

Protagonist Corner

Make Way for Electric Blue Wheelchairs!

Matthew 20:1-16

Brett Webb-Mitchell

Duke Divinity School, Durham, North Carolina

Have you ever considered how pragmatic, how utilitarian, how “user friendly” the church is? Despite the many sermons that have been preached in the history of the church against such notions, many congregations still promote the idea that our value in going to church is found solely in what we *do* in the name of God in the busyness of congregational life, rather than *being* in God. This is easily reinforced as we slip into ostentatious displays of honoring those who *do* the most in the church just like other volunteer groups, giving plaques, award dinners, and monetary gifts for the tangible tasks completed by these parishioners. Afterwards, more work is merrily piled on those who *do* the most voluntary work in the church, forgetting the presence of the silent others in the life of the church. Behaviorists call this kind of “work and reward” system, “positive reinforcement,” and it works! And when some of these people are burnt-out on church life, there is the crusade to find someone else to fill in the vacant slot.

The frustration with this view of church life is that this reward system that we easily slip into isn’t Christ’s understanding of the workings of God’s kingdom. For example, consider the importance of merely *being* a child of God’s, as found in this story of Jessica. Jessica is a shy, six-year-old girl who attends a Presbyterian church where I am the interim pastor. She stands out from the other young children in this church for she has cerebral palsy. Her disability affects her four limbs, making them move in wild arcs when surprised, and her speech as well. She communicates verbally when she can control the complex muscles that let her talk. She is also learning how to use a head stick that points to figures on a computer, which then allows her to communicate.

What really attracts the other children in the church to Jessica is her wheelchair. The chair, itself, is an eye-catching electric blue in color, specially molded for Jessica’s contorted physique, looking more like something that the astronauts would blast off into space than wheel around through the sanctuary. She is a true hit among the children in the church as she can be seen taking off down ramps and sidewalks around the church, screaming with wild abandon with the other children, while they all hold onto a part of the wheelchair for dear life, hoping not to fall off around wild turns. Jessica knows she is a hit, and smiles as broadly as humanly possible.

There is more to Jessica than her wheelchair. Jessica’s family is poor. She lives with her mother and two other siblings, but no father. Her mother depends upon the financial support of the state and federal government, as well as the church towards the end of some months. Because there is little money coming in, the family rides around in an old, broken-down Datsun station wagon, with Jessica’s mother wrestling for a good five minutes with Jessica’s chair to get her inside the car. As Jessica gets older, taller, and heavier, this transportation mode is becoming critical. It has also become a godsend of an issue for this church.

Jessica’s family predicament has become an epiphany moment for this church. In January of this year, the church’s pastor committed suicide. The pastor’s suicide

exacerbated the alarming division within this church, where there have been groups around the church who had divided themselves into strange balkanized zones. There was little that any one group had in common with another, as each group was sustained by a common bitterness towards one another. Some people were struggling against the very theological integrity of this church to the point of questioning if it would remain within the jurisdiction of the Presbyterian Church. The divine miracle was Jessica's transportation problem, because it provided the first opportunity since January for these otherwise fractious, divided camps to come together around a marvelous common cause: getting Jessica's family a van, which would cost around \$15,000. In order to plot and plan how to raise the money, it meant they had to communicate with one another.

This is where the miracle happened: one weekend in August, the church hosted the "Great Baseball Tournament!" There were two teams from this Presbyterian church alone, as well as teams from the neighboring churches, Methodists and Baptists alike. The food, umpires' time, baseball fields, and the announcer and loud speakers were all donated. By the time this tournament was over, \$13,000 was raised. But something more important happened for all to see and hear. People from the contentious groups were not only laughing and playing with one another—they put their differences aside all in the name of Jessica, one of God's children.

Jessica is one of God's children. She is an integral part of this Christian community. And because she and her family are in great need, her very existence and presence in this church provided the much needed excuse for people who were once divided to forgive and come together in this common cause for one of God's children.

This simple, true story reveals the untruth spread among many Christians regarding the place and presence of people with disabilities in the church. Many people with developmental, emotional, or physical disabilities have been kept out of the church, because those people who appear "normal" have a misunderstanding of church. Families with and advocates for people with disabilities are often asked by church leaders "What can *they* do in church?" or "What will *they* get out of it?" Some church leaders think of the church and God in pragmatic terms: you can only be part of this exclusive club if you can *do* something, for you cannot get something out of doing nothing.

When one's value in the church is reduced, simplified, and categorized by what we can *do* in the church, the church is in danger. It shows that we no longer understand that without God, we are nothing. We have been fooled into thinking that if we just *do* the things of the church, we may find favor with God. Since people with disabilities are not able to do some things in the church, and since they don't appear to look like anyone's image of a "normal" God, their value is questioned in churches, especially if one is severely or profoundly disabled.

This draconian measure of worth is contrary to Jesus' teaching. Recognizing that we are created in the image of God, we are called to surrender all to Christ and live in total dependence upon the graciousness of the Creator. Jesus kept pointing out to his disciples that, regardless of our brilliant abilities or visible limitations, in the presence of God, we are all disabled, handicapped, and crippled by sin. Our salvation came by Jesus' death upon the cross and resurrection three days later, making us dependent upon being saved by God in Christ, who alone admits us to full participation in the reign of God. We are God's children, and God alone chooses what he would like to do with his own.

This is the point of Jesus' parable of the laborers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-

16). Those who came early in the day and were glad to work were not complaining about what *they* received from the master; they were greatly disturbed by how much the *others* received. In *their* understanding of earthly justice, those who came last, who *did* less, should receive less than the others who came bright and early in the morning and worked all day. Their “reward” is the caustic remark, “Take your pay and go.”

The implications of this parable are fairly evident. Those who had come early and were questioning the very judgment of the master are like those who have turned God’s gift of faith into a legal contract, bound by the ultimatum: “If I do this amount of work for God and the church, for this period of time, then I deserve God’s grace.” They demand that God should operate according to their ideas of just pay and fairness. They fail to understand that living in Christ means living a life where grace is never a bounty to be earned, but God’s gift of love freely given, which we don’t deserve, but with humble gratitude, receive.

We worship the God of creation as God’s creatures, dependent upon and needing God’s gift of grace. We follow Jesus who does what he likes with his own, for we are God’s children, and it is God who chooses to be generous with his love. The bounteous, gracious, efficacious power of God’s mercy is what happens upon a people in worshipful prayer; our creaturely abilities and limitations are no barriers to such penetrating, ever-present Godly love. Our response is summed up in the question-answer of the Shorter Westminster Catechism of the Presbyterian Church: “What is the chief end of man? To glorify God and enjoy him forever” (*Book of Confessions*, 7.001).

That is why Jessica and her family come to church: to be among God’s people in worshipping God, through song and word, deed and prayer. Her very presence in the electric blue wheelchair, her present crisis, her limitations brought about by her disabilities have taught this congregation and others this miraculous insight: our worth is not found in what we do, but, in Christ’s body, realizing whose we are: one of God’s children, God’s own. That’s why we need to make way for little girls in electric blue wheelchairs! Because Jessica is who she is, she has enabled this once bitterly, divided, fractured congregation to step upon the path of healing and wholeness, for God has chosen to be generous with his own. Amen.