform like perfect, impervious machines, we look like discarded, broken toys.

-Julie Belser and Melanie Morrison,  
*"What No Longer Serves Us"*

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## Sunday

### Defining Disability

One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be made well?" The ill man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am making my way someone else steps down ahead of me."

-John 5:5-7 (John 5:2-9)

We all have things we are good at, and things we are not. We all have our own limits and boundaries. Some limits are considered acceptable by our society, while some are looked on as unwanted, or even taboo or unclean.

Disability is challenging to define, because there are many historical and current perspectives that can differ, overlap, or conflict. Two popular current models for understanding disability are the medical and social models. The medical model views disability as originating from a problem in the individual's body that needs to be addressed and corrected by medical intervention. The social model views disability as arising not from the individual's body, but from a mismatch between the person's needs and the social and/or physical environment. Under the social model, a person is not 'disabled' by a medical condition, but by a lack of access and accommodation. Both models have their strengths and weaknesses, and may be more useful in some contexts, and less in others.

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Confronting Ableism, Part II

When [Bartimaeus] heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again." Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

-Mark 10:47-52

The Bible has long been used to justify ableism, just as it has been used to justify sexism, homophobia, and countless other oppressions. As we meditated on yesterday, people are often further disabled by the way that society treats them. For example, many of those with learning disabilities are denied the right to a higher education, and people with visible disabilities are assumed to be incapable of normal daily functions. The attitudes that create this disabling exclusion run deep in society.

Radical disabled activists remind us that what is most important is that they are able to speak to their own needs, and justice will not be found until we listen to them.

**Questions:** What are your limits and boundaries? What are the tools or assistance that help you live a good life? What would your life look like without these supports? How do the social and/or medical models of understanding disability apply to the story of the man at the pool of Bethesda in John 5?

**Mantra:** God, help me to open my understanding.

The fear of becoming disabled makes us uncomfortable. ...We cling to the cultural norms of attractiveness, independence, self-sufficiency and productivity to avoid [facing] two of our greatest fears: we are not perfect, and we are not in control.

-Jennie Weiss Block, Copious Hosting

**Questions:** Why does Jesus ask Bartimaeus "what do you want me to do for you?". What does this example tell us about how to interact with disabled people(or anyone who we perceive to be 'in need')?

**Mantra:** God, help me to cast aside the assumptions I make about others

He is nothing. He should not act as if he is someone who deserves recognition, let alone attention. He should melt into the crowd and make himself invisible, like a good blind beggar... Bartimaeus does not accept this role for himself... He takes control of his life once again.

-Kathy Black, A Healing Homiletic

The life and ministry of Jesus testify that his mission is to bring God's justice and peace to all people, especially the victims of the world... solidarity is countercultural.

-Paul J. Wadell, Becoming Friends

Thursday

Acknowledging Agency

She had endured much under many physicians and had spent all that she had, and she was no better but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, "If I but touch his cloak, I will be made well."

-Mark 5:26-28 (Mark 5:25-34)

A pervasive and often unconscious attitude about disability is that people who are ill and/or disabled are somehow at fault for their continuing condition; that if they simply tried harder to find treatment, or tried a new diet, or lost weight, or prayed more, they would be well. This attitude often comes from a line of thinking that's been named "the just world theory", which is the belief that bad things only happen to people who 'deserve' them.

The reality is that the vast majority of disabled people work tirelessly to improve their own lives, and are their own biggest advocates for their care and access needs.

**Questions:** Can you think of times when you've fallen into this line of thinking about disability? How might these assumptions contribute to harm towards disabled people? What might recognizing the agency of disabled people you interact with look like?

**Mantra:** God, help me to listen.

I don't believe in charity. I believe in solidarity. Charity is vertical, so it's humiliating. It goes from the top to the bottom. Solidarity is horizontal. It respects the other and learns from the other. I have a lot to learn from other people.

-Eduardo Galeano