Embodying Community: a Transformative and Sacramental

Ecclesiology of Disability

by

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Abstract

This project asserts that, in and through churchly communities that embrace the sacraments’ evocation of God’s gracious invitation to inclusion, people with disabilities require critical facets of access to God’s transformative equality and justice. It makes this claim in five distinct but connected ways, via an introduction, five chapters, and a conclusion. The Introduction proposes the thesis statement. After it examines the project’s interpretive method—a dialectical hermeneutic of suspicion and the retrieval of human beings’ embodied goodness—the Introduction also explains the thesis statement by assessing varied theological and scholarly paradigms of disability, sacrament, equality, justice, and hospitality. This introductory chapter also explores an action-reflection model based in lived experiences of disability.

Part One comprises two chapters, and prioritizes suspicion, or critical distance between observation and reality. Chapter One outlines the contours of a theological anthropology of disability using texts from the books of Genesis and Isaiah, sketches a renewed Christology of disability by exploring select Gospel healing narratives, defines baptism and Holy Communion in themselves, and shows some of the ways that these sacraments can heal and free people of varied abilities. Chapter Two describes the empathy that grounds this dissertation, explores the experiences of shame, fear, and exclusion suffered
by many people with disabilities, contrasts those experiences with positive experiences of welcome and inclusion, and expresses our need for a spirituality of friendship based in the generous episteme of disability.

Part Two comprises three chapters, and emphasizes scholarly retrieval of human embodied goodness. The third chapter illustrates the theological significance of physical, intellectual, affective, and spiritual access to God’s equality and justice for people with disabilities through baptism and Holy Communion. The fourth chapter explores the practical significance of our access to equality and justice in terms of mutual aid and covenantal relationship. The fifth chapter observes several formative components of an embodied eschatology of disability. Finally, my Conclusions chapter summarizes my findings, and briefly explores other scholarly questions raised by this theological research.
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# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements........................................................................................................ iv

Introduction: Letting Love Open the Door ...................................................................... 1

A. Thesis Statement ............................................................................................................ 6

B. Hermeneutics of Suspicion and Retrieval................................................................. 8
   1. Defining Disability as Medical and Social................................................................. 8
   2. Hermeneutics: Suspicion as an Integral Facet.......................................................... 11
   3. Hermeneutics: the Significance of Retrieval............................................................. 17

C. Disability and Transformative Access ...................................................................... 21
   1. Defining Disability..................................................................................................... 21
   3. Inspiring Imagination: Intellectual Access to Equality and Justice ....................... 26
   4. Affective Access as the Anchor for Equality and Justice ........................................ 29
   5. God’s Gracious Gifts: Spiritual Access to Equality and Justice ......................... 32

D. Equality and Justice .................................................................................................... 35

E. Gracious and Loving Inclusion.................................................................................. 45

F. An Action-Reflection Model Based on Lived Disability ............................................ 49

G. Conclusion: Introductory Themes Reiterated and Expanded ................................... 53

Part One: Hermeneutics of Embodiment....................................................................... 55

Chapter One: the Stuff that Dreams are Made On....................................................... 55

A. The Theological Roots of Human Embodiment ......................................................... 57
   1. Humanity in God’s Image: Genesis 1-3................................................................. 57
   2. Humanity in God’s Image: Isaiah 40 ..................................................................... 66
3. Humanity Restored in Jesus ..........................................................................................72
   a. Physicality: Healing and the Redemption of the Body ...................................75
   b. Cognition and Language: Changing Perception (John 9) ..........................78
   d. Spiritual Access as Transformation .................................................................85

B. The Construction of a Sacramental Ecclesiology of Disability .........................90
   1. Jesus’ Sacramental Love for Humanity and Creation .................................91
   2. Defining the Sacraments ..............................................................................96
   3. How Do the Sacraments Heal and Liberate Human Beings? .....................102
      a. The Creation of Moral Vulnerability ........................................................102
      b. The Increase of Dignity ..........................................................................105
      c. Recognition of Humanity’s Intrinsic Worth .........................................108

C. Conclusion ..........................................................................................................111

Chapter Two: the Church as the Body of Christ ....................................................113

A. The Sacramental and Ecclesiological Significance of Community ..................115

B. Distorted Images: Honouring the Weaker Member? .................................121
   1. Stopping the Dance of Disability ...............................................................123
   2. Reynolds’ Relational Critique of Three Enlightenment Virtues .........131
   3. Jennie Weiss Block and Negative Experiences .......................................136

C. Positive Lived Experiences of Disability .........................................................141
   1. The Compassionate Connection: Play and Care in Webb-Mitchell ..........143
   2. Dancing Differently: Nancy Eiesland on Diane DeVries ......................148

D. The Churches’ Progress in Terms of Inclusion ..............................................153
E. Conclusion ........................................................................................................... 158

Part Two: Hermeneutics of Retrieval.......................................................................... 160

Chapter Three: Access through the Sacraments.......................................................... 147

A. The Sacramental Call to Equality............................................................................. 163
   1. Physical Access to God’s Equality: Counting the Cost ....................................... 163
   2. Intellectual Access to Divine Equality................................................................. 171
   3. Affective Access to Equality: The Dance of Friendship....................................... 179
   4. Spiritual Access to Divine Equality.................................................................... 185

B. The Sacramental Imperative to Justice................................................................. 190
   1. Physical Access to Divine Justice....................................................................... 191
   2. Intellectual Access to Justice: Meaning What we Say........................................ 197
   4. Spiritual Access to Justice: Transformation and Re-membering....................... 204

C. Conclusion: Widening the Aperture........................................................................ 210

Chapter Four: One, But Not the Same........................................................................ 212

A. We Get to Carry Each Other.................................................................................. 215
   1. Help in Small Things .......................................................................................... 215
   2. Help Rather than Take Over .............................................................................. 221
      a. The Use of Spiritual Gifts in Physical Access ................................................. 224
      b. Embodying Patience: Examples of Intellectual Access .................................. 227
   3. Help! I Need Somebody...................................................................................... 232

B. Dancing with the Stars........................................................................................... 238
   1. Give a Little Bit...................................................................................................... 239
2. Walking through Walls ................................................................. 244

3. Faithful Community ..................................................................... 249

C. Conclusion: Anticipating an Embodied Eschatology ...................... 251

Chapter Five: Leaping for Joy... ....................................................... 254

A. The Erotic and Expressive Importance of Embrace ......................... 256

1. Celebration: Vanier on the Joy of Living and Loving... .................. 257

2. Journeying towards Integrity: Pain, Suffering.............................. 261

3. The Heart of the Matter: Volf on Forgiveness and Solidarity .......... 266

4. Reaching Out to Touch the Flame.................................................. 274

B. Pain and Promise: The Eschatological Significance of Present Transformation.279

1. Access as Transformed Bodily Experience in Yong ....................... 280

2. Illness as Cognitive Fluidity in Betcher....................................... 286

3. Raised and Rooted Consciousness in Charlton.......................... 294

C. Conclusion .................................................................................... 300

Conclusion: Walking (Limping, Trundling, Crawling) On... ................. 302

A. Revisiting Embodiment ................................................................. 306

B. Head and Feet Need Each Other.................................................... 312

C. True Equity and Justice as Access ............................................... 314

D. An Epistemology of Accompaniment.......................................... 317

E. Celebration, Transformation, and Redemption.............................. 319

Bibliography ...................................................................................... 324
**Introduction: Letting Love Open the Door**

Christians with disabilities have a problem: the Church is captivated by our society’s ableist norms, and caught up in a worldview centred on independence, rationality, productivity, and technology’s salvific power. The insights of Enlightenment scholars, such as Immanuel Kant, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and John Locke, have influenced this view.¹ Many people in globalized societies accept such paradigms. Moreover, Christians of able body have denied Christians with disabilities access to God’s equality and justice in churches. Thus, Christians with disabilities cry out for multifaceted, transformative access within the global Church.

Support for the total inclusion of Christians with disabilities in church-communities that strive to embody Christ’s generous and other-centred love can come from sources as eclectic as popular music. For instance, in the bridge of his joyous song of fidelity, “Let My Love Open the Door,” Pete Townshend, guitarist of the Who, sings, “Let my love open the door / It’s all I’m living for / Release yourself from misery / There’s only one thing gonna set you free / And that’s my love . . . ” As he writes of a liberating love, Townshend assumes a Christ-like voice: the goal that Christ was and is “living for” is to knock continuously on the doors of human hearts and to offer them full and dignified life (see Rev. 3:20).² Because all people feel fear and pain, only Jesus’ love can open the doors of our hearts, and offer us access to God’s radical equality and justice. By *access*, I mean the capacity for people of all abilities to give and receive dignity and fullness of life in community. Access has physical,

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¹Sharon Betcher, an independent scholar and researcher in disability-studies and theology who taught constructive theologies at the Vancouver School of Theology from 2000-2012, steadfastly criticizes the post-Enlightenment, medical model of disability. See her *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007), e.g., 1-23, 91-104.

intellectual, affective (emotional), and spiritual (including eschatological) components, facets that I will clarify at great length.

Only God’s love can grant human beings the wholeness they seek, and offer that access. God’s equality and justice, the fruits of access, unites human hearts with reconciling grace that can eliminate exclusion, renew human capacities for joy, and create the conditions that can change the Church. Moreover, access has an ideological element. The pathway to dignity and joyful life is aided or slowed by people’s worldviews, attitudes, and behaviours. Significantly, people embody access in hospitality, the disposition and activity that welcomes other people. This dissertation will clarify this definition of access using two concepts, equality and justice.

In a philosophical vein, equality is the mutual symmetry of power that obtains among human beings in God’s presence, a symmetry that allows them to fulfill their needs. Theologically, equality means a connective mutuality of power: because all people have equal value, all are treated the same in God’s presence and God celebrates all essential differences. This means that God treats people equally, not that they are uniform or the same. Moreover, justice means the embodied, social performances of shared power. Justice, the relational quality of diverse people sharing power, blossoms whenever people cooperate to create social spaces of dignity and joy, and to engage each other in right relationship. Social philosopher Iris M. Young’s concept of justice will prove fruitful for this thesis, and will intertwine with the Judaeo-Christian idea of shalom, God’s desire for the rightness, integrity, and harmony of Creation.  

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Concepts such as access, equality, and justice—ideas that permeate theological scholarship—also testify to God’s relational love for humankind; at our best, human beings of all kinds of ability also exemplify this relationality. God’s love empowers community by revealing divine life in material form, and by allowing fragile, complex human beings to welcome and recognize each other’s personhood. Access to God’s equality and justice is both communal and an individual process. As Townshend implies in his song, relationships can “set free” people across the ability-spectrum to embody and enact God’s inclusive and joyful love on Earth.

This project will construct a transformative and sacramental ecclesiology of disability, based on the insights of other theologians of disability and ecclesiology. The goal of this chapter is to define the various parts of my thesis statement with clarity. To that end, the next short section will articulate my thesis statement. After I make that assertion, the chapter will explain my dialectical interpretive method of suspicion and retrieval. Then, using that method to survey theologies of disability (among other liberative disciplines), it will define disability and access as physical and social constructs, explore the essences of divine equality and justice, clarify God’s inclusion or hospitality, and describe an action-reflection model of lived disability.

In one way, Townshend’s song of joy and devotion is this dissertation’s conceptual “hook”: his assumption that love is relational also describes its vision of transformative, Spirit-filled change in the Church. This alternative vision illustrates the centrality of rites such as baptism and Holy Communion that manifest Christ in spirit and flesh to Christian communities; rituals like these become understood as sacraments. The sacraments invite believers into authentic Christian praxis because they both activate energies of interpersonal
connection, and illuminate other sacramental facets of human experience that support universal flourishing.

Furthermore, this new vision of the Church impacts *ecclesiology*, the study of the Church’s mission, identity, governance, and destiny. This project seeks to describe the Church as a past, present, and future community, the “Body of Christ,” formed by the Holy Spirit, in light of the lived experience of disability. This dissertation will clarify that, in *sacramental* communities—communities formed around baptism and Holy Communion—people of diverse abilities can play a part in forming a new *ecclesial* (churchly) community based on joyous and connective access to God’s equality and justice, rather than ableist norms. This project is necessary because it connects lived experiences of disability to a sacramental ecclesiology. People with disabilities observe, and testify to the incompleteness of, the Church’s practice of its classic “marks” of unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity. As a man with spastic cerebral palsy, I contend that Christians with disabilities witness to the Church’s fragile incarnation of these signs. Though we have often been overlooked and excluded, our presence can reveal ways that the Church is unified; moreover, we can show how the Church’s righteous praxis both attests to the ideal welcome of all people and witnesses to God’s redemptive earthly mission.

Significantly, this new community that practices God’s sacramental love and inclusion consists partly of people *with disabilities*, people whose physical and intellectual

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4I assert that Reformed churches are *sacramental* communities because they are formed by the *oath* (*sacramentum*) of loyalty and love of believers to God and each other. While such communities are primarily homiletical communities of the Word, that loyalty to God’s larger redemptive design remains.

experiences of reality differ from those of people of able body. This dissertation will examine how Christians of varied abilities can embrace each other as siblings in equitable sacramental communities. This project’s definitional pillars include disability, access, equality, justice, eros, and sacrament. Briefly, disability designates the framework of physiological and social limitation from which I argue about access to equality and justice through the lens of the sacraments. Furthermore, access refers to multiple points of entry to God’s generous dignity and joy.

This sacramental and transformative ecclesiology of disability embraces access in five ways. The first chapter will examine a Christology of disability through the lens of human embodiment, exploring the roots of shame and defining Jesus Christ and the sacraments through the lived experiences of people with disabilities. The second chapter will describe the experiences of Christians with disabilities with exclusion, oppression, and shame; thereafter, it will define compassionate engagement with difference by examining positive lived experiences of disability. The interrogation of shame links these two chapters; the second chapter extends the first by pairing human bodily shame with its opposite, confidence in embodied goodness.

These two chapters will unfold by means of a dialectical hermeneutic of suspicion and retrieval. The first part of this interpretive strategy, suspicion, refers to a critical engagement with Christian scriptural texts, cultural artefacts, and ecclesial praxes that elevate

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6For a cogent discussion of the benefits and drawbacks of the “social model” of disability, the paradigm that views disability as a social construction based in the assumptions of people of temporarily-able bodies, see Tom Shakespeare, Disability Rights and Wrongs (New York: Routledge, 2006), 9-28; for various ways to construe the language-debates around disability, see also Nancy Eiesland, The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 26-29.
bodies deemed beautiful, able, and useful. This project will use suspicion to expose ableist ecclesial actions that require critique and transformation, and that harm believers with disabilities.

Simultaneously, and furthermore, the use of suspicion also requires the assistance of a lens of retrieval, in order to promote inclusive ecclesial praxes. Retrieval means an exploration and affirmation of God’s good Image in human bodies, and a theoretical and practical reclamation of that Image in sacramental community. Throughout this project, as I engage ableist behaviours in church-communities with critique and suspicion, I will also use retrieval to recover the ways that human bodies reveal God’s good purposes, and to highlight the relevance of embodied relationships for Christology, ecclesiology, and eschatology.

In terms of this constructive work of suspicion and retrieval, the third chapter specifically will examine the theological aspects of multifaceted access to God’s equality and justice for Christians with disabilities, defining the symmetry and sharing of power as thoroughly as possible. In turn, the theological impact of access to equality and justice for Christians with disabilities will ground the fourth chapter, which will be an extended discourse on a practical ecclesiology of disability. Chapter Four examines the practical aspects of access to God’s equality and justice. The fifth chapter serves as a culmination of the project, exploring the contours of an embodied eschatology of disability to reveal the heavenly hope embodied by Christians with disabilities. Chapter Five is necessary because it will clearly display the reality of God’s dignity and joy, as people with disabilities can experience it, both now and in the future. After these five integrated steps, a brief concluding

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7In the use of a hermeneutic of suspicion, I follow critical theorists such as Paul Ricoeur; see Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: an Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale, 1970), 32-40; see also Rebecca S. Chopp, *Praxis of Suffering: an Interpretation and Liberation Theologies* (New York: Wipf and Stock, 2007), 33-34.
chapter will close this dissertation; these Conclusions will reflect on my argument, and pose questions that require future study.

The opening assertions of this dissertation require further explication and substantiation. First of all, my claims about the exclusion of Christians with disabilities from ecclesial access to God’s equality and justice, and our embodied revelation of God’s love, can be stated in a thesis.

A. Thesis Statement

This project will assert that, in and through churchly communities that embrace the sacraments’ evocation of God’s gracious invitation to inclusion, people with disabilities require critical facets of access to God’s transformative equality and justice.

People with disabilities illustrate—perhaps uncomfortably for able-bodied persons—a need and dependency common to all bodies and made acute through ableist praxes and norms. Like all others, people with disabilities need divine dignity and fullness of life, but our participation in churchly life is hindered by perceptions that prioritize the experiences of able bodies over those of others. Christians with disabilities can embody our desires for dignified, full life abundantly in communities that celebrate God’s holistic hospitality through rituals that free our erotic energies, energies of desire that encourage intimate affective relationships.  

In order to explicate this thesis statement, I will perform several interpretive moves in the rest of this Introduction. In a first section on method, which I have called “Hermeneutics of Suspicion and Retrieval,” I will explain my approach to the problem I have named, the

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8I use the word erotic to refer to energies of relation, far greater and more comprehensive than mere libido. As I will clarify shortly, Paul Tillich and feminist theologians describe eros as a force of desire with personal, relational, moral, creative, and political implications.
captivity of the larger Church to ableist norms: this section will outline the use of a dialectical method, as a critical and constructive examination of exclusion and inclusion illustrates the ways that people with disabilities use the sacraments to create just and loving communities. Thereafter, a series of discrete sections will describe disability and access more fully, explore the liberative erotic potential of the sacraments, and identify the contours of God’s hospitality, as I disclose my own identity as a systematic theologian with spastic cerebral palsy. I see my sacramental theology as not only liberative but Reformed because it emphasizes both the memory of Jesus’ actions and human emulation of Jesus’ action by re-membering each other—by suturing part of the wound of exclusion—and by human beings’ cognate dependence on grace in relationship. Re-membering, as it will be defined in this project, has a specifically Reformed cast: when the community of believers, the Body of Christ, stitches itself together socially by incorporating new members, all the members truly enact the faith that assents unequivocally to God’s designs. In light of all these considerations, before I look ahead to the first chapter on theological anthropology, this Introduction will also discuss this dissertation’s experiential action-reflection model.

B. Hermeneutics of Suspicion and Retrieval

1. Defining Disability as Medical and Social

The opening section of this Introduction has claimed that that Church is held captive to tacit ableist societal norms; in particular, the previous discussion has asserted that Christians of able body have excluded and oppressed Christians with disabilities by preventing our full participation in the Church.\(^9\) This statement requires some context in

\(^9\)Naturally, the claim that the larger Church is “held captive” in these ways recalls Martin Luther’s assertion that the Christian Church was in the midst of a “Babylonian captivity” to other punitive ecclesial norms. See Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, e.g., Part I, in *Martin Luther’s Basic...*
order to be effective: thus, before explaining my method for approaching the Church’s ableist norms, I will define disability in its complexity, and outline behaviours that oppress or exclude people with disabilities.

Socially and theologically, people with disabilities desire forms of access to God’s equality and justice that are common to all people, but we do not always find that access because we experience marginalization in our lives. This dissertation uses the word *disability* in two senses. First, disability describes a functional experience of impairment, where people embody physical and intellectual limits.  

Disability means inhabiting a body or mind that does not always function as its possessor wishes it to do. For instance, disability may mean not being able to lift heavy objects, walk, or see with “regular” acuity. Blindness, cerebral palsy, and arthritis are all physical disabilities; meanwhile, autism and schizophrenia are *intellectual* disabilities, limitations related to cognitive, rational, and affective processes. Thus, disabilities involve different kinds of impairment; they can be described using the “medical model,” a paradigm that localizes impairment in the body of a person with functional limitations. Many scholars of disability critique the medical model both for its heavy reliance on disability’s physical bases, and the related assertion that disability is an individual physical or intellectual problem.

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For one theologian’s definitions of disability, see Kathy Black, *A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 17; see also Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimaging Disability in Late Modernity* (Waco, TX: Baylor, 2007), 99.

For instance, Rod Michalko, a sociologist who is blind, and his partner Tanya Titchkosky, a sociologist with dyslexia, both decry the individualistic and rationalistic bases of the medical model. See Rod Michalko, *The Difference Disability Makes* (Philadelphia: Temple, 2002), 6-8, 42-47; see also Tanya Titchkosky, *Disability, Self & Society* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2003), 96-113.
Second, according to the World Health Organization and other sources, the term \textit{disability} engages with social constructs.\footnote{The World Health Organization defines disability as an interaction between people with physical and intellectual impairments, and attitudinal or environmental barriers that restrict our participation. See World Health Organization, \textit{World Report on Disability} (Geneva: WHO, 2011), 4.} People who experience physical and intellectual limits \textit{also} experience social standards—attitudes, behaviours, and ideologies—that exclude or attempt to normalize our tasks, vocations, and activities.\footnote{Critical theorist Michel Foucault writes of the normalizing force of the Law, and observes its power to corral human bodies: see Michel Foucault, \textit{Abnormal: Lectures at the College de France 1974-75}, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2004), 55-64.} People with disabilities experience limiting behaviours and attitudes because we do not, or can only with difficulty, perform certain kinds of socially-acceptable activity. According to this “social model” of disability, the model this project will articulate, the prejudices of people of able body mark us, because we find it hard to walk, run, smile or laugh at the “right” times, or drink a glass of wine.\footnote{Michalko and Titchkosky both address the social model at length; Titchkosky particularly interrogates what it takes for a blind person to pass as a sighted one. See, e.g., Michalko, \textit{Difference Disability Makes}, 47-56, 113-41; see also Titchkosky, \textit{Disability, Self & Society}, 64-95.} Because we appear physically or intellectually different from communal norms, we experience the consequences of \textit{ableism}. Ableism occurs in behaviours, attitudes, and worldviews that exclude, oppress, or stigmatize persons with disabilities; this phenomenon occurs both in the Church and in society. For instance, refusing to put wheelchair ramps or elevators in church-buildings, or using sermons to connect disability to sin, constitute ableist behaviours. Moreover, like other people, Christians with disabilities can claim access to God’s equality and justice. Mutual, symmetrical, and empathetic relationships of friendship and solidarity among people of varied abilities can offer all human beings important points of entry into God’s dignity, joy, and fullness of life.
Let me introduce myself as a way of explaining the social model of disability. I am a Caucasian male constructive theologian from Summerside, Prince Edward Island, in my early thirties, living in Toronto. I possess spastic cerebral palsy, a neurological condition that affects motor control, as well as logical, non-verbal, and spatial disabilities. My non-verbal disabilities mean that I cannot immediately intuit the sequence of events in a social gathering; for instance, I may say the right thing at the wrong time. I struggle to read maps, to do more than basic arithmetic, and to construe simple body-language. Physical access to social spaces matters to me because belonging mitigates pain; my friends have helped me to navigate life with serious balance-issues due to my shorter and weaker right arm and leg, and create the space for me to deal with constant back pain. Relational belonging matters too: communal belonging is the essence of erotic, embodied relationship, as well as the fulfillment of my, and my friends’, material needs. This dissertation has significance for me because it advocates for God’s hospitality to all; it affirms the unique mode of knowledge embodied by people with disabilities, and declares that God’s friends of all abilities possess innate value. In order to clarify the contours of that episteme, I need to briefly explain this thesis’ dialectical method.

2. Hermeneutics: Suspicion as an Integral Facet of an Ecclesiology of Disability

Ableist cultural rhetoric and practice—for instance, normative advertisements that picture happy, healthy, young people of able body consuming the products of

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15For these claims about the human necessity of belonging to a community or communities, see Jean Vanier, Becoming Human (Toronto: Paulist, 1998), 35-39, 57-62.

16I use this word “episteme” in the same way as Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz does: an episteme is an embodied mode of knowledge, and an orientation towards others in relationship. See Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, and Eduardo Mendieta, “Freeing Subjugating Knowledges,” in Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, and Eduardo Mendieta, eds. Decolonizing Epistemologies: Latina/o Theology and Philosophy (New York: Fordham, 2012), 8.
“corporations”—demands that Christians with disabilities exercise suspicion, a critical hermeneutical (interpretive) device. As described above, suspicion denotes the discursive distance that occurs when one sees a hidden dynamic in a text or artefact; suspicion allows one to discern the space between what is, and what ought to be. An ecclesiology of disability that uses suspicion entails an examination of scriptural portraits of disability, ecclesial artefacts, and churchly praxes. Christians of varied abilities must critically appraise ecclesial phenomena that enable people of able body to degrade, humiliate, hurt, or kill us; moreover, we must replace ableist frameworks with paradigms that affirm the bodily experiences and unique modes of knowledge of Christians with disabilities.

Sharon Betcher, an independent scholar and theologian of disability who taught constructive theologies at the Vancouver School of Theology from 2000-2012, embodies this hermeneutic of suspicion. Her reflections on flesh-eating disease and mobility devices both reveal her critique of ableist readings of human bodies and demonstrate her strong feminist hermeneutic. Betcher argues that the bodies of people with disabilities are normal—for us. She states that pneumatology, theological reflection on the Holy Spirit, ought to engage with the perspective of embodied difference. Christians of diverse abilities must critique any discourse that would normalize our bodies without our consent; for instance, the market for prosthetic limbs both helps and harms us. Prosthetics ameliorate some parts of life, such as walking, reaching up to obtain a jar, or exercising. Nonetheless, prosthetics can also make some people with disabilities feel as though we are “less than” people of able body, motivate

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19 For a scathing discussion of the normalizing power of prosthetic limbs, see *ibid*, 90-121.
a fruitless search for a cure, and interfere with our desires for authentic life with our disabilities.

Betcher contributes more to a dialectical hermeneutic of suspicion and retrieval than her distaste for the technological enhancement of human bodies. Following French critical theorist Gilles Deleuze’s discourse on illness, she also explores the value of pain for Christian communities. Betcher observes that the discipline of pain formed early Christians by altering their connections to Roman power-structures: the pained bodies of Christian martyrs were gestures of protest against the greed and militarism of the Pax Romana.  

According to Betcher, illness can change the way that people relate to themselves, because pain teaches human beings respect for their bodies. Thus, a crucial part of the generous episteme of disability is impairment’s disclosure of the fullness of life embodied in illness and vulnerability. Because pain informs both my theological anthropology and its eschatological extensions, the first and last chapters of this dissertation will carefully consider Betcher’s claims about pain.

Other feminist theologians, such as the Asian-American Rita Nakashima Brock and Canadian Pamela Young, add to Betcher’s critical and constructive discourse. Brock argues that feminist theologians and women generally ought to critique androcentric relationships that exercise “hierarchical” power. In patriarchal political systems, male egos seek dominance over, rather than connection to, others. This dominance, a repeated assertion of the superiority of men over women, issues in (for instance) belief in authority figures, the repression of difference, and independent mastery. Throughout Journeys by Heart, Brock

20See ibid, 134-36.
21See ibid, 172-73. I will return to this argument briefly in Chapter Five.
asserts that these individualistic paradigms are destroying humankind and the Earth. Brock argues forcefully that the members of Christ’s Body need to free their erotic energies—forces that facilitate creation, healing, and healthy self-expression—in order to thrive. Brock’s arguments about *eros* ground this project.

Brock and other feminist theologians define *eros* as the joyful energy of embodied desire that empowers human beings to accept themselves and to welcome, relate to, create with, and heal each other. Pamela Young, a United Church of Canada minister, explores the Scriptural and ecclesial supports for *eros*, the connective and relational desire that allows for flourishing, reinforcing Brock’s claims about the importance of erotic connection, and extending Betcher’s analyses of bodies in pain. Young observes repeatedly that many of her religious-studies students have questions about truth and ultimate meaning, questions not fully answered by recourse to orthodox Christian dogmas that they take to be objective; she states that an erotic mode of knowledge is inherently subjective, recognizing its own affective investment in its object. Young claims that objectivity is a privilege, rather than a mode of knowledge. In particular, she states that ecclesial teaching and preaching ought to open itself up to people’s questions, especially questions regarding churches’ relationships to political power.

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25 For Young’s homiletical assertions, see *Re-Creating the Church*, 20, 23, 90-92.
Many Christians with disabilities can relate strongly to Young’s point, because the imaginative transformation of ecclesial perception that leads to and accompanies access demands rigorous questioning of our epistemology. The inclusion of disability requires all God’s friends to examine how we know what we know. Eros is essential to a dialectical hermeneutic relative to Christians with disabilities because, ideally, baptism and Holy Communion allow people to recall their connections to each other, the earth, and the divine spark that enlivens all creation. The sacraments disclose human interdependence with creation, and—because they materially demonstrate God’s grace—anticipate the eschaton, the time of God’s dignity, integrity, and joy.

Young profoundly articulates the need for ecclesial transformation through engagement with eros, but one of her contentions merits exploration. Explaining the Church’s four marks of unity, catholicity, holiness, and apostolicity, Young asserts that asceticism is destructive rather than transformative for churches that want to harness the Spirit-filled powers of eros, because bodily deprivation means bodily degradation.26 I disagree with Young, because it appears that she mixes up sensory deprivation and bodily integration. Asceticism is not always disembodied, but can be integrated powerfully. While, in many cases, early Christian mystics did practice a disembodied spirituality, some forms of meditation allow people of diverse abilities to engage with their bodies.27 I argue, instead,
that the sacraments can lead people with disabilities to embody a contemplative spirituality that integrates the pain and promise of the human body.

The experiences of Nancy Mairs, a poet and creative-writing professor in Arizona with multiple sclerosis, buttress my claim about asceticism; Nancy Eiesland narrates some of Mairs’ life-experiences with MS. Mairs observes poetically that, because of the degenerative processes of MS, her body is “shrinking” and “going away.” As her neurons lose their myelin sheaths, Mairs ironically embodies ascetic practice. Her bodily deprivation increases her need for human interdependence. Mairs’ ambiguous embodiment reveals both the truth of Betcher’s discourse on pain, and the import of asceticism for Christians of all abilities.

Moreover, as well as narrating Mairs’ experiences with MS, Eiesland extends this examination of this thesis’ dialectical hermeneutic. She observes that an ableist society sees people with disabilities as blessed or cursed, agents of God’s inscrutable will, or tests of others’ faith and character. Eiesland particularly studies the American Lutheran Church’s 1986 denial of ordination to people with disabilities, claiming that the ALC ignored both the lived experiences of Americans with disabilities and the history of the States’ disability-rights movement. Thus, Eiesland contends that Christians with disabilities must occupy the “speaking centre”; that is, those of us who have agency must narrate our experiences and discuss their solutions. This affirmation allows Eiesland to critically retrieve the goodness of human bodies.

28For the contours of Mairs’ story, see Eiesland, Disabled God, 40-46; for these ableist views of believers with disabilities—among others!—see ibid, 70-74.

29See ibid, 80-87.

3. Hermeneutics: the Significance of Retrieval for an Ecclesiology of Disability

When we focus on our embodied lives, Christians with disabilities can reclaim our bodies as good; we can retrieve our bodies. Again, retrieval means a clear observation of the created goodness of human bodies, and an affirmation of humans’ embodied contributions to holistic dignity and joy. I do not advocate for a return to pre-modern theological paradigms; rather, I contend that a postmodern theology of the body, centred on the human eros freed in sacramental community, can promote human and creaturely connection, healing, and liberation.

Many theologians affirm the retrieval of embodied human goodness. For instance, Paul Tillich, the existential theologian, asserts that the embodied process of faith unites human passions with reasons for being: Tillich’s notion of eros as a synthetic personal and social force grounds his paradigm of authentic life.\(^{31}\) Tillichian scholar Alexander Irwin synthesizes many of Tillich’s thoughts on eros, emphasizing how Tillich sees eros operative at many levels. Eros is cognitive, because it subverts rational controls. It is also moral because it can heal humankind’s separation from the Divine. Ontologically, eros centres experiences of truth and meaning. Irwin also cites feminist theologians who assert eros’ relational and political significance.\(^{32}\)

In the same vein as Tillich and the feminist theologians who supplement Tillich’s erotic paradigm, gay Episcopalian priest Jay Johnson argues gently that human bodies are good, desired by God, and meant for embodied and ecstatic experiences of relational


\(^{32}\)For all these diverse references in Tillich’s works to eros, and for his discursive connections to feminist theologians, see Irwin, *Eros Towards the World*, 23, 39-41, 55-69, 76-89, 125-43.
fulfillment. As Johnson retells Genesis 3, the story of the fall of the two humans from grace, God’s question to Adam takes on a haunting and plaintive quality: God wants to know where God’s friends have gone, precisely because God has infinite and inexpressible joy in store for them (us!). Johnson repeatedly emphasizes the connection of food to sex, as one part of *eros*’ connective energies; since Jesus performed radical table-fellowship—a form of hospitality integral to an ecclesiology of disability—this dissertation will also use meals as metonyms for relational encounters.

While Johnson investigates the erotic possibilities for the retrieval of bodily goodness in sacramental community, Jean Vanier, founder of L’Arche, finds other affective and existential categories for retrieval. Vanier claims, “To live in community is to discover and love the secret of what is unique in ourselves.” Vanier means that communal life can reveal each person’s distinctive place in human society; while Vanier refers to people’s interpersonal gifts, his statement can also apply to human bodies. Our bodies are gifts too, and Vanier affirms that bodies are the sites of goodness, justice, and love. Indeed, when he explains the various facets of love in terms of his friend Claudia—a blind and deaf Honduran woman—he affirms the embodied nature of love’s creative and healing powers. The second and third chapters will dwell on the human embodiment of love; specifically, the discourse in the third chapter concerning the dance of friendship, and *perichoresis*—the affective dance of the Trinity, emulated by human affection—will expand Vanier’s insights about embodied, integral love.

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33*For Johnson’s audacious claim that God desires human beings with erotic fervour, see Jay Emerson Johnson, *Divine Communion: a Eucharistic Theology of Sexual Intimacy* (New York: Seabury, 2013), 41-51, esp. 50; see also e.g., 60-73, 102-9, 155-64.


35*For Claudia’s beautiful story, see Vanier, *Becoming Human*, 19-31.*
Tom Reynolds’ discourse on the *Imago Dei*, God’s relational Image in human beings, also adds significantly to retrieval as a device describing the goodness of the human body. Rereading Terence Fretheim and Jürgen Moltmann, Reynolds argues that the God’s Image is creative, relational, and available. Reynolds’ point buttresses Vanier’s: God’s Image implies embodied service rather than domination. Rather than hurting each other and subduing the Earth, people can imitate God by serving the physical creation, and by affirming each other’s embodied gifts. Reynolds’ argument about the *Imago Dei* impacts this dissertation because access to God’s equality and justice for Christians of all abilities presumes a holistic image of humankind.

Although American activist, wheelchair-user, and sociologist of disability James I. Charlton denies that institutional religion can free people with disabilities, he also defines “conscientization” in a way that reinforces these insights about embodied retrieval. He states that “[m]ost often, raised consciousness involves a change in consciousness whereby the (false) notion of disability as a pitiful, medical condition has been replaced by the (true) awareness of disability as a social condition.” Charlton outlines the change of perception that offers people with disabilities equality and justice. Socially speaking, disability cannot be abstracted from a single deviant body. Bodies are not machines; they are clay vessels that need to be filled with relational and erotic possibility, and placed on the Lord’s Table. Later explorations of covenant, physical access, and embodied eschatology will partly build on Charlton’s claims.

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36 For the sweep of this fascinating argument, see Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: a Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (New York: Brazos, 2007), 177-86.

37 See James I. Charlton, *Nothing About Us Without Us: Disability, Oppression and Empowerment* (Berkeley: University of California, 1998), 70; for the quotation, see *ibid*, 118.
This project also owes a great debt to Miroslav Volf, student of Jürgen Moltmann. In order to describe the ecclesiology of disability to which it contributes, this project uses several of Volf’s concepts: notably, *embrace* will appear in Chapters One and Five; also, large sections of Chapters Three and Four will explain and apply his notion of *perichoresis*, the mutual in-dwelling of the triune God, and a short section of the fifth chapter will outline aspects of his paradigm of forgiveness. Volf’s logical and lyrical insights about the Church’s constitution as a community help to ground the centrality of relationship in this ecclesiology.

Moreover, in order to reveal its roots in an interdisciplinary milieu and personal narrative, and to reinforce its hermeneutic of retrieval, this project will deploy popular-music lyrics and experiential insights. These resources can help to clarify embodied aspects of a transformative and sacramental ecclesiology of disability. Christian poet Paul “Bono Vox” Hewson, lead singer of Irish rock group U2, and American singer-songwriter and humanitarian Bruce Springsteen, write insightful lyrics that evoke material facets of God’s dignity, joy, justice, and love.

This section has outlined this project’s dialectical method, and revealed the contours of my analytical tools of suspicion and retrieval. Suspicion matters to this dissertation: because Christians of all abilities evince a unique episteme based in vulnerability and interdependence, we need to be wary of paradigms that would attempt to normalize us, and of actions that would coercively regulate our bodies. Feminist theologians such as Betcher, Pamela Dickey Young, and Brock illustrate this articulation of suspicion with beauty, vehemence, and wit.

Suspicion, and its critical distance, interacts with the retrieval of embodied goodness in this project. Christ’s Body must recall the goodness of human bodies in order to reflect
God’s love. Our acceptance of our limited bodies allows Christians of varied abilities to display God’s compassionate vulnerability to each other. The insights of Johnson, Eiesland, Reynolds, Vanier, and others—bolstered by select lyrical insights from rock artists like Bono and Springsteen—will ground this interpretive choice to reclaim human bodies in their goodness and dignity. As the social location of disability, the body also reifies God’s power and love in community. Suspicion and retrieval facilitate the dialectical relationship of disability and access in this dissertation.

C. Disability and Transformative Access

1. Defining Disability

All of God’s friends depend on God’s grace and the equality and justice that that grace entails. Nonetheless, Christians with disabilities do not often experience unmitigated access to God’s equality and justice. That is, we do not often discover points of entry into God’s dignity and joy, because many able-bodied members of the Church accept society’s marginalization of those whose bodies are different. A burgeoning body (pun intended) of theological work uses compassion and critique to consider the ways that the social institution of the Church should ideally include, but often still excludes, people with disabilities from full participation in its life.

Disability is a marker of physical and intellectual difference; it is neither a sign of deficiency nor especially blessed by God. Disability is an aspect of God’s intended diversity in creation, and is a beacon towards Christ-like patience and humility in community.\(^{38}\) This definition sits at odds with an ableist society: ableism—discrimination against and oppression of persons with disabilities—emerges from the “medical model” of disability, the

\(^{38}\)Miroslaw Tataryn and Maria Truchan-Tataryn point to this humility as a way of accepting disability. See Miroslaw Tataryn and Maria Truchan-Tataryn, Discovering Trinity in Disability: a Theology for Embracing Difference (Toronto: Novalis, 2013), 14-24.
paradigm where disability is understood as a deficiency requiring remediation, extant only in the body of the disabled person. Paternalism and prejudice pervade this paradigm: many people of able body believe that they know what is best for people with disabilities, although they do not share our experience of our bodies. Furthermore, as Eiesland has shown, many people with able bodies believe astounding notions about disability, and God’s purposes for people with disabilities.\textsuperscript{39} These beliefs speak only to the concerns of (some) people of able body. In Church and society, people with disabilities have learned to see ourselves as people of able body see us.

Christians with disabilities are not exempt from these experiences of ableism. No matter how many friends we have, and regardless of our abilities to (for instance) write interesting theological texts, ride stationary bicycles, sing with a band, or play board-games, people with disabilities are marginalized inside and outside the Church because of our bodily and intellectual limitations. To no small degree, these limitations are created by physical and social barriers. In the second and third chapters, I will examine these experiences of ableism, and propose alternative routes to access to equality and justice for Christians with disabilities.

Ableism is the reason that Christians with disabilities need multifaceted, continuous access to God’s radical equality and justice. That is, we need embodied experiences of dignity and joy where we can perceive and welcome each other mutually (equality), and where we can share power in welcoming embrace (justice). Inhospitable environments and indifferent communities create ableist norms, and these norms necessitate the invitation of Christians of diverse abilities to multifaceted access to God’s radical equality and justice.

\textsuperscript{39}For some of these astounding beliefs about disability, see Eiesland, \textit{Disabled God}, 70-74.
The prioritization of the able, beautiful, and (frequently) young body in public discourse and media overlooks the gifts of those who have different bodies and minds. Christians with disabilities need to claim access to God’s equality and justice because our experience of the Church as a community is not everything it should be. We are told, explicitly or implicitly, that our bodies have little or no value. Even worse, people of able body often tell us that we have no right to either life’s necessities or its basic pleasures. Christians with disabilities need access because that access allows us to experience God’s affirmation, rather than society’s negation.


Having defined disability and ableism above, I must also define access, a multifaceted phenomenon. The goal for this subsection, and for the three that follow it, is to briefly define the ways that Christians with disabilities can experience God’s dignity and joy in the world, to observe that those various modes of embodied access are organically interrelated but distinct phenomena, and to look forward to the fulfillment of those qualities through heavenly hope. This whole discourse aims to provide a foundation for more extensive explorations of these concepts in later chapters. Thus, this discussion describes access in four vital and interconnected dimensions: physical, intellectual, affective, and spiritual. The dimensions of access do not display any sort of hierarchy or priority among themselves; they are unified, rather than layered. Since the aspects of access are integral to each other, it is necessary for faith communities to attend to each and all of them together. Indeed, if one is missing, all the others are diminished.

One simple, broad definition of access in an ecclesiological sense follows: access is the opening or entryway into a mode of life where people can both give and receive God’s
dignity and joy in community. In such a form of life, people of varied abilities can possess physical and symbolic space to share their gifts with their communities, and can express their worldviews without fear of shame or hatred. One might wonder what access looks like for people with varied abilities. In the first place, access is an embodied phenomenon that encompasses both the desire for place in physical environments, and the fulfillment of material needs in just ways. Feminist Episcopalian priest Sarah Coakley, among others, states that bodies are concrete vessels for the communication of God’s love.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, Nancy Eiesland observes that her childhood experience of “laying on of hands” filled her with ecstasy; she especially recounts the tender ministrations of a group of North Dakota nuns, an episode that I will clarify further later.⁴¹

Other theologians and scholars affirm Eiesland’s location of access in the body: for instance, Catholic disability advocate Jennie Weiss Block asserts simply, “The social location of disability is the body.”⁴² Similarly, while his journalistic work lies outside the theological domain, Joseph Shapiro’s stories of Americans with disabilities—particularly his own interactions with his mechanically-gifted friend Jim—link embodied relationship to dignity.⁴³ For Christians with disabilities, physical access means creating hospitable spaces that testify to universal design by way of ramps, adequate lighting, non-slip flooring, and

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⁴⁰For instance, Coakley’s claims that female ordination to the Anglican priesthood, and female performance of the Eucharist, have concrete erotic overtones: see Sarah Coakley, “The Woman at the Altar: Cosmological Disturbance or Gender Subversion?” Anglican Theological Review 86.1 (Winter 2004), 75-79, in Disability in the Christian Tradition: a Reader, eds. Brian Brock and John Swinton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 459-63; similarly, for an explicit paean to human bodily goodness, see again the whole of Johnson, Divine Communion.

⁴¹See again Eiesland, Disabled God, 117.


clear signage. By *universal design*, I mean the layout of a physical environment usable by all human beings, irrespective of the user’s age, size, or range of ability. While physical access, like Bonhoeffer’s “costly grace,” entails risk and sacrifice, access also completes Christ’s Body.

Although physical access primarily means making space for bodies and rearranging ecclesial architecture, it is also related inextricably to other aspects of dignity such as justice and friendship. As already asserted, and as a later section will clarify, justice refers to social performances of shared power where people affirm their interdependence and cooperate to achieve dignity and joy. Since justice is material, Peruvian “father” of liberation theologies Gustavo Gutierrez argues that caring for one’s neighbour pleases God. Gutierrez calls the neighbour a “sacrament,” by which he means a physical and symbolic conduit for God’s love; he also connects sacramental praxis to the equitable sharing of resources, such as food and money.

Moreover, access, the giving and receiving of dignity and joy, requires friendship, the act of belonging together in human community. Paul J. Wadell, Catholic theologian, defines friendship as a mutual, liberating, and attractive phenomenon where people enjoy spending time together around shared goods and supporting each other’s well-being. Friendship can

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45 For this profound phrase, see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship* (London: Touchstone, 1995), 45.


build people up, unite them to each other, and connect them to creation. In later chapters, Wadell’s definition will help me to connect an open theological anthropology to the practice of friendship.

3. Inspiring Imagination: Intellectual Access to Equality and Justice

Access begins with the body, and unfolds into people’s needs to share both our power and our physical necessities such as food, water, and shelter. That said, dignity and joy also possess vital intellectual facets. When I write intellectual access to equality and justice, I refer to the sharing of knowledge, through imaginative reflection, in ways that challenge ableist ecclesial structures. This project’s discussion of intellectual access will advocate for transformed perceptions of disability, so that people with disabilities are given renewed access to God’s dignity and joy; story, symbol, and other modes of engagement facilitate this transformed perception. Chapters Three and Four in particular will analyze the ways that narratives and symbols, the vehicles of free knowledge and imagination, enrich the ecclesial life of Christians with and without intellectual disabilities; conversely, these chapters will also reveal how Christians with intellectual disabilities contribute to the ekklesia’s unity and wholeness.

Significantly, Tanya Titchkosky, sociologist of disability at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, asserts that access for people with disabilities requires a changed perception, one that opens into welcome and recognition of the other person as different from oneself. Every form of access to God’s equality and justice for Christians with disabilities calls for this altered perception. In turn, the Church’s new perceptions can create the space for a renewed ecclesiology based in divine love and eschatological hope. Imaginative

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renewal for Christians of all abilities can allow us to transform ableist ecclesial structures (Romans 12:2).  

As described above, narrative can play a vital role in this imaginative renewal. Brett Webb-Mitchell, a Christian music therapist, understands the import of narrative for people with disabilities: in order to educate and edify his readers, Webb-Mitchell borrows Robert Coles’ sociological method of narrative. Webb-Mitchell’s stories examine the lives of children with disabilities in Devereaux Hospital, Orlando, Florida, and prove the claim that people with profound intellectual disabilities need stories that are simple, direct, and engaging. I recognize both a diverse range of cognitive strategies, and the various kinds of disability; my discussion of intellectual access will particularly focus on the needs of Christians with intellectual disabilities.

Moreover, stories do not simply impart rote knowledge; they also allow Christians of all abilities to use our imaginations in order to solve our problems. As many of the personal narratives in this project will clarify, stories empower people with disabilities to channel what James Charlton calls “raised consciousness” and to challenge ableist socio-symbolic systems that over-emphasize reason and production—often the re-production of knowledge about able, healthy, beautiful, and young bodies.

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49 Jacques Voneche asserts that imagination is integral to autobiography—that, indeed, as child psychologist Jean Piaget’s multiple autobiographies indicate, one can shape the story one tells about oneself to fit one’s audience. See Jacques Voneche, “Identity and Narrative in Piaget’s Autobiographies,” in Narrative and Identity: Studies in Autobiography, Self, and Culture, eds. Jens Brockmeier and Donal Carbaugh (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2001), 219-21, 234-35, 244-45.


51 For a thoroughly symbolic definition of raised consciousness, see Charlton, Nothing About Us Without Us, 118-19.
warm bread, incense, candlelight, and music, allow Christians with disabilities fullness of life.

The dignity granted through the free use of our imaginations allows Christians of varied abilities to discern new symbols, in order to rewrite ableist narratives in life-affirming ways and to empower each other in our struggle for justice. These cognitive engagements in sacramental community impact relationship and affective access. However, they differ from those emotional commitments because symbols and narratives restructure and renew the life of the mind.

Narrative and symbol allow Christians across the spectrum of ability to do what John Swinton calls “re-framing.” That is, our ability to offer our own accounts of ableist behaviour in the Church allows us to change the emotional valence and the meaning of those events; it also allows us to propose, in their place, novel theoretical and paradigmatic stances for equality, justice, and healing. Shared stories, embodied in community, shape our convictions; meanwhile, our relations with others also embody and enact those beliefs in concrete ways.

Mary Therese Harrington’s research into the full aesthetic scope of Catholic catechesis with people with intellectual disabilities exemplifies the power of new narratives to create imaginative and perceptual change: for instance, catechists working with people with intellectual disabilities can explore the full symbolic valence of broken bread in Holy Communion. In terms of a sacramental ecclesiology of disability, the Church’s symbols

52See John Swinton, Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 15-17; Swinton also cites Stewart Govig’s definition of reframing in Souls are Made of Endurance: Surviving Mental Illness in the Family (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 78.

53For Harrington’s insights into (Catholic) catechesis of people with profound intellectual disabilities, see Mary Therese Harrington, “Affectivity and Symbol in the Process of Catechesis,” in Developmental
need to be “broken”—continually reformulated in ecclesial language and practice—in order to disclose God’s love for people of all abilities. More specifically, one can affirm that the stories of Christians with intellectual disabilities, told in unique ways, allow us to share our unique modes of knowledge, and to transform the old structures of ableist church-communities into new vessels open to receive God’s grace. New narratives can create the space for new encounters among God’s people of all abilities; these encounters can increase the unity and holiness of Christ’s Body.

4. Affective Access as the Anchor for Equality and Justice

Intellectual access to equality and justice is connected to but separate from affective access. When I write affective access, I mean two connected things. First, affective means connected to relationship; second, access is the entry to communal participation in God’s dignity and joy. Thus, affective access means connective, embodied, erotic relationships among believers of all abilities that permit participation in God’s dignity and joy, through friendship, intimacy, and solidarity. While physical and intellectual access to equality and justice also involve relationship, affective access especially signifies a relational dance where, empowered by our knowledge of God’s deep desire for us, believers belong together in love and trust. Moreover, intimate friendships empower people to invest in continued

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54 Gail Ramshaw-Schmidt asserts explicitly that, because it both affirms and negates God’s revelation in our midst, the language of Christian worship needs to be continually rethought in order to engage believers’ hearts and minds. See Gail Ramshaw-Schmidt, Christ in Sacred Speech: the Meaning of Liturgical Language (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 15-26, 91-97, 115-17; For the ways that liturgical symbols need to be broken in order to reveal God’s grace in the patterns of worship, see Gordon Lathrop, Holy Things: a Liturgical Theology (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), e.g., 17-24, 27-31, 104, 157; for corroboration of Lathrop’s claim, see also Robert Cummings Neville, Truth of Broken Symbols (Albany: SUNY: 1996), 20, 244, 266-67.
encounter and growth. Friendship’s dance can enable all Christians to be truly catholic, to love the whole world.

Affective access to equality and justice is central to this dissertation: the dance of relationality connects to equality by virtue of creating friendships. Moreover, affective access connects to justice by creating solidarity among believers of varied abilities. Baptism and Holy Communion allow Christians with and without disabilities to re-member each other: by establishing interpersonal erotic connections, these rites enable our eschatological bond. That is, when Christians of diverse abilities care for each other in concrete ways in sacramental community, we anticipate and glimpse the divine integrity and harmony of the Last Days.\footnote{John Swinton defines re-membering as “the act of being drawn back together”; he observes that, “To re-member something is to take that which was broken and to make it whole again.” See Swinton, \textit{Raging with Compassion}, 124-25. Christine Smith provides another crucial experiential definition, one which I will return to throughout this work: see Christine Smith, “Preaching: De-Centring, Hospitality, and Right Relationship,” in \textit{Purposes of Preaching}, ed. Jana Childers (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 106-8.}

While God’s equality and justice are not separable, I define them distinctly in terms of affective access because equality leads to justice: in an affective sense, one sees equality in mutuality. Moreover, affective intimacy creates the conditions for the embodied and perceptual transformations that can offer all people God’s dignity and joy. In light of these claims, Jennie Block’s theology of hospitality, and Vanier’s gentle reflections on the intertwined lives of people with and without disabilities, both testify to the affective significance of friendship and solidarity for the full and dignified lives of believers in sacramental community.

Second and moreover, the substance of this affective access is embodied erotic connection: again, by erotic connection, I mean relationships where people invest in each other, and seek each other’s wellbeing. \textit{Eros} is the matrix both for people’s good
interpersonal action(s), and for the sympathy and empathy that facilitate sustained relational connection. Affective access to equality and justice can offer Christians of all abilities belonging, fulfillment, and joy.\textsuperscript{56} Thus, this work will define loving relationships by way of \textit{eros}, and will show how erotic connection can re-shape the affective lives of Christians with disabilities, so that we can support each other in our limitations, and buttress each other’s wholeness, healing, strength, and joy.\textsuperscript{57} Indeed, as I will clarify in Chapter Four, love allows Christians to perform catholicity.

Significantly, our affective access to equality and justice requires an inclusive and sacramental paradigm of \textit{covenant}. Affection’s dance, with its trajectory of wholeness, reveals explicit promises made between God and humankind, from one person or people to another, and between humanity and the Earth. Croatian-born theologian Miroslav Volf describes a unique and clear vision of God’s justice and peace by claiming that the \textit{catholic personality}—the fully human being, in relational fullness—can actively and joyfully encounter others in making covenants.\textsuperscript{58} Thus, Chapters Three and Four will describe the conditions of covenants in Hebrew and Christian scriptures, observe their connection to the lived experiences of people with disabilities, and show how covenant can contribute to our healing. Covenant opens human beings to the theological realities of God’s grace manifested in baptism and Holy Communion.

\textsuperscript{56}Pamela Dickey Young calls the “flourishing” born of \textit{eros} a matrix of joy, fulfillment, and harmony; see Pamela Young, \textit{Re-creating the Church}, 13-17.

\textsuperscript{57}One can find a comprehensive definition of \textit{eros} and the erotic in Young, \textit{Re-creating the Church}, 33-36; another important description is in Irwin, \textit{Eros Toward the World}, 128-43. Irwin in particular synthesizes the insights of several important feminist and womanist theologians such as Carter Heyward and Judith Plaskow.

\textsuperscript{58}For his brief and beautiful description of this unique mode of individuality, see Miroslav Volf, \textit{After our Likeness: the Church in the Image of the Trinity} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 279-82.
5. God’s Gracious Gifts: Spiritual Access to Equality and Justice

The previous subsections have defined physical, intellectual, and affective components of the access of Christians with disabilities to God’s equality and justice. This access also possesses a spiritual facet: spiritual means pertaining to the resurrection-life of believers in community. Thus, spiritual access to equality and justice means the illustration of the theological realities of God’s universal love, embodied in Jesus Christ, through the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion; spiritual access coincides with the other three modes as their theological meaning. “Spiritual” does not refer to an otherworldly or disembodied orientation, split off from physical, intellectual, and affective dimensions; rather, it describes the embodied ritual disclosure of God’s being and action to and with Christians of diverse abilities, the tangible fruits of God’s love, and the ways the ritual elements mediate God’s eschatological presence to God’s earthly friends. Spiritual access to divine equity is not otherworldly but anticipatory: it is an expectant openness with an eschatological character. The fifth chapter will address these facets of spiritual access.

Spiritual access connects the other forms of access to equality and justice, but is distinct. Spiritual access is like physical access insofar as it allows touch and material acts of solidarity; moreover, it resembles intellectual access because it can ignite the imaginations of believers of varied abilities, and is similar to affective access by virtue of its relationality. That said, spiritual access is different from, and includes, the other kinds of access by virtue of its unifying and transformative sacramental focus. Baptism and Holy Communion provide spiritual access to God’s equality and justice for believers of all abilities by affirming the truth and eschatological reality of human interdependence and diversity. They do so because of their nature as embodied rituals, and because they testify to Christ’s restoration of God’s
Image to humankind in the resurrection. Spiritual access illuminates Christ’s diverse Body, and shows how Christians of varied abilities can enact change in the world, through God’s action in the sacraments. In their eschatological reality, the sacraments invite believers to act out God’s radical love.

Peter C. Hodgson borrows Paul Minear’s primary images of the Church—people of God, body of Christ, koinonia or fellowship, and Spirit—to construct what he calls the “new ecclesial paradigm”; this paradigm theoretically grounds spiritual access to God’s equality and justice for Christians of varied abilities. Hodgson observes that Minear’s ecclesial metaphors are symbols of compassion, communion, and connection. He specifically argues that God’s true and faithful love forms the koinonia, the fellowship of Christ’s Body. In this dissertation, the image of the “Body of Christ” will represent both the community created by the Spirit’s work with people of diverse abilities, and sacramental communities that strive to embody God’s love and justice.

Like Hodgson, but paying greater attention to the sacraments, practical German theologian Jürgen Moltmann sees Christ’s Body as a liberative community centred in sacramental praxis. He claims that the sacraments invite God’s people from the present, fallen world full of oppression, to God’s future Reign of peace. Moltmann stresses the sacramental impact of God’s future Reign on the present world: because the sacraments’ erotic liberation can move people to resist injustices, including ableism, Moltmann argues that baptism, the sacrament of God’s regenerative power, is “Christian hope in action” and

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60 For all these references, see Hodgson, *Revisioning the Church*, 29-34, 32.
God’s eschatological call to service in the world. Furthermore, Moltmann asserts the incarnate hope displayed in the “repeatable” feast of the “Lord’s Supper,” and claims that the Communion elements truly convey God’s Reign through faith.\footnote{For Moltmann’s claims about the eschatological import of baptism, see Moltmann,\textit{ Church in the Power of the Spirit}, 209-11, 236, and 231-32; for Holy Communion, see ibid, 250.} This project will offer numerous examples of the sacraments’ modes of perceptual transformation, in terms of spiritual access to equality and justice.

Hodgson and Moltmann use metaphors to explain spiritual access. In the \textit{Church Dogmatics}, Karl Barth adds a crucial concept that grounds those metaphors: he calls the churches Christ’s “earthly-historical form.”\footnote{See one significant reiteration of this point in Karl Barth, \textit{Church Dogmatics}, eds. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), e.g., vol. 4.1: 700-1. There, Barth affirms that the most reliable metric for Christian holiness is Jesus himself. In a similar vein, Moltmann writes that the \textit{latent} Church becomes \textit{manifest} as it embodies the four “marks”: see Moltmann, \textit{Church in the Power of the Spirit}, 357-61.} By using this term, Barth is arguing that the Church only becomes itself insofar as it witnesses—however imperfectly—to the redemptive gift of Jesus Christ in the world. Thus, Christians of all abilities are called to embody Christ’s erotic, eschatological, and sacramental love in community, and to love magnanimously, as God does.

The sharing of Christ’s resurrection-life is the substance of \textit{transformation}, in many ways the most significant definition in this section. Since Christians with diverse abilities embody the Church’s traditional marks, spiritual access to equality and justice mediated through the sacraments realizes what the Gospel of Mark calls \textit{metanoia}: because they point to the dignity and joy that are the outcome of Christ’s resurrection-life, baptism and Holy Communion enact a spiritual transformation of our perceptual and material worlds. That is, when we are granted entry to God’s full, solemn, and joyful life, God’s people can change our world. When Christians of varied abilities relate to each other as equals, making
attitudinal, behavioural, and paradigmatic changes in globalized societies, they can change each other’s lives, and share in God’s joy. The revelation of equality and justice in community leads to that transformation.

D. Equality and Justice

The last section outlined the connections of Christians with disabilities to four different modes of access to God’s radical equality and justice; this access can help Christians of all abilities to critique and dismantle ableist structures that prevent the Church from fully expressing its transformative witness to God’s grace. Having defined access thoroughly, I must now inquire into the character of God’s equality and justice. How do these interrelated processes of mutuality and shared power impact the embodied lives of believers with disabilities?

First, let us explore the nature of equality in light of the divine. In this dissertation, equality has a philosophical and a theological sense. Philosophically, equality refers to mutual symmetry of power that emerges among human beings, allowing them to fulfill their needs. Political philosopher Iris M. Young defines social equality as the “full participation and inclusion of everyone in a society’s major institutions, and the socially supported substantive opportunity for all to develop and exercise their capacities and realize their choices.” Every person has the same right to choose and to express him- or herself. Theologically, equality refers to this inclusion and social support as a process affirmed in God’s creative presence. I define equality thus in order to offer context to positions like that

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63 For this cogent definition, see again Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 173.

of liberal political philosopher John Rawls, who calls justice “fairness,” a social contract agreed on by egocentric, rational, able parties.65

Rather than following Rawls’ concept, this thesis will engage with Young’s inclusive and expressive definition of equality. Young’s ideal of equality grounds this thesis because it highlights people’s personal and communal gifts. Other political theorists, such as Martha C. Nussbaum, argue as Young does. Nussbaum contends that equality occurs when human beings have the social supports they need to actualize various needs and capacities. For Nussbaum, these basic functions, or “capabilities,” include: life; bodily health and bodily integrity; senses, imagination, and thought; practical reason; and environmental control.66 Tom Reynolds observes that Nussbaum’s formulation of equality aligns her theoretically with feminist scholars such as Eva Feder Kittay.67 In this dissertation, equality is a relational quality where each person depends on every other for flourishing. As Young and Kittay make clear, human beings’ interdependent existence necessitates a strong sense of community, which Kittay names a “connection-based equality,” analogous to a mother-child relationship; Kittay’s personal experiences of this connective equality include caring for her daughter Sesha, who is developmentally delayed.68 Young’s and Kittay’s definitions ground a sacramental ecclesiology of disability.

65For Rawls’ definition of justice, see John Rawls, A Theory of Justice, 2nd ed. (New York: Belknap, 1999), 6-10.
66For her explanation of her version of the “capabilities approach” to justice, see Martha C. Nussbaum, Women and Human Development: the Capabilities Approach (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2000), 5-6, 11-15, 70-101.
67For Reynolds’ summation of Kittay’s and Nussbaum’s thoughts on equality, see Reynolds, Vulnerable Communion, 131, 135n87. Some disability theorists have criticized Nussbaum for creating a list of capacities that delineate human agency; Nussbaum’s term of “capability” is problematic because ability is not a “capability” in Nussbaum’s phrase. For instance, see Lennard J. Davis, “Dependency and Justice,” Journal of Literary Disability 1 no. 2 (2007): 1.
68For a cogent discussion of Kittay’s concept of “connection-based equality,” see Eva Feder Kittay, Love’s Labour: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency (New York: Routledge, 1999), 28, 66-71, 73,
God offers this connective mode of equality to God’s friends of all abilities as a gracious symmetry of power, and as an expression of worth in God’s eyes. Theologically, the gift of equality begins and ends in Christ Jesus. Through Jesus’ life, ministry, death, and resurrection, all Christians can experience equality; Christ’s presence accents Young’s definition of equality as social inclusion and support by allowing God’s friends with disabilities to experience infinite divine love, and steadfast human affection, through embodied, erotic connection. As the Good Shepherd, Christ calls people to experience his fulfillment (John 10:7-18). Ideally, in Christ’s Body, Jesus’ love creates a symmetrical power-relation that prevents the formation of hierarchies of power. Christ’s love can enable all those who bear God’s Image of relationality, creativity, and availability to empower each other with divine dignity and joy. Nonetheless, because human equality in the Church is a theological reality rather than a sociological fact, Christ calls all of his friends and lovers to live into that spiritual reality as an eschatological hope.

Many theologians observe the centrality of affective relationship to equality. For instance, intertwining her experience as an occupational therapist with Jewish philosopher Martin Buber’s relational anthropology, Molly Haslam asserts explicitly that the Image of God borne by all human beings consists in our responsiveness to other people: she states that when people are responding to each other, they are mutually recognizing each other’s worth,

146-50, 179-80; for a similarly-relational form of equality, see also Young, Justice and the Politics of Difference, 15-32.

and allowing themselves to be changed.\textsuperscript{70} This relational transformation undergirds this project.

Meanwhile, numerous feminist theologians state that \textit{eros} creates the mutual response described above.\textsuperscript{71} \textit{Eros} can create equality, and always presupposes community. For instance, Nakashima Brock asserts that “[t]he feminist concept of community founded on powerful erotic bonds allows a redefinition of the human self which departs from the traditional Western masculinist conception of the detached, autonomous ego.”\textsuperscript{72} The kind of community Brock describes is necessary in the Church, because human beings are interdependent. Precisely in their individual limitation and incompleteness, people know their need for each other, a need based on our inexpressible, mutual value. While people need each other to varying degrees, and while they cannot always give and receive gifts reciprocally, I assert that Christians of varied abilities can offer each other equal regard as one facet of interpersonal mutuality; they can live together in ways that allow them to meet some or all of each other’s needs. The acceptance of all people’s gifts and limitations allows the members of Christ’s Body to show God’s love to all.

When people engage in erotic connections where they value each other fully and care deeply for each other’s interests, they seek to participate in symmetrical relations of equality. For instance, during the Common Table, the worship-service hosted by the Jeremiah Community—an intentional community in an Anglican parish in Parkdale, Toronto, of which I am a covenanted member—we have used a “talking stick” (a sacred object) to discuss the


\textsuperscript{71}For one summary of other definitions of \textit{eros}, see Irwin, \textit{Eros Towards the World}, 129-33.

\textsuperscript{72}See Irwin, \textit{Eros Towards the World}, 161; see also Brock, \textit{Journeys by Heart}, 29-34.
sermon. As we hand around the stick, we listen deeply to each other without reservation. Our outward lack of prejudice testifies to our mutual valuation. Moreover, in our shared power (that is, justice), all of us can speak to the theological and political issues raised in the sermon; thus, we engage in symmetrical power-relations, based our embodied and reciprocal desire for our flourishing. As we engage in this kind of theological interpretation, my friends and I are equals.

Although political philosophers like Rawls state that equality is based in individual dignity and worth, Young’s definition and mine indicate that equality can be grounded in a mode of interpersonal relation that respects people’s individual integrity. That said, equality—the essential, mutual symmetry of power that enables people to support each other’s gifts—creates the space for its correlate term justice. Iris M. Young defines justice as the creation of conditions that meet people’s needs, and the enabling of expressions of desire in a societal context; she emphasizes that justice enables people’s creativity and resistance to injustice. Similarly, Nussbaum’s “capabilities approach,” a schema of social justice that includes people with disabilities and non-human animals, uses capacities that Nussbaum deems universal to create an “intuitive” portrait of dignified life. Although Nussbaum’s approach to justice implicitly raises the issue of seeing ability as a “capability,” this dissertation affirms her paradigm of justice.

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74 For the individual—and, unfortunately, classist and racist—bases of some political philosophies of justice, see Young, Justice and the Politics of Difference, 124-33; see also Rawls, Theory of Justice, 10-17, 79-81.

75 See Iris Young, Justice and the Politics of Difference, 34, 40, 95.

Equality is part of but distinct from justice, which involves the sharing of power. Equality among people leads into justice because people’s mutual valuation of each other’s gifts and capacities—a valuation partly dependent on social institutions that align to create mutuality—precedes their acting to use those gifts for the common good. Empathetic action, within alternative social structures like those envisioned in this project, is the most significant part of justice. The mutual valuation of equality and the action of justice blend into each other, and exist in the hearts of all God’s friends who work to create dignified and joyful social structures in the place of ableist institutions. Equality, born of eros, means that people value each other mutually, and have each other’s best interests at heart; justice is the active component of equality. Justice involves sharing power in an effort to enact shalom—by which I mean the wholeness, integrity and harmony that God desires for all creation in God’s good and abundant Reign.

Other theorists and theologians affirm Young’s claims about justice. Like Iris Young, Pamela Dickey Young (no relation) has claimed that eros facilitates what she calls “flourishing” and “right relationship,” two facets or components of justice. For Pamela Young, to flourish means to express full, vibrant existence. This term connotes “joy, satisfaction, fulfillment,” and harmony; thus, it impacts believers’ affective access to equality and justice. Indeed, like equality, justice is erotic. The mutual valuation of equality and the just action that allows human flourishing both emerge from eros, an embodied, passionate mode of knowledge.

Moreover, for Pamela Young, right relationship signifies humbly placing oneself in perspective alongside others. In terms of social systems, people of all abilities can know how we fit in the larger scheme of the whole, and respect (even celebrate!) people’s differences,
while also affirming our personal integrity. Iris Young argues that some “new left” social movements respect difference in this way, and “repoliticize” North American political life by reclaiming decision-making and creative choice from institutions. This dissertation aims to create this sort of repoliticization for the Church by virtue of its clear orientation towards eros-filled justice. When people of all abilities in church communities can truly express themselves with dignity and creativity, they can transform parts of their society that hinder them, and can create new norms that bear witness to remaining injustices. Furthermore, this work promotes these sorts of movements because, sociologically and theologically speaking, flourishing and right relationship are embodied consequences of divine and human equality and justice. In the fourth chapter, I will develop this point, and say more about creating healthy ecclesial boundaries.

Furthermore, embodied relationships of equality and justice signify friendship. While friendships do exist between people offering each other reciprocity, they are not always structured in that way. Paul Wadell enumerates several criteria for friendship—mutual attraction, each having the other’s best interests at heart, and the like—that we can apply, with ease, to friendships among people of varying abilities. Indeed, mutual formation in lives of integrity is one significant aspect of friendship with Christians of varied abilities.

Truly just relationships and societies—friendships and affective encounters—are undeniably important for Christians with and without disabilities. People with physical and intellectual disabilities exist at the Church’s margins, and so witness to the vulnerability of

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77 For all the information in this paragraph, see Pamela Dickey Young, Re-Creating the Church, 13-17.

78 See Iris M. Young, Justice and the Politics of Difference, 81-91.

79 See again Wadell, Becoming Friends, 55-65.

80 For the significance of friendship as Christian discipleship, see ibid, 107-11, esp. 108.
all persons. Our gifts and limitations testify to the ineffable human need for human and
divine companionship. Thus, Jennie Weiss Block expands on Wadell’s concept of friendship
by listing the important qualities of a spirituality of friendship, including “listening,
vulnerability, risk, hospitality, faithfulness, loyalty, trust, honesty, respect, commitment,
justice, [and] generosity.” Building on lists like these, the second and third chapters will
deepen my accounts of equality and justice by propounding an erotic spirituality of
friendship for Christians of diverse abilities.

I have stated that equality and justice are distinct, but not completely separable.
Equality, born of eros, means that people value each other mutually, and are mindful of each
other’s needs. Justice is the active component of equality, where people express that mutual
valuation, evince their interdependence, and affirm their gifts and capacities. Iris Young’s
politicized framing of justice testifies to this concept of justice as the enactment of equality:
she asserts that justice is both the creation of conditions that meet people’s needs, and the
empowerment that grounds self-articulation. Young’s definition of justice informs this
dissertation.

Any Christian definition of participatory social justice invites a definition of shalom.
The theologically-loaded term shalom comprises both the holistic integrity of human lived
experience of equality and justice, and the harmony of every aspect of individual and societal
flourishing. Feminist theologian Letty M. Russell defines shalom as “complete social and
physical wholeness and harmony,” observing that shalom means both liberation and blessing:

81See Block, Copious Hosting, 161.

82See again Iris Young, Justice and the Politics of Difference, 34.
such harmony frees God’s friends to bless each other, and to emulate divine creativity. Justice comprises the resonance between actions and beliefs signified by *shalom*. Christians of all abilities who seek justice can strive for right relationship and express it in novel symbols.

Indeed, both equality and justice demand the transformation of attitudes and symbols. Christians of all abilities can communally embody a new vision of the Church that emphasizes believers’ interdependence, rather than reifying autonomy and self-sufficiency. For instance, Jennie Weiss Block asserts that justice as shared power can look like an assembly of people with varying (dis)abilities gathered for a Roman Catholic Mass. This illustrative example, which will be clarified further, shows how symbolic renewal inspires interpersonal and systemic justice.

Like Pamela Young’s definition of flourishing, Iris Young’s description of justice reinforces the need for symbols that express believers’ desires for embodied equality and justice. In that light, liturgical theologian Gordon Lathrop observes that Christian symbols must be “broken,” and rethought by Christ’s Body. Lathrop’s point matters, for liturgical symbols allow God’s friends to embody equality and justice sacramentally. Liturgical elements actualize part of the praxis of Christ-like life. In order to see and touch divine


84For more on the communal journey towards justice, see Charles Fensham, *To the Nations for the Earth: a Missional Spirituality* (Toronto: Clements, 2013), 94-97.

85See Block, *Copious Hosting*, 123-25.

86See Lathrop, Gordon, *Holy Things*, 43-53, 91-104; Gail Ramshaw-Schmidt makes the same observation of liturgical language continually throughout *Christ in Sacred Speech*. 
equity, Christians with diverse abilities must transform the “socio-symbolic order.”87 Thus, this ecclesiology aims to empower believers of diverse abilities to “break”—re-think—symbols, such as the sacraments, through their connection, or lack of connection, to just material relationships. Rethinking here means a renewed analysis of the context of diverse church-communities, in order to create the space for a fuller articulation of shalom. Symbols must be broken in these terms when they become problematic: whenever symbols cease to be useful for human flourishing—examples abound!—then those symbols must be re-thought. Further explorations of friendship, the sacraments, and multifaceted access throughout this project will testify to the Church’s symbolic transformation.

Indeed, the goal of the Church’s symbolic transformation is eschatological: Moltmann, as well as Russian Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemann, assert emphatically (and separately) that the communal performance of the Eucharist inaugurates God’s New Age.88 Moltmann extends Schmemann’s focus on the sacraments to include baptism, claiming that, in baptism, Christians are immediately given God’s new life. Meanwhile, the Lord’s Table holds “a public and open meal of fellowship” that beckons believers to enact God’s peace and justice.89 While Christians of varied abilities can perform many sacramental actions, I affirm baptism and Holy Communion as primary, and as central to Reformed Christian worship, because of my Presbyterian upbringing and maturation in

87Eiesland follows her mentor Rebecca Chopp in her use of this term: see Eiesland, Disabled God, 19-22.


89For Moltmann’s assertions about baptism and Holy Communion, see ibid, 278-79, 233, 239, 242-45.
Anglican spirituality. Thus, I use the word “sacrament” to refer specifically to baptism and Holy Communion in this project, and draw insights from Protestant and Catholic sacramental reflections, because these rites involve communal and embodied transformation for the sake of the whole created order’s flourishing.

This section has used the insights of numerous theologians, and scholars of disability, to claim that Christians with disabilities need access to equality and justice in God’s presence. Equality is the mutual and connective evaluation of another person, a positive appraisal that can ideally issue in friendship. Concurrently, justice is the social performance of that mutual valuation. Communities formed by baptism and Holy Communion can embody equality and justice in actions that clarify the outlines of God’s shalom—the fullness of divine love, dignity, and joy. These same communities can also examine and transform ecclesial symbols so as to make them more inclusive. The next section will clarify the significance of hospitality for equality and justice, especially discussing its grounding in the Church’s four classic “marks.”

E. Gracious and Loving Inclusion

The Church’s inclusion of Christians with disabilities, and the welcome that we offer in return to the Church, both depend upon hospitality, which is one of the crescendo moments in the symphony of multifaceted access to God’s equality and justice. Hospitality grounds God’s grace in creation: God made the whole universe out of love. Moreover, hospitality is the primary action of justice. A communal desire to welcome those who are

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90Baptism and Holy Communion are central rites of a Reformed Christian ecclesiology; this project affirms both the covenantal aspects of baptism, and the personal and social relationships with Christ and the friends of God through the eating and drinking of Communion bread and wine. See, e.g., Howard L. Rice and James C. Huffstutler, Reformed Worship (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 57, 60-61, 65-73. For another thoroughly-Reformed investigation of the sacraments, see James F. White, Sacraments as God’s Self-Giving (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983).
different motivates the Jewish and Christian history of salvation: God welcomes Abraham’s family, and so transforms it into a people-group meant to liberate others. Hospitality, the embodiment of access, animates the Christian story, as exemplified in Jesus’ life and ministry, and that of his friends.

In terms of this project, hospitality involves the inclusion of Christians of varied abilities—indeed, all vulnerable people—as essential parts of the mission of Christ’s Body. Barth argues that humankind exists as humankind primarily in responsiveness towards God. “What makes him real man [sic] is that he is engaged in active responsibility to God. He would not be real man if his responsibility were not actualised as history.” According to Barth, human beings respond to God’s hospitality: our ability to be hospitable comprises the core of our humanity.

Furthermore, people who are hospitable to each other recognize each other’s personhood: the German word Erkenntnis, which represents the matrix of “acknowledgement,” “knowledge,” and “recognition,” means recognizing and accepting the other person in his or her difference, and so is an essential part of holistic hospitality. Similarly, John Swinton, professor of moral theology at the University of Aberdeen, affirms this mode of welcome. He states that, because Christ befriends humankind, Westerners ought to welcome refugees and asylum seekers. The African principle of Ubuntu suggests the root

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91 For the quotation, see Barth, Church Dogmatics, vol. 3.2: 175; for his other meditations on hospitality, see ibid, vol. 3.2: 196, 203, and 209.


93 For Swinton’s powerful argument, see Swinton’s Raging with Compassion, 219, 225-9, 237-44; his claims are made more powerful because of atrocities like the Syrian civil war, ongoing since March 2011, which has left millions of people dead or displaced.
of such welcome in relationality: “I am because we are.” All human beings are because God is, and we flourish because God loves us.

Barth’s claim that hospitality determines our humanness is integral to a sacramental ecclesiology of disability. Because human beings are social creatures, and because sociality is based in a desire for intimacy, social spaces dedicated to the protection of bodily difference and premised on sacramental expressions of love are possible for all. Human relationality presumes an invitation to welcome. Other theologians engage with the concept of divine-human hospitality: for instance, Moltmann connects hospitality at length to the Church’s four “marks” of unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity. These marks all affect the Church’s hospitality.

Moltmann observes that the four marks are Christ’s characteristics; they all reveal the shape of God’s Reign. Moltmann connects ecclesial unity to divine and human hospitality: since ecclesial unity comes from Christ, who invites all to join him, and since the Church includes “people of different social, religious, and cultural origins . . . who . . . stand up for each other, especially the weak among them,” Christ calls God’s friends to include each other. Simultaneously, Moltmann calls catholicity the Church’s “unity in extent”; catholicity determines the Church’s dialectical relationship to earthly societies. For Moltmann, holiness is a “verbal noun”: holiness is entering into relationship with the suffering of the world, which (in turn) means that apostolicity, the Church’s acceptance and

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96 See ibid, 342.
actualization of God’s mission, is an acceptance of suffering for God’s sake. Moltmann characterizes this suffering as solidarity with people who are oppressed; Kathy Black, teacher of Deaf undergraduates and homiletician who occasionally experiences flaccid paralysis, adds that true Christ-like holiness is the dismantling of societal purity codes. I affirm Moltmann’s claims: the true Church shows the world the hospitality of the risen Christ by living into its “marks.”

Barth’s and Moltmann’s claims about ecclesial hospitality clarify the previous definitions that describe this project’s core argument. The third and fourth chapters will clarify sacramental hospitality further by engaging Block’s spirituality of friendship, Volf’s ideal of the “catholic person,” and Webb-Mitchell’s explorations of the spirituality of children with disabilities.

This shorter subsection has outlined the theme of hospitality for and with Christians with disabilities in sacramental church-communities that want to embody God’s promises of dignity, joy, equality, and justice. Hospitality, the relationship between host and guest and between friends, is embodied in our practice of the Church’s marks: when we seek to know others intimately, Christians embody God’s welcome. Inclusion, enacted in just and loving relationships mediated by the sacraments, empowers believers of all abilities to combat ableist paradigms.

Moreover, this whole chapter has explicated the relationships of Christians with disabilities to the three parts of my thesis statement: it addressed the multifaceted and

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97 For Moltmann’s definition of unity, see Church in the Power of the Spirit, 342; for his comprehensive paradigm of catholicity, see 348-50; for his active definitions of holiness and apostolicity, see ibid, 353-55, 357-61.

98 For a stirring indictment of first-century and contemporary purity laws, see Black, A Healing Homiletic, e.g., 125-28, 137-40.
ultimately erotic nature of God’s equality and justice, defined disability and transformative access at length, and described the basic appearance of God’s gracious hospitality. Now, it is important to clarify briefly the action-reflection model that emerges from my dialectical hermeneutics of suspicion and retrieval. This model is based in people’s varied experiences of human bodies, bodies that ache and yearn for relational and systemic connections of equality and justice.

F. An Action-Reflection Model Based on Lived Disability

Because human bodies can confirm and deny our perceptions of equality and justice, they can impel us towards thoughts and actions integral to shalom. This project’s dialectical hermeneutics require an action-reflection model based in the lived experience of disability. This model affirms sacramental love, shared vulnerability, and communal struggle against ableist hegemony; it also denies social and perceptual phenomena that oppress people with disabilities.

Action is the means by which people can realize justice or injustice; ideally, human activity issues in the social performance of shared power. Action connects suspicion to retrieval, and so requires careful definition. Since the 1970s, many theologians of liberation have claimed that theological reflection is inseparable from lived praxis that discloses God’s option for people who are poor.\footnote{In particular, Brazilian educator Paulo Freire states that action and reflection comprise part of a dialectical \textit{praxis} that emerges from the “felt needs” of people who are oppressed. See Paulo Freire, \textit{Pedagogy of the Oppressed}, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos, 3\textsuperscript{rd} ed. (New York: Continuum, 2000), 87-93, 107, 116. Rebecca Chopp interprets the same event through a feminist theological lens; see Chopp, \textit{Praxis of Suffering}, 2-6, 33-37.} Since, in this dissertation, justice is shalom performed, it follows that action incarnates God’s flourishing and right relationship. Just action incarnates the vulnerability lived out by Christians of varied abilities: in this sense, action means
listening, befriending, eating together, and sharing in life’s fullness. Action entails a posture of receptivity and acceptance.

Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutierrez reveals what just action can look like in a theological sense. He asserts that, as it embodies God’s choice of solidarity with oppressed people, the Church can become “the sacrament of history.” For Gutierrez, action for human liberation is a fundamental aspect of the Church’s nature and mission in the world. Such action is relational: he argues that the work of “salvation”—the work of making the world whole, as God intended—is an historical process. Moreover, Gutierrez contrasts the “selfishness” that causes exploitation to the “voluntary poverty” that emerges from love of one’s neighbour.\textsuperscript{100} Gutierrez’s argument about voluntary poverty strongly resembles the affective access to equity described above.

Gutierrez clearly links just socioeconomic action to simple material life, and disavows violent power-relations in favour of love of neighbour. His claim matters to an ecclesiology of disability because—by virtue of our embodied episteme of vulnerability—Christians with disabilities can act out, and reciprocally ask for, simple, authentic relationships. We do not necessarily want to hear promises of completely accessible transit next month, or next year; we do not always appreciate the hands-off prayers of an insular church-community when we feel back pain, or have our hearts broken. While some Christians with disabilities do not want paternalistic actions that “help” by taking over, many of us desire simple inclusion: we want people to eat with us, pray with us, and to invite us to the next hike even when we cannot come, rather than to simply ignore our needs. God’s option for the poor can offer Christians with disabilities access through physical mobility,\textsuperscript{100}For the felicitous phrase “sacrament of history,” and his definition of salvation, see Gutierrez, \textit{Theology of Liberation}, 143. For Gutierrez’s reflections on selfishness and exploitation, see \textit{ibid}, 172.
friendship, and participation in society. Moreover, praxis or just action makes that option real: as a social institution, the Church that includes disability will be a Church that meets its most vulnerable members on their own terms.

The second axis of this thesis’ theological model is reflection. While “reflection” does partly mean the cerebral processing of sensory phenomena and lived experience, it does not mean disembodied thought. Christians with disabilities embody all of life: waking, sleeping, eating, visiting friends, and seeing the sunrise are all embodied activities. Reflection empowers us to live these social performances: reflection refers to an active contemplation of our material and social engagement with God and the world. Reflection has several facets, including listening, helping others, and availability; thus, like action, reflection embodies a posture of receptivity.

Many theologians and scholars nuance this portrait of reflection. For instance, Paul Wadell asserts that contemplation is an indispensable part of true friendship. He contrasts a contemplative attitude that views the world with love with an unreflective paradigm emerging from ingratitude and cruelty: while evil actions constitute what Wadell calls “a failure of vision,” contemplative people strive to see things as they are, “because [they] know that seeing is essential to goodness.” These insights matter to Christians of all abilities; seeing the world kindly enables the Church’s perceptual transformation, and creates the

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102 For instance, Vanier asserts both that people who offer themselves to God in vulnerability are the “secret” of communal life, and that “availability for service is one of the most marvellous gifts that we can find in community.” See Vanier, *Community and Growth*, 155-56, 261.

103 For Wadell’s meditations on contemplation, see *Becoming Friends*, 123, 126.
space for access. Various parts of this dissertation will expand on these meditations concerning contemplation.

From an ecumenical and Lutheran perspective, Paul Tillich adds the concept of integrity to Wadell’s meditations. Tillich argues that the act of faith is “an act of a finite being . . . grasped by and turned to the infinite.” Once God takes hold of someone, he, she or they can grasp God in response. Additionally, because by perceiving God people perceive limitless being, power, and love, they require centred (integrated) selves—identities that move from centre to “alteration,” and back to the centre—in order to orient towards God. Christians with disabilities possess a unique perspective on finitude and infinity, for many of us can feel Jesus’ presence with us precisely in our limitation. Moreover, our contingency reveals the constraints placed on all created life, while also disclosing God’s marvellous power. God has made human beings, across the spectrum of ability, to feel passionately, share life intimately, and act justly.

As we deepen in erotic connection and live towards shalom, Christians of varied abilities both act and reflect. Receptivity connects action to reflection. Action means that human beings share power; action embodies what Christine Smith calls “re-membering,” which is a salvific making-present of the Other. Moreover, reflection comprises both the social performance of gratitude for God’s provision, and the act of empathetic listening. As

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104 John Swinton claims that certain theologies of disability reinforce the Church’s understanding of the limitation of all human beings; that is, theologies of disability disclose how fragile all of us are. See Swinton, John, “Disability, Ableism, and Disablism,” in Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology, ed. Bonnie Miller-McLemore (New York: Blackwell, 2011), 448.

105 For these citations from Tillich, see Dynamics of Faith, 118; and Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1957), 30-32, cited by Irwin in Irwin, Eros Towards the World, 84.

106 See again Smith, “Preaching,” 106.
later chapters of this project will make clear, these essential practices empower God’s friends to meet each other’s needs.

**G. Conclusion: Introductory Themes Reiterated and Expanded**

This introductory chapter has laid the groundwork for a comprehensively transformative and sacramental ecclesiology of disability focused by the marks of the Church, and lived out in sacramental community. It has expounded my thesis statement about Christians with disabilities and our relation to multifaceted access to God’s equality and justice. It has also clarified my method of suspicion and retrieval, defined all the facets of my thesis statement, and examined my action-reflection model based on the lived experience of disability. These definitions empower me to write cogently of equality and justice for Christians with disabilities.

The next five chapters will engage all these definitions. First, it is necessary to offer a glimpse of the overall development of my argument. As already stated above, my first two chapters are grounded in the intertwined hermeneutic of suspicion and retrieval. The first chapter will investigate the theological foundations of human embodiment, and set out my theological anthropology, especially its facets of erotic energy and recognition (*Erkenntnis*). This chapter will discuss bodily shame in the Garden of Eden, hope in Isaiah’s prophecy of the mountain of the LORD, and fulfillment in the Gospel’s portrayals of Jesus’ healings, especially in his clear perception of people with disabilities. The first chapter will also show how the sacraments can liberate human beings’ erotic energies, and how they affirm human vulnerability, dignity, and worth. Thereafter, the second chapter will examine the Church as Christ’s Body through suspicion and retrieval: this chapter will engage the positive and negative lived experiences of people with disabilities, connect compassion and playfulness,
enunciate a spirituality of friendship, and show how ecclesial hospitality to Christians with disabilities embodies the theological significance of multifaceted access to God’s transformative equality and justice.

My third, fourth, and fifth chapters will continue to illustrate a dialectical hermeneutic of suspicion and retrieval, foregrounding my fundamental concern for access to God’s equality and justice. The third chapter will reveal the theological implications of multifaceted access to God’s radical equality and justice for Christians of diverse abilities. In turn, the fourth chapter will unfold the practical implications of that access, using Vanier’s and Volf’s ecclesiological insights to reveal the kind of people God’s friends need to be in order to offer each other access.

The fifth chapter will explore an embodied eschatology of disability, examining the meaning of Christ’s resurrection-life in the lives of Christians with disabilities, using both suspicion and retrieval. This chapter will describe the theological meaning of resurrection-life as spiritual access to God’s equality and justice for Christians of diverse abilities; this description will depend on Volf’s notions of embrace and forgiveness, Vanier’s idea of celebration, and Amos Yong’s Spirit-filled discourse on eschatology. Practically speaking, this chapter will also link the living and heavenly hope of many Christians with disabilities to Charlton’s concept of “raised consciousness,” and show how people of varied abilities can use that raised consciousness to constitute an inclusive form of ecclesial community. Lastly, my Conclusions section will outline questions and avenues for my own and others’ further research.

I invite my readers to join me on this journey of discovery!
Part One

Hermeneutics of Embodiment: Anthropology and Ecclesiology

Chapter One: the Stuff that Dreams are Made On

This chapter’s title comes from William Shakespeare’s 1611 drama *The Tempest*. In this play, one of the last Shakespeare wrote, the wizard-figure Prospero welcomes a number of visitors to the island that he shares with his slave Caliban. In the end of his soliloquy from Act Four, Prospero reveals that every character, piece of furniture, and action in the play was a “spirit,” by which he means a fiction.\(^1\) The sorcerer asserts that everything the audience saw was a dream; then he claims, “We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep.”\(^2\) Human beings are fantastic creatures, and “our little life”—the finite, small, and contingent life of the creature—is abridged and abutted by a “sleep,” called death.

This first chapter begins to build a transformative and sacramental ecclesiology of disability with a portrait of *theological anthropology*. The chapter describes the Image of God in human beings, in order to clearly articulate the efficacy of baptism and Holy Communion in the creation of just and equal communities for all people, of all body-types, within the Church.\(^3\) Thus, I add nuance to Prospero’s claim about human beings above. Human beings are indeed “such stuff as dreams are made on”: because a good and loving God makes us in God’s Image, we are a vital part of our creator’s dream. The one who

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\(^{3}\)Again, Iris Young offers a striking definition of justice as the ability of each person in a group to express his or her capacities, and to define his or her own actions. See Iris M. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton, 1990), 39.
created humans within a good creation wants all of us to contribute our gifts and desires to a new world of limitless dignity and joy.

This chapter examines the theological roots of human embodiment through the dialectical hermeneutic of suspicion and retrieval. Thus, it will critically assess Christian texts and cultural artifacts, seeking evidence for the oppression of Christians with disabilities, and proceed to reclaim our bodily goodness. The chapter will unfold in three parts. First, I will explore two Old Testament accounts of human embodiment. Using Jay Emerson Johnson’s reflections on human shame as background, I will discuss Adam and Eve’s creation in, and shameful descent from, Eden. Thereafter, I will also explore the hopeful and prophetic message of human equality and contingency in Isaiah 40:1-11, making especial note of God’s love for all bodies.

Second, and subsequently, I will consider Jesus’ incarnation, ministry, death, and resurrection in terms of its full redemption of human bodies. The insights of theologians of disability such as Kathy Black, Nancy Eiesland, and Jean Vanier will enable me to show how Jesus’ incarnation brings bodily redemption through healing, intellectual change through altered perception, and affective access by connecting emotion to sacramental spirituality. I will conclude this section with a glimpse of Amos Yong’s reflection on the eschaton, the Last Days, for people with disabilities. This exploration of Yong will anticipate deeper analysis of his eschatology in the fifth chapter, as part of an embodied eschatology of disability.

The material in the first two sections, concerning human embodiment and its redemption in Christ, culminates in a third section where Jesus’ future eschatological life is contained here and now, in ecclesial community centred on embodied, sacramental joy. Thus,
third, I will critically examine the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion, to discuss how and why they can heal and free human beings for full and dignified life. I assert that the sacraments heal and free human beings by creating spaces where we can be vulnerable to God and each other, increasing our dignity, and redefining human worth. In this section, I will allude to specific ways that human beings can be vulnerable to each other through the sacraments—avenues that I will explore in later chapters—and observe how sacramental participation can shape the relations of Christians with diverse abilities to interpersonal and political life. This discussion, drawing on the insights of Miroslav Volf, Jean Vanier, Nancy Eiesland, and others, is in no way meant to be exhaustive; instead, it will illuminate the paradigm of my overall argument for further expansion.

A. The Theological Roots of Human Embodiment

Christian theological anthropology begins with humanity’s creation, in the world’s own beginning, as God’s “very good” creatures begin to bear God’s relational Image. Thus, the first subsection of this chapter will offer an account of human relationality, beginning from the creation of human beings and following their descent into shame after that creation.

1. Humanity in God’s Image: Genesis 1-3

The text of Genesis 1:26-28, quoted at length below, partly opens these examinations.

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.
God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”

(Genesis 1:26-28, NRSV.)

According to the text, the world contained two human beings made in God’s Image (1:26). These male and female creatures, who resemble their Maker, oversee all the fish, birds, and quadrupeds. God enjoins the relational creatures to “be fruitful and multiply,” and to exercise “dominion” over all other living things in the garden (1:27-28). Jay Johnson reminds his readers that God made people “resolutely good.” Originally, humans embodied physical and spiritual continuity with their ground of being. As I will clarify, human bodily goodness is more fundamental than, and helps human beings to overcome, the shame of sin and segregation.

Subsequently, the second Hebrew creation narrative, recounted in Genesis 2, reminds readers that the relationality of God’s Image-bearers also began in Eden. A human being formed from the ground, adamah or Adam, receives from God “the breath of life,” and so lives (Genesis 2:7, NRSV). Later, God realizes that it is “not good for the man to be alone.” God brings the animals to Adam in order that he might name them (2:18-21). Naming forms relationships between human and animal, but Adam finds no “helper” among the animals. Thus, God causes Adam to sleep, and to awaken in joy at the sight of a woman, the helper he desires (2:23).

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4Sallie McFague, Jay Johnson, and others have noted the unfortunate consequences of the word translated “dominion” in this passage: because Christians have been told we can subdue the planet, many—even with the best intentions—have exploited the material creation and raped it of its resources. See Sallie McFague, The Body of God: an Ecological Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); see also Jay Emerson Johnson, Divine Communion: a Eucharistic Theology of Sexual Intimacy (New York: Seabury, 2013); and Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, “A Theology of Hope for the Uncreators,” in Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today, ed. Marit Trelstad (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006).

5See Johnson, Divine Communion, 35.
In the Garden, humans discover their capacities for naming and relationality. Adam names all the animals before God makes him a suitable partner. The people discover the fullness of their own identities in each other. Adam’s joyful shout when God shows him the woman discloses the joy of mutual attraction. Paul Wadell argues that interpersonal attraction can, ideally, manifest itself in “spiritual friendship,” intimacy that embodies mutual discipleship. ⁶

Feminist theologians buttress the significance of human beings’ creaturely capacity for relationship. For instance, writing of the necessity of healing for women abused by patriarchal social structures, Rita Nakashima Brock observes that relationship comprises a vital aspect of human identity. In our need for personal integration, human beings need other blossoming selves to love us into existence; indeed, relational power-sharing centred in self-acceptance founds Brock’s concept of “erotic power.” ⁷ Rosemary Radford Ruether extends Brock’s claim about the liberating potential of erotic relationality, asserting that, in his subversion of Judean and Roman customs, Jesus incarnates a “new humanity, female and male.” ⁸ At the world’s beginning, Adam and the woman, tilling and preserving the Garden of Eden, resemble God most closely by relating to each other. In their communion, they know themselves as God’s creatures.

This generous, peaceable pattern of relation is God’s initial gift to human beings. I mean to foreground relationality as a fundamental good. I do not mean to argue that the

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woman is made from Adam, and that her creation thus supports patriarchy; neither do I assert that sexual identity is linked to male-female relation.9 That said, human identity is based on response to God: ideally, in Eden, people can do all the tasks that God gives them to do freely and in response to God’s bounteous provision. The narrator also observes that “the man and the woman were both naked and felt no shame” (Genesis 2:25, NRSV), a poignant and poetic ending.

Nonetheless, there is still one problem in the Garden: this liberating pattern of relation between the two people, and among them and their Creator, contains the seeds of its own partial dissolution, because God has placed in one specific Tree the potential for the knowledge of morality, of “good and evil” (Genesis 2:16-17, NRSV). God forbids the human couple to eat from that tree. The shadow of doubt lurks within the garden called “fruitful”; even in the place where God asks his creatures to bless and be blessed, the shadow of doubt and sin exists.10

That doubt manifests itself in a singular conversation between the woman and the serpent. The snake asks why God has forbidden them the tree; the woman adds to God’s decree that the humans may neither eat the fruit, nor touch it (3:2). Then the serpent plants the seed of doubt in the woman’s mind: “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (3:4-5,

9 In terms of human parity, Miroslav Volf asserts that masculine and feminine gendered identities are both good and complementary. See Miroslav Volf, Exclusion & Embrace: a Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 175-81; for a similar argument, see also Sarah Coakley, “Woman at the Altar,” Anglican Theological Review, in Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader, eds. Brian Brock, and John Swinton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 464-66.

NRSV). The serpent’s claim that God has omitted part of the truth undermines the human beings’ relationship to God.

Citing biblical theologian Terence Fretheim, Tom Reynolds clarifies the human beings’ moral situation. The serpent rightly observes that God has omitted part of the truth about the tree; moreover, the serpent reframes God’s omission, making it seem a malicious error designed to oppress the people.\textsuperscript{11} In response to the serpent’s cunning, the woman eats the forbidden fruit, and offers some to the man (Gen. 3:6-7). Because the people now recognize their contingency, even within their relationship(s) to God, both human beings feel shame, and acknowledge their nakedness. Ashamed, the people hide, blaming each other and the serpent for their problem.\textsuperscript{12}

At first glance, the serpent’s statement is true. When the man Adam and the woman (not yet named) comprehend the difference between good and evil, they will be able to exercise full, free agency.\textsuperscript{13} That said, as critics of late capitalism know, unfettered desire is tyrannical. Human beings able to choose any object at all will find themselves unable to choose. Moreover, via Augustine of Hippo, Reynolds argues in this context that humankind’s fall precipitates our descent into cupiditas, or concupiscence: after eating the fruit that discloses the weight of moral choice, the human beings and all their progeny are ensnared by disordered desires. Concupiscence involves mistaking a finite good for an infinite one, and


\textsuperscript{13}One can define this freedom, \textit{autonomy}, as the capacity to choose and act independent of external control or influence. For a concise definition, see “autonomy,” def. 1.2, \textit{Oxford English Dictionary} (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016). For a definition that I will revisit in the second chapter, see Reynolds, \textit{Vulnerable Communion}, 83.
placing all one’s hopes in contingent things. Reynolds observes that concupiscence seeks its fulfillment “in the wrong place.” This form of desire seeks to absorb its objects in order to bolster its own security.\(^\text{14}\) In this way, concupiscence as defined above is effectively one form of idolatry. Concupiscent desire means that autonomy has two sharp edges: autonomy can facilitate real moral growth, but can also alienate people from relationship because of its self-centredness.

According to Reynolds, concupiscence permeates contemporary Western media. Companies must create desire for their products—desire that in principle can never end, so that people will buy those same products, and hope for fulfillment through them.\(^\text{15}\) This consumer-oriented cycle of desire and despair can leave human beings alienated both from our bodies, and from each other. As the stunning mortality-rate for people with anorexia nervosa shows, humans’ desire for contingent things disrupts our ability to relate to each other authentically.\(^\text{16}\)

The narrative of humanity’s fall impacts Christians with disabilities because it concerns an original experience of shame, and the humans’ loss of self-acceptance.\(^\text{17}\) Jay

\(^{14}\)For a full description of concupiscence and its effects, see ibid, 194-7.

\(^{15}\)For Reynolds’ discourse on novelty in Western advertising culture, see ibid, 92-5.

\(^{16}\)One recent study notes that, of 954 patients with eating disorders, 25 (2.6%) had died after an eight-year interval between studies; of those twenty-five deceased patients, seventeen had anorexia nervosa, and seven of those with anorexia died by suicide. See C. Laird Birmingham et al., “The Mortality Rate from Anorexia Nervosa,” in International Journal of Eating Disorders 38 (2005): 144.

\(^{17}\)Many theologians investigate shame as a locus of a liberating theology. See, e.g., Stephen Pattison, Saving Face: Enfacement, Shame, Theology (London: Routledge, 2013); see also Robin Stockitt, Restoring the Shamed: Towards a Theology of Shame (New York: Wipf & Stock, 2012); and Rebecca Thomas and Stephen Parker, “Toward a Theological Understanding of Shame,” Journal of Psychology & Christianity, 23.2 (Summer 2004), 176-182. While these concepts merit sustained attention, for the purposes of the argument developed in this project—an argument broader than an interrogation of shame—I can only mention them in passing.
Johnson defines shame succinctly as “alienation from our own bodily goodness.” In their broken communion with God, Adam and Eve understand their own limitations: both their sewing fig-leaves together to make loincloths (Genesis 3:7) and Adam’s reply to God’s searching question (3:10) clarify their fear of their uncovered contingency. Attentive readers may observe that their shame leads to their loss of self-acceptance, and their alienation from their creator: in verse 10, Adam says that his knowledge of his nakedness in his maker’s presence made him afraid. Part of the shame that the man feels emerges from his assumption that God does not want to see him as he is.

Moreover, Adam and Eve’s children also discover the effects of shame and a lack of self-acceptance. Cain is a farmer, while his younger brother Abel is a shepherd; as Volf points out, while Cain and Abel are literal and “formal” equals, Cain is greater, and Abel lesser. Cain feels proud of his ability to produce food from the Earth, whereas Abel recognizes the sustaining power of his relationship with God. Thus, God rewards Abel’s understanding of his dependence, and disregards Cain’s offering. Jealously angry at this “inversion,” Cain murders Abel, and separates himself from (explicit) communion with God; that said, Volf observes that Cain is still in God’s care. Because Cain knows himself only as a “greater” brother, and cannot abide God’s reversal of that valuation, he secludes himself from God’s abundance, and goes into exile.

In the twenty-first century, people also lack the confidence to resist desires for aesthetically-pleasing bodies. Glossy magazines that valorize leanness, thinness, super-tanned skin, and fluorescent smiles indicate that most people do not embody aesthetic and

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18See Johnson, Divine Communion, 36.

19For Volf’s Girardian interpretation of Cain and Abel’s story, see Exclusion & Embrace, 92-98.
athletic ideals. Advertisements enjoin people to look like Venus Williams, Chris Evans, or others who have “bodies we want.”

Seemingly-endless cycles of desire mar our relationships with our bodies and each other. Rather than celebrating our bodies, we are taught to always yearn to appear differently. Genesis 3 recounts compromised human capacities for contentment, healthy expressions of desire, and integral relationships. Accordingly, this project proposes a celebratory paradigm of human bodies as good, and as God has made them. This paradigm is based in Jesus’ gift of full, joyous life to all people, which is embodied in sacramental community.

When I write in this way, I do not endorse Saint Augustine’s view of Eve, the woman, as a vessel for sin and a lesser being unworthy of friendship. Rather, I write thus both to observe how concupiscent desire breaks up relationships, and to promote an ecclesial culture of self-acceptance. Christians’ confidence is based in Jesus’ full disclosure of God’s Image and his love for those marginalized by an ableist society. Jesus’ recovery of bodily goodness and holistic integrity grounds a transformative and sacramental ecclesiology of disability. People of varied abilities can love our bodies, because God desires them and teaches us to desire them too.

I have hands-on experience of the deleterious effect of shame on self-acceptance. Growing up with spastic cerebral palsy on Prince Edward Island, and realizing the great

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22Johnson describes the fullness of God’s desire for humankind in some detail: see Johnson, Divine Communion, 41, 43, 52-4, and 72-3.
effort I needed to expend to make my muscles do what I wanted them to do, I detested my body; I felt that it was deficient relative to other bodies. I envied athletes like my two brothers, who could turn faster, jump higher, and lift more than I. Thus, I spent most of my childhood trying to ignore my body, whether that meant avoiding doing calisthenics that would aid my strength and flexibility, or staying inside to play computer games or read in summer-time. Even now, having learned to enjoy the joyful and eschatological aspects of a workout, I feel embarrassed at my physical awkwardness; for instance, I have consistently apologized to strangers on the subway, or to friends in cramped classrooms, for the weakness of my legs, or my slowness in turning.

That said, just as Johnson claims, I have partly reconciled myself with my body by consuming some of the “hair of the dog that bit [me].” To both confront my bodily shame, and to transform that shame into joy at my own capacity, I needed to become an athlete. Thus, as I will recount in the fifth chapter, in 2007 I began to go to the gym, where I have learned to bicycle, lift heavy weights, perform chin-ups, and accept my body as it is. While I do not believe that I require a perfect body now or in the future, the gym offers me both healing and confidence.

This section has briefly explored the shame of humanity’s fall and the self-acceptance that Jesus offers in terms of a transformative and sacramental ecclesiology of disability. People with disabilities need not experience the shame of lacking “normal” bodies, because God has made us in God’s relational Image, and loves our bodies as they are. Indeed, since norm means a regulation, people with impairments can rejoice in our diversity, and in our freedom from regulation. Regardless of our bodily function, we are assured of God’s love as

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23 For this peculiar yet fitting Irish expression, see Johnson, *Divine Communion*, 72.
we channel our energies in God’s service. Significantly, some parts of Isaiah 40—a sixth-century B.C.E. prophetic text that denotes part of God’s eschatological plan for Israel’s and the world’s wholeness—continue to deepen the dialectical paradigm that Genesis has uncovered. The author of Isaiah 40 reveals anew human physical fragility, allows Christians of all abilities to trust our unique embodiment(s), and affirms the equality of all bodies in the presence of a loving God.

2. **Humanity in God’s Image: Isaiah 40**

God does not leave human beings mired in shame and self-doubt: in many of the prophetic Hebrew texts, God’s Word comes in visionary form to a nomadic people longing for a glimpse of restoration and wholeness. Before examining God’s promised wholeness and integrity in some Gospel healing-stories, readers can discern how the Spirit works in even fragile human existence. Thus, it is important to explore how Isaiah 40—used as a liturgical text in Advent—clarifies humanity’s limitation, human equality before God, and God’s intense longing to embrace the mortal with immortality. This text, which forecasts Jesus’ eschatological entry in the Gospels, declares firmly God’s ardent desire for humanity to feel the fullness of life.

Alongside other Old Testament scholars, Walter Brueggemann asserts that the section of Isaiah called “Second Isaiah” (chapters 40-55) continues the tradition that looks toward *shalom* for Israel and the whole earth; that said, Second Isaiah contains a more “lyrical” literary style than chapters 1-39. Moreover, the historical context is different: although chapters 1-39 address the seventh-century exile of God’s people within the Babylonian empire, chapters 40-55 mark “the fall of Babylon” and the ascent of Cyrus II, commonly called “the Great.” Significantly, Brueggemann states that the whole Book of Isaiah is
structured by the dialectical relationship between “displacement” and “restoration,” and God’s plan for Earth’s well-being.\(^{24}\)

Brueggemann notes that much of the poetry in Isaiah 40-55 promotes Israel’s future restoration; while some scholars argue that the “Suffering Servant” in the four “songs” is Christ, a problematic interpretation, Brueggemann affirms Tryggve Mettinger’s claim that all Israel is that servant. While Israel’s role as its own servant in Isaiah 49:6 is structurally “awkward,” this contention that Israel serves itself highlights Israel’s divine mandate to serve the whole world.\(^{25}\)

Affirming Brueggemann’s argument, we can also interpret Isaiah 40:1-11 in terms of disability, and observe the restoration of all God’s people. The first voice in Isaiah 40 belongs to YHWH, the Lord Almighty. God asks Isaiah (or Isaiah’s audience, either in his own time or the future) to “comfort [God’s] people” (40:1, NRSV) and to comfort Jerusalem, because Israel’s long disfavour with God is over (40:2). One may note here the legal language of judgment and punishment: the immediate context is the exile of the Israelites from Jerusalem in the sixth century B.C.E. According to the writers of Isaiah, YHWH has punished the Israelites with physical bondage at the hands of the Babylonian empire, in recompense for centuries of idolatry and economic injustice (see also Amos 4:1-5:14, 21-27). One can infer that the nation of Israel has collectively amplified the sins of the first humans—an inordinate desire for the possession of God’s abundance—by trusting in its own political and social permanence.


After the text clarifies God’s forgiveness of the Israelites, it immediately, and unexpectedly, changes subject and place: “A voice cries out: ‘In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain’” (40:3, NRSV). This new speaker locates God’s proclamation and action in the wilderness outside Mount Zion. That is, rather than making Godself manifest only in Jerusalem, the city of God’s favour, the universe’s Creator also reveals Godself in the Judean wilderness. Just as in the Exodus narrative, God will display God’s power in the place of plentiful manna and scarce meat, the space of thirst and longing, the home of angels and birds of prey.

Significantly for this dissertation, the Lord’s road is to be straight. This word, yashar in Hebrew, refers to the character of this road as much as to its lack of curvature.26 This word denotes not only “straightness,” but “rightness” in terms of moral and ontological authenticity. Those who walk this straight road alongside the Creator will eschew self-centred preoccupations, and honestly turn towards right relationship with the world. People who approach the world in this way do so without subterfuge or self-deception. While Christian preachers, teachers, and congregations can use this metaphor in ableist ways, such as valorizing the ability to walk straight (an ability this author lacks) or symbolically denigrating the real and physical struggles of people with mobility issues, here I only observe the moral, rather than physical, integrity of those who accompany the Lord on this eschatological highway of righteousness.

26I am indebted to Andrew Colman for this information. See James Strong, ed. Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2007), yashar, H3474, p. 1513.
According to Nancy Eiesland, people with disabilities often highlight rectitude of the kind described here, because we disrupt and resist the lone-wolf mentality fostered by postmodern capitalism and embody the need for mutuality and interdependence. Eiesland argues that people with disabilities must “act out” and “hold [our] bodies together” in order to resist the pervasive culture of ableism—a social and ideological paradigm that Reynolds calls the “cult of normalcy”—that serves the comfort and power of persons of able body.²⁷ Former Jesuit priest and LGBTQ activist Robert Goss concurs: in accordance with his portrait of Jesus as an agent of God’s solidarity with all oppressed people, Goss calls other queer Christians (and, by extension, other church activists) to embody Jesus’ transformative and disruptive ethic of love.²⁸

Geometrical “straightness,” righteousness, authenticity, and equality are conflated in Isaiah 40:3-5. Caring for the welfare of one’s neighbours makes one a more whole and free person. Thus, equality in this sense marks a mutual, connective, and empathetic set of relations wherein people communally envision the world and invest their resources in it. It lays the groundwork for a moral disposition of openness towards others and a willingness to be shaped by others’ perspectives. For Christians with disabilities, as for Second Isaiah’s audience, equality means cooperating to clear a social space for creative and reciprocal acts of love.

After describing the Lord’s straight path in the wilderness, the writer of Isaiah outlines the inherent equality and mutuality of God’s shalom in glowing terms: “The glory of

²⁷For Eiesland’s militant observations, see Nancy Eiesland, Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 94-5; for a full and terrifying description of the discursive powers of the “cult of normalcy,” see Reynolds, Vulnerable Communion, 27, 79-86.

the LORD shall be revealed, and *all people* will see it together” (Isaiah 40:5, NRSV, emphasis added). In this glimpse of the Last Days, the author makes concrete the mutual equality defined in prior verses as righteousness and authenticity. God’s grandeur is the parity and dignity in store for all God’s creatures in the coming time of integrity. Isaiah 40:3-5 reveals that God’s splendour is a fully alive humanity, existing in dignity and joy not mixed with prejudice or oppression.

Isaiah 40:6-11 examines human contingency, partly in light of the equality already illustrated. A voice asks the prophet to “cry out”; Isaiah, perplexed, responds, “What shall I cry?” (40:6). In reply, the first voice states that “[a]ll people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field” (7). Human beings’ equality consists, in part, in our fragility in the face of finitude. Irrespective of our abilities, our finite, physical selves will weaken and die, but God’s Word exists eternally (8). God supports and guides people, as a shepherd does sheep (11); Isaiah witnesses to Israel’s total dependence on God during the exile. Although the Isaiah passage does not explicitly evoke the link between human contingency and sympathy, the portrait of Jesus in the next section will make those links concrete, because Jesus’ love models empathy for all.

Jean Vanier directly connects the modes of human contingency and interdependence, to which the prophetic texts allude, to the human experience of loneliness, and indirectly connects them to sacrament. Vanier asserts that all people experience loneliness. Loneliness reveals a sense of incompletion, like a flower or blade of grass in this passage; this lack emerges partly from our lives as separate beings. Seclusion can be either a source of bitterness or a creative and motivating force that impels people to seek interdependence and harmony. Vanier notes that “love” can overcome the “chaos” of isolation by fostering
relationship, and asserts that sacraments, like Holy Communion in L’Arche Trosly, can help people of diverse abilities to experience God’s grace through unity-in-diversity. The third chapter will clarify the capacities of people of diverse abilities for mutual empowerment and celebration of difference.

I have experienced both the contingency and the interdependence asserted in this passage. I have felt both debilitating weakness in my body and mind, and the ecstatic and energizing sparks of human relationship. For instance, in mid-March 2012, as I ran down the stairs in good shoes after teaching my first lecture, my body betrayed me. I tripped on the bottom step, and injured my foot so that I could hardly walk. The next moment felt as though it was days long, as I absorbed the shock of my new immobility. For the next week, I depended on my roommates to buy me groceries, and to come see me. I felt like my limitation was burdensome, and I felt separated (unfairly!) from activities that I loved. By contrast, in late September 2013, I hiked for about three hours with friends from the University of Toronto’s Graduate Christian Fellowship; they helped me to balance on crags and narrow trails in Toronto’s east end. In that poignant moment, I felt the physical and social empowerment and support that comes from relationship.

Like the first verses of Isaiah 40, verses 28-31 also articulate the prophet’s profound appreciation of human equality and contingency. After extolling YHWH’s presence and power (40:12-26), the speaker states that God does not “faint or grow weary” (Isaiah 40:28, NRSV). God will edify those who need strength, and offer divine strength to those who “wait on Him” (40:31, NRSV). For Isaiah, gratitude for God’s present gifts and hopeful anticipation of future dignity both embody that patience. This dissertation’s ecclesiology,

29 For all the information in this paragraph, see Jean Vanier, Becoming Human (Toronto: Paulist, 1998), 7-8, and 20-27; see also Vanier, Jean, Befriending the Stranger (Ottawa: Novalis, 2005), 127.
which supplements other liberating ecclesiologies that already exist for diverse groups of people, will emphasize the dignity and joy that allows human beings to rise on eagles’ wings (40:28). This project does not aim to outline and critique various extant ecclesiological models; instead, it will focus on supplementing positive features of a generally-Reformed ecclesiology that pays special attention to theologies of disability and the lived experiences of people with disabilities.

This discussion of human equality and fragility through Isaiah’s prophecy leads into a discourse on Jesus’ salvific power for people of varied abilities: traditional Christologies posit that Jesus Christ is the shepherd described in Isaiah 40:11 (see also John 10:9-16). It is necessary to discuss who Jesus is, how he relates to humankind—especially to those of us with disabilities—and how he manifests God’s love and grace to us. Thus, the next section will investigate these questions by exploring some Gospel healing-narratives and contextualized Christologies that impact a transformative and sacramental ecclesiology of disability. The discussion in this section will not be exhaustive, but will create space for later proposals.

3. Humanity Restored in Jesus

Who is Jesus and how does his B/body (by which I mean both his historical incarnation as a Palestinian Jewish peasant, and his communal incarnation in the Church that bears his name) make a difference to a transformative and sacramental ecclesiology of disability? Traditionally, Christians have claimed for almost twenty centuries that Jesus, a manual labourer from Nazareth, a little town in the Galilee region of Israel/Palestine, was also the Christ, the “anointed one” who fulfilled the prophecies of ancient Israel, including
Isaiah’s prophecy described above.\textsuperscript{30} That is, a carpenter manifested the dynamic and relational God of creation and covenant. For instance, in his Church Dogmatics, Karl Barth calls Jesus Christ “the genuine, true and righteous man . . . who kept the covenant which all others broke.” Barth’s statement affirms Christ’s identity.

Theologically speaking, Barth follows the ecumenical creeds by asserting Jesus’ incarnation of both humanity and divinity. In his humanity, Jesus embodies the contingency and gratitude that all people possess in relation to God, and exists in openness to God the Father. Barth writes that Jesus images God perfectly, depending on God for being and activity.\textsuperscript{31} Jesus evinces trust in God, in part, through his death on a cross that frees creation from sin and death and displays a new way to be human.\textsuperscript{32} Jesus lived, died, and rose from death fully human.

Moreover, Barth states that Jesus Christ “kept the covenant.” In his humanity, Jesus fulfilled the promises he made to God, and so embodied God’s relational Image to the full. In his radical table-fellowship, healings, exorcisms, story-telling, teaching, and prophetic disturbance at the Jewish Temple, Jesus lived his life for God, and called his followers to do

\begin{footnotes}
\item[31] For Barth’s affirmation of Jesus’ covenant-faithfulness, see Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), 3.2:214; for Barth’s assertion of his full humanity, see ibid, 176-81. To explore Barth’s portrait of Jesus as God’s earthly Image, see Barth, Church Dogmatics, 3.2.134, 217-219. For one explanation of Barth’s relational theological anthropology, see Daniel J. Price, Karl Barth’s Anthropology in Light of Modern Thought (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 117-65. For more on Jesus’ obedience to God the Father, see Paul J. Wadell, “Pondering the Anomaly of God’s Love: Ethical Reflections on Access to the Sacraments,” in Developmental Disability and Sacramental Access, ed. Edward Foley (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994), 61-3.
\item[32] Paul Tillich calls Jesus the New Being; according to Tillich, Jesus accepts and overcomes the consequences of “existential estrangement,” in order to maintain a “perfect unity” with God. See Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1957), 2:135. For another lens on Jesus’ significance to people with disabilities, see Reynolds, Vulnerable Communion, 197-209.
\end{footnotes}
Jesus lived, died, and rose again in order to restore mutual vulnerability, dignity, and worth to human beings, and to create empowering relationships that affirm personal and social integration.

Jesus’ way of life restored significant facets of God’s Image to humanity, especially to his friends. Jesus affirmed people’s mutual vulnerability, dignity, and worth. Here, by dignity, I mean the holistic social state of harmony that occurs in God’s shalom. By human worth, I mean the personal and individual aspects of dignity. All of Jesus’ encounters promoted Erkenntnis—recognition, knowledge, and affirmation. He included people with disabilities in his life, and offered all people vulnerability, compassion, and trust. Notably, Jesus lived in poverty, and acted in solidarity with and for people who were poor and oppressed. Gutierrez asserts, “The preferential option for the poor is the link to our faith in Jesus Christ.”

Thus, as I will clarify, part of divine equity is the Christ-like embodiment of economic justice for those who are poor.

This brief discourse opens into a crucial question: how does Jesus’ physical body, interpreted after his resurrection in a corporate sense as the Church, his earthly Body, impact an ecclesiology of disability? Three Gospel healing-narratives will clarify how Jesus’ Body informs a transformative, sacramental ecclesiology of disability in three ways that

\[\text{33For a thorough critical exegesis of Jesus’ “Stop the Temple Action,” see Goss, Jesus Acted Up, 145-56.}\]


\[\text{35As stated in the Introduction, Peter C. Hodgson calls the Church “the Body of Christ.” This image connotes self-sacrifice for others’ sake, and the constitution of a new people as a new humanity. See again Hodgson, Revisioning the Church: Ecclesial Freedom in the New Paradigm (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 29-30. Similarly, Tillich clarifies that Jesus lives out the New Being through the whole Church: see Tillich, Systematic Theology 2:135.}\]
portend multifaceted access for people of diverse abilities. First, since Jesus incarnates sacramental love, both his physical body and the Body of Christ bear witness to healing and the total bodily redemption of humans. Second, Jesus’ full embodiment of humanity includes the transformation of societal perceptions of human bodies. Third, Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection attest the connection of emotion and spirituality through affective access; later chapters will clarify this connection. These assertions will create the space for further ecclesiological proposals.

a. Physicality: Healing and the Redemption of the Body

Many Christian theologians, and scholars in other religions, note rightly that Jesus was a great teacher. Jesus reinterpreted the Jewish scriptures in his own day in ways that proposed justice between Palestinian peasants and Roman landowners, and that practised peace in contrast to the brutality of the Pax Romana. Nonetheless, Jesus healed people while he taught them truths about God. He embodied truths about God through his ministries of healing and conversation, and so offered his neighbours with disabilities dignity and compassion.

In her profound book A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability, Kathy Black analyzes Jesus’ healings at length, and addresses their social and religious implications for church-communities that include disability. Black observes the difference between healing and curing: cure signifies the removal of symptoms of a physical disease, while healing denotes a “sense of peace and well-being” that reintegrates the person into his or her community. Black argues that Jesus’ meetings with persons with disabilities were healings

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36For one thorough modern indictment of the Pax Romana, see John Dominic Crossan, God & Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 23ff.
rather than cures; significantly, her definition of healing also describes one facet of God’s 
*shalom.* I affirm Black’s homiletical emphasis on the radical and generous nature of Jesus’ 
healing powers: while many of Jesus’ healing encounters, such as the man with the withered 
hand (Luke 6:6-11), display ambiguous power-relations, the vast majority of these accounts 
show a healer willing to transform social purity codes into new norms that invite people into 
holistic inclusion.

For instance, Black redefines Jesus’ interaction with the single leper in Mark 1:40-45 
as a healing encounter. Referring to the “purity codes” of Leviticus, Black describes a 
number of ostracizing behaviours that people with leprosy (or “Hansen’s disease”) had to 
practise, such as shouting, “Unclean, unclean,” in public places. Black observes that the man 
offers Jesus a choice, rather than demanding cure or healing, because by healing him Jesus 
risks ritual impurity. Jesus feels anger, called in Greek σπλαγχνίζεσται, a verb that 
denotes a compassionate movement of one’s innards. Jesus’ healing of the man with leprosy 
upsets his culture’s “purity codes” and begins the man’s social reintegration. Moreover, 
Jesus asks him to offer the correct sacrifice after the healing (see Leviticus 14:4-33). In this 
episode, Jesus absorbs the shame of impurity, becoming unclean for the man’s sake, and 
bodily resists an obdurate religious system in order to offer dignity to his neighbour. Black 
challenges her audience to be like Jesus by transforming the “purity codes” of Western 
churches.

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37For these definitions of “healing” and “cure,” see Kathy Black, *A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and 

38For Black’s description of Jesus’ anger at the religious system, see Black, *Healing Homiletic*, 133. 
For the overall effects of Jesus’ healing, see 134-6.

39For a womanist interpretation of Jesus as an icon of resistance, see Rosemary P. Carbine, 
In light of Black’s discourse, my definition of healing will incorporate Black’s paradigm. I view healing as a gradual, and sometimes painful, growth towards well-being, which involves both relating to others and an integrative, embodied experience of shalom. Recall that shalom means not only “wholeness” and “peace,” but also essential lived integrity, active solidarity and sympathy, and the embodied harmony of every aspect of individual and societal flourishing.\(^4\) Inclusive relationships that offer access manifest healing for people of diverse abilities.

My own experience too is germane. Throughout my remarkable life, I have encountered the healing that takes place in the Church. While I am not yet perfect (see Philippians 3:12), I am more whole now than I was before meeting Jesus. I bled from my brain when I was born. I believe that the Lord touched my head in that moment to mark me for God’s service: Because I was small and sickly after my premature birth and cerebral haemorrhage, I was not baptized until March 1985, six months after my birth. I do not recall the congregation’s vow to raise me as one of God’s children, but I remember very well its joyous after-effects in youth retreats, communal prayer, camp experiences, and theological study. Other people embodied God’s love for me.

I affirm that my experience of a cranial haemorrhage branded me as God’s servant, so that I could both relate to others in ways that offer them God’s dignity and joy, and use my cognitive skills to testify to gaps in the collective experience of equity for God’s friends of varied abilities. My experience of weakness from my haemorrhage made me a creative and

\(^4\)For this entire episode, see Black, *Healing Homiletic*, 128-36; for a “healing” hermeneutic, see 139-40.

\(^4\)For solidarity as empowerment, see Iris M. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 116-17, 168-73, and 186. For a clear definition of love as sympathy, see Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 126-8.
“right-brained” person, while my intimate encounters with other people have engendered in me a great desire for shalom—for equity, dignity, and joy. These profound and moving modes of experience allow me, like the leper in Mark 1, to offer God’s friends a choice for or against healing. These life-experiences allow me, like the blind man in John 9, to critique the severity and myopia of ableist perceptions within and without the Church. In terms of that ecclesial transformation of perception, I turn now to a scriptural examination of consciousness-raising in John 9.

b. Cognition and Language: Changing Perception (John 9)

Jesus frees the whole world. As he frees the captives and “binds up the broken-hearted” (see Isaiah 61:1-2 and Luke 4:17-18), Jesus works to transform people’s perceptions from self-centredness to his own joyful openness to relationship. Part of that metanoia or conversion to which Jesus invites all people (Mark 1:14-15) entails changing the way that people of able body and people with disabilities view each other. In light of that conversion, Jesus’ encounter with a blind man in John 9 proves instructive. Jesus and the man offer each other dignity and friendship, and the man models discipleship for many people with disabilities in the twenty-first century.

In John 9, Jesus and his disciples see a man who is blind. One of Jesus’ friends asks who is to blame for the man’s blindness. Contrary to some of his other statements linking disability to sin, Jesus asserts, “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, NRSV). Jesus mixes mud with saliva, and asks the blind man to wash in the pool called Siloam, which means “sent” (9:6-7).

Thereafter, God’s workings are indeed revealed in the life of the one who was blind. As soon as the man can see, he disputes the teachers of the law concerning the identity and
mission of the One who healed him (9:10-34). After two such encounters with the Pharisees, the man angers them, and they eject him from the synagogue (9:31-34); thereafter, he sees Jesus again. The man who was blind worships Jesus (9:35-38), and Jesus needles the Pharisees about the narrowness of their perception of God’s love (9:39-41). Like Bartimaeus’ story, which I will engage later, this account witnesses to Jesus’ equal relationships with people with disabilities.

Kathy Black investigates Jesus’ hospitable encounter with this man at length. She observes that traditional preaching interpretations of this text focus on its many binary-oppositions, notably darkness versus light (9:4-6) and blindness versus sight (9:18-26). Many preachers have found in this narrative a measure for the emergence of a person’s faith in Jesus, a tale of light overcoming darkness, or a sign of the “removal” of human “blindness” through Jesus’ love. Nonetheless, Black asserts another theological meaning to this story.

This narrative does more than recount the man’s journey of faith in Jesus. As Black notes, Jesus’ words to his disciples break the cultural connection between disability and sin; Jesus’ healing action offers all people with disabilities hope for access to divine equality and justice, because Jesus foregrounds God’s Image in the man. That Image is striking: the man’s “strong wit, personality, intellect, and ability to communicate” exist alongside his blindness, for a physical disability cannot sum up a person’s identity.42 Jennie Block corroborates Black’s view of the blind man, adding that he is “smart, clever, [and] tenacious . . . ”43 Indeed, the man’s tenacity is his most prominent trait; Christians with disabilities can exhibit that same purpose.

42For Black’s thoughts on the man’s tenacity, see Black, Healing Homiletic, 72, 77.

That said, Jesus’ healing of the man may actually add to his “sense of isolation”: having always been blind, he has no recognizable trade. Creating job opportunities for him may be difficult. Black adds that the blind man may represent the struggles of many Christians, with and without disabilities, in the secular world: as he had no faith before meeting Jesus, he now has to both integrate his new worldview with his sense of physical sight, and socially reintegrate himself.44 These transformations will take time, and will reconfigure his social relationships.

Jesus’ transformative healing and the blind man’s journey of faithful response can relate to the fatigue of Christians with disabilities in our struggles for equality and justice. On the one hand, Jesus’ action offers the man dignity because perceptions are altered positively: his newfound physical sight allows him to see spiritually that Jesus calls him to live differently.45 On the other, because he offends the Pharisees, the man experiences relational disruption before communal integration. The blind man demonstrates the significance of diverse perceptions to a Church inclusive of disability: when different perceptions are included in ecclesial decisions, people of varied abilities can discover solutions to communal or societal injustices.

Second, the man’s journey with Jesus begins with what Eiesland calls “the kinesis of knowledge.” She explains that term by stating that “we [who have disabilities] become

44 See Black, *Healing Homiletic*, 77-78.

45 When I make these assertions, I do not mean to devalue blindness, or connect it to a lack of perception or moral integrity. Rather, I claim that Jesus’ transformation of the man’s physical circumstances creates the space for the affirmation of his new spiritual circumstances as a friend of Jesus. New Testament scholar Colleen Grant makes a similar point: the man’s extraordinary “deliberative process,” not Jesus’ miraculous healing of his blindness, is the point of the story. See Colleen Grant, “Reinterpreting the Healing Narratives,” in *Human Disability and the Service of God: Reassessing Religious Practice*, eds. Don E. Saliers and Nancy Eiesland (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 84.
keenly aware that our physical selves determine our perceptions of the social and physical world. These perceptions, like our bodies, are often nonconforming and disclose new categories and models of thinking and being.”

Eiesland contends that the physical and perceptual worldviews of people with disabilities are aligned differently than they are for people of able body; she also claims that, because of this different mode of knowledge, people with disabilities think and act differently, and that our unique mode of knowledge merits greater dignity.

The blind man corroborates Eiesland’s claim, because his physical and perceptual transformation offers him profound knowledge of Jesus. He knows who Jesus is because Jesus “opens [his] eyes” (9:30); perception here is multilayered, as the metaphor of sight in John’s Gospel links bodily and spiritual awareness. Furthermore, the man’s geographical journey from Siloam to his neighbourhood, his parents’ house, and his synagogue echoes his existential sojourn. For Jesus and his new friend, kinesis (motion) is knowledge. The physical motions of Christians with disabilities can disclose our special episteme; when we move through the world, we practice an erotic form of knowledge that transforms the knower and the thing known.

Third, Jesus’ healing and the man’s worship enact the love that Christians with disabilities need to flourish. Jesus reminds the man of God’s Image in him, disclosing to him the potential of existence without exclusion. Jesus is the man’s hodos (Road) to God (John

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47For the significance of *eros* as relational knowledge invested in the well-being of its object, see again Pamela Dickey Young, *Re-creating the Church: Creating Communities of Eros* (Harrisburg: Trinity, 2000), 31-36.

48For Jay Johnson’s conviction that the Eucharist embodies Jesus’ love that cuts through shame and fear, see *Divine Communion*, 164; for a similar LGBTQ activist perspective, see Goss, *Jesus Acted Up*, 76-8, 106-10.
14:6), accompanying him along the first steps on a journey of life with dignity. For all Christians, Jesus is journey and destination; he is what Bono calls the “Kingdom Come” in joyful motion.

That same joy felt by Jesus and the blind man—the eschatological embrace shared between God and God’s creation in and through hospitable communities—opens the way for a brief examination of what I have called the “affective access” that Jesus embodies for Christians with disabilities. The blind man experiences confrontation and agitation when he encounters the Pharisees; by contrast, through Jesus’ creative and healing word—the Word that enacts God’s plenteous power in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9)—the Samaritan leper already knows the dignified joy of physical and perceptual access to God’s equality and justice.


Jesus embodies joy for Christians with disabilities, because he reveals to us that God desires us just as we are. Consequently, Christ Jesus, present to us in inclusive church-communities that practice God’s radical generosity, demonstrates his exuberance through radical table-fellowship. Fellowship over meals entails a profound savouring of life’s simple moments, such as walking, eating, and telling stories. These simple moments are evident in many of the healing-narratives, including Jesus’ healing of the ten men with leprosy, a story of profound joy.

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49I am indebted to Dr. Charles Fensham for this profound interpretation of this verse.

50For Bono’s beautiful lyric, especially the third verse, see U2, “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For,” The Joshua Tree (Dublin: Island, 1987), 25, 33-6.
In Luke 17:11-19, Jesus travels along the border between Samaria and Galilee with his disciples (17:11). In their travels, he and his friends encounter a group of ten men with leprosy, who call on Jesus to “have pity” (17:13, NRSV). Jesus asks them to “go, show [themselves] to the priests” (verse 14): from the word “go”—so to speak—all ten are healed, and yet only one, a Samaritan, returns to Jesus to offer praise to God (15-16). Once again, the outsider—the one beyond the Law’s purity-codes—expresses the joy of newfound belonging, an ecstasy lost on some of those already accustomed to belonging. Strikingly, the text uses the word εὐχαριστέω, a verb correlated to the rite called “Eucharist,” to describe the Samaritan’s outpouring of gratitude. One may ask how the Samaritan’s unbounded joy at his social reintegration points to the linkage of emotion and spirituality in sacramental communities, which I call “affective access,” with God’s equality and justice for Christians with disabilities.

First, I affirm Kathy Black’s contention that, in this text, the one outside the boundaries of normal belonging understands Jesus’ mission and identity better than those on the “inside” of those boundaries. Black asks, “What do outsiders have to teach us today? What lessons do ‘foreigners’ . . . have to offer?” Cast out by his nation, the Samaritan throws in his lot with nine Jewish men, and then fully embraces Jesus as his healer who comes from God: he offers glory to God because he realizes anew that God loves him (Luke 17:15). Other people with disabilities can glorify God through a similar sense of spiritual

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51 Jesus’ extravagant love breaks down barriers in this text. As Patrick Cheng affirms, Christ is God’s radical love, or chesed, that seeks to relate to other peoples across difference. See Patrick S. Cheng, Radical Love: an Introduction to Queer Theology (New York: Seabury, 2011), 50; see also Ephesians 2:14.


53 See Black, Healing Homiletic, 147.
reintegration into Christ’s Body. For instance, Diane DeVries, a Texan woman with paraplegia who compares her body to the Venus de Milo, teaches her younger sister to dance. Because she has been taught that her body is normal, Diane knows a spiritual vigour that can inspire others; as the next two chapters will clarify, Diane’s self-acceptance allows her participate in what I call the “dance of difference.” Healing does not simply consist in physical reintegration; it is also spiritual and emotional.

Second, Christians of varied abilities can offer each other our trust as a gateway to affective access, just as the blind man places his trust in Jesus in John 9, and as the Samaritan does in this passage. Mutual trust resists the possibility of paternalism from Christians of able body, because mutuality is doing with others, not for them. Jean Vanier claims that that trust is one of the primary gifts of people with disabilities: according to Vanier, people with disabilities can embody an orientation towards belonging that resonates with all humanity. Although this vulnerability does not “save” people of able body in any sense, because it forbids them to give solely out of their own strength it can reveal human beings’ need to support each other.

To support his claims about trust, Vanier tells the story of his friend Antonio, who could not use his hands, speak, or walk. Although Antonio could not perform all the gestures of friendship, he “had accepted his limits and disabilities,” and “lived a love of trust” through his “smiling eyes” that conveyed his joy in existence. Antonio expands the bounds of normalcy by engaging other people with his trust and need, and displays to all the tenderness

54 See Eiesland, Disabled God, 36-38.

55 Theologians who write about inclusion have also commented on this joyous dance. For instance, see Brett Webb-Mitchell, Dancing with Disabilities: Opening the Church to All God’s Children (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1996), 31-35.

56 For Vanier’s stories about Antonio, see Becoming Human, 91-92, 98-100.
of the human heart. I can relate to Antonio. I live out that same trust when I “borrow someone’s shoulder” to go hiking, for the shoulder that mediates my lameness symbolizes God’s love in my life.

Finally, Christians with disabilities can create a portal to affective access in inclusive church-communities by “turning around,” as the Samaritan does, in gestures of self-acceptance. Self-acceptance prevents us from blaming believers of able bodies, or an ableist Church, for our exclusion; rather, self-acceptance allows us to accept others as they are, and to recognize God’s image in them. Self-acceptance mediates our shame, clears our perceptual lenses, and allows us to desire our bodies. Moreover, self-acceptance, the key to emotional and spiritual integration, allows us to look forward to the Last Days. Amos Yong’s research confirms that, in God’s abundant Reign, Christians with disabilities will discover the fullness of God’s desire.

d. Spiritual Access as Transformation: Yong’s Eschatological Vision of Disability

The last three sections have revealed some of the contours of the multifaceted access to equality and justice that Jesus offers to people with varied abilities in his ministry. In a similar way, this section will explain the resurrection of Jesus—and, by extension, the new life of Jesus’ friends of diverse abilities—in order to round out the scriptural portrait of access that began with Genesis. In light of this, Jesus Christ, the world’s liberator, reduces the shame of all human beings. Christ’s cross creates solidarity between Jesus and people with disabilities, for it reveals the fragility of Jesus’ body, just as ableist systems reveal our bodies’ ambiguity and frailty.\(^\text{57}\) The lives of people with disabilities connote both weakness

\(^{57}\)Moltmann strongly implies this mode of solidarity, asserting that Jesus’ death “for the life of creation” creates a new way of life, where Jesus assumes the suffering of fragile and oppressed human beings.
and the God-given strength of trust and interdependence. Our unique perceptions and our physical, intellectual, and emotional requirements reveal the significance of Christ’s Body: people with disabilities need other people to help us to resist unjust ableist structures. Jesus knows our limits, and our frustration at constrictive power-structures; his resurrection with wounded hands and feet offers us spiritual access to transformative equity. Thus, this section will concisely connect Jesus’ resurrection-life to the bodies of people with disabilities, and explain the possible appearance of that life.

Amos Yong, a Pentecostal theologian who has taught most recently at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, has a younger brother named Mark who has Down Syndrome. In some of his reflections on Mark’s life, Yong has explored what disability might mean for people with disabilities in the Last Days. Following Paul’s interpretation of the coming resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:45-57, Yong asserts that the “glory” of risen human bodies may include disability. Since Paul contrasts the “powerful” bodies of risen people with the bodies of those dead and buried, his use of “weakness” and “perishable” (1 Corinthians 15:43, 50-52) may refer to the contingent bodies of all humans, rather than disabled bodies. Moreover, since Paul’s “criterion” for resurrection is Christ, the resurrected bodies of people with disabilities will attest the Spirit’s animating power, and may display both radical and dignified continuity and discontinuity with their previous state of incompleteness. I affirm Yong’s suggestion here that the Spirit will empower our bodies;


58 For all these eschatological points, see Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* (Waco, TX: Baylor, 2007), 273-4.
while this empowerment does not necessitate the full restoration of our bodies, it will involve the restoration of God’s glorious, relational Image in our flesh.

Yong also examines Gregory of Nyssa’s doctrine of *epectasis*, because it enunciates specific possibilities for the bodies of people with disabilities. Speculating about the soul of Macrina, his sister, Gregory argues that the human soul changes continually even after death. The spirit, still incorporated into a resurrected body, may grow continually in God’s relational Image without reaching a specific terminus. According to Gregory, human beings can travel infinitely into God’s dignity, grace, knowledge, and pleasure, because God is infinite. No living body images true humanity in all its splendour; rather, the ideal of dignity is a moving target.\(^{59}\)

Lastly, Yong argues that the Holy Spirit, initiator of divine-human relationships, always creates new possibilities for embodied encounter. Since souls are shaped by bodily interactions, all people can participate in the Spirit’s transformative work according to their capacities. Yong ponders the potential for healing for people with disabilities in the Last Days, and asserts that people with Down Syndrome and other disabilities may retain their “phenotypical features”—physiological identifying marks—in the resurrection.\(^{60}\) Yong claims that resurrection affirms, rather than negates, the bodily signs that distinguish human beings. Indeed, as Eiesland states independently, holistic healing entails not the removal of disabilities from human beings, but instead growth in God, and embodied realization of the potentials for dignity and joy.\(^{61}\)

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\(^{59}\)For Yong’s dense and thorough definition of *epectasis*, see Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 274-78.

\(^{60}\)For all these claims about the Spirit’s life-giving powers, see *ibid*, 278-85.

\(^{61}\)See Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 107. The fifth chapter will expand on these claims.
I affirm Yong’s desires both for authentic identity and for healing within Christ’s resurrection-life; I do not believe that people with disabilities will have perfect bodies in the resurrection, in the sense of “perfect” mediated by normalcy. Rather we will have Spirit-filled, fully-alive bodies, for God values what society calls imperfect. As I will suggest later, my workouts and my love of dance both reveal my desire for Jesus’ integrative healing. For instance, in October 2012, I was astonished to discover that I—a lopsided, lean figure who could not catch a football at age fourteen—could run at a slant along the track at Hart House. Moreover, between May and November 2014, I learned to perform between fifteen and forty chin-ups safely. These experiences illuminated Jesus’ resurrection-life for me within my athleticism, because the exercise released my erotic energies: these and other kinds of physical exertion changed my understanding of my body, engaged me in relationship with others who accompanied me in my physical healing, and gave me the grace to be kinder to myself and others.

Of course, Yong’s eschatological analysis does not simply serve me, or any other individual. Rather, Yong connects healing and identity for Christians with disabilities to communal life and friendship. In that light, as Wadell states, God draws friends together for communal formation as disciples. Wadell calls such people “spiritual friends.” Christians of all abilities need each other because we remind each other of God’s purposes. Chapters Three through Five will demonstrate the redemptive implications of this communal support.

In that light, Reynolds asserts that Jesus demonstrates the essence of God’s Reign: in his life, ministry, death, and resurrection, Jesus shows his friends that God’s eschatological

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62 For a cogent discussion of amicitia, which Wadell calls “spiritual friendship,” see Wadell, Becoming Friends, 107-11.
Reign depends on hospitality. God’s presence is made concrete in what Reynolds calls “availability,” a moral disposition of openness to other people. For Reynolds, availability has three components. First, openness to the other connotes “respect,” a willingness to let the other person be him/herself and “unfold on his/her own terms.” Later chapters will add nuance to this aspect of availability by calling it Erkenntnis, recognition and knowledge. Second, availability entails fidelity. When I welcome another, s/he and I are bound together; faithfulness is the primary aspect of covenantal relationships, encounters where people offer themselves to each other in faith. Third, Reynolds’ concept of availability requires compassion, an empathetic relation that allows one to share others’ suffering, and to seek their good, while also seeking to protect oneself. In his humanity and divinity, Jesus displays all these qualities of availability.

Independently, Reynolds and Yong imply that Christ will offer his friends a joyful and embodied life, full of dignity, in the resurrection. In the Last Days, people with mobility issues, people like me, will “leap like . . . deer” (Isaiah 35:6, NRSV). This passage offers a plurality of interpretive possibilities, rather than simply clarifying normate biases for re-making people into “able” bodies in the resurrection. The possibilities abound: for me, resurrection-life could be my standing on my yoga mat with legs strong enough for balance; because of my spatial disabilities, my risen life could also include a simple journey from my college in Toronto to the CN Tower without a map. The resurrection correlates to Iris

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63 See Reynolds, Vulnerable Communion, 221-22.
64 For all these carefully-nuanced definitions, see ibid, 123-8.
Young’s definition of justice expounded in the Introduction, where people of all abilities can express themselves and flourish fully.65

Jennie Weiss Block corroborates a joyful and embodied picture of God’s Reign as spiritual access to dignity and joy for people with disabilities. She relates that, the day her adoptive brother Bobby died of kidney failure, he asked her whether there was a “Radio Shack in Heaven,” because he wanted their mother to give him money to buy gadgets. Thinking quickly, Jennie told Bobby that there was indeed a Radio Shack in Heaven, and that this heavenly hardware store was free.66 This poignant vignette suggests that God’s Reign relates to embodied human desires here and now, and entails the eternal aspect of God’s equality and justice.

All the eschatological facets discussed above relate intimately to baptism and Holy Communion. Indeed, baptism and Holy Communion enable Christian communities that include disability to realize the material, eschatological, and existential import of God’s Reign. These rites can ignite the imaginations of Christians of all abilities to transform ableist social structures. The next section will define the sacraments and connect them to other themes discussed thus far; by linking the sacraments to community, the section will set the stage for the chapters to come.

B. The Construction of a Sacramental Ecclesiology of Disability

The sacraments can make manifest healing from experiences of shame, and can heal human relationships. In this way, Christ’s redemptive power can enable Christians of varied abilities to live into God’s mission for the Church in a fragile and fallen world. In this last

65For this exciting and empowering definition, see Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 39, 91-2.
66For this heartwarming and heartrending story, see Block, *Copious Hosting*, 165.
section of this chapter, I will demonstrate these claims by performing three tasks. First, I will investigate Jesus’ love for the whole created world, which I will call “sacramental love.” Second and subsequently, I will briefly explore and define the sacraments for the purposes of this project. Third, I will illustrate how baptism and Holy Communion can heal and free human beings, offering us God’s love, grace, mercy and power in our bodies; here I will assert that the sacraments strengthen Christ’s Body by affirming human vulnerability, dignity, and worth.

1. Jesus’ Sacramental Love for Humanity and Creation

Jesus Christ lived in complete communion with God the Creator; baptism and Holy Communion are grounded in that same relationship, and Jesus offers human beings of varied abilities the possibility of realizing that same connection to God. For instance, when Jesus sweats drops of blood as he prays in Gethsemane (see Luke 22:41-44), he embodies his trust in his Parent. His perspiration testifies to his integral faith that God will succour him in his limitation. This passage displays Jesus’ sacramental love for his Parent, and for humanity: sacramental love means his faith in the life-energies imparted to him by his loving God. In this episode, Jesus hopes in the Creator’s nearness, even though he accepts that God will not save him from crucifixion. He has also come to the Garden with friends, who forget their bond with Jesus when they fall asleep due to their “grief” over his impending death (22:45, NRSV). Jesus’ ambiguous and revelatory connection to God and his friends conveys the life-giving quality of *eros*.

Moreover, Jesus demonstrates that same sacramental trust throughout his life; for instance, during the wedding at Cana (John 2:1-12), the decidedly-Eucharistic feeding of the five thousand (John 6:1-14), and his repeated meals with others (e.g., Luke 14:1-24), Jesus
petitions God in faith, and the Deity gives to Jesus what he asks. Jesus and the Father embody relational harmony. All the healing-narratives interpreted thus far, and Jesus’ radical openness to people who suffer and outcasts, also suggest strongly that Jesus offers this connection with the divine to people with disabilities; in an ideal sense, Jesus’ integral compassion for people who are marginalized models the way that Christians of varied abilities can live in community.

The sacraments, rituals that make Christ materially and socially present to church-communities, are grounded in Jesus’ intertwined person and practice; thus, Christians with and without disabilities can assume the same vulnerable connection that Jesus shares with his Father, and can aspire to God’s equality, justice, and peace in the world through the sacraments. Baptism is an emblematic sign of God’s life, love, and power through water and the Spirit; in a related way, Holy Communion is individual and communal participation in Christ’s life, death, and resurrection through bread and wine. Both rituals manifest the mutual symmetry and sharing of power that portend shalom for all humanity and all creation. These two rituals attest to the truth of Allan Boesak’s claim that “in Jesus Christ, the total

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67 As I will restate in my later discourse about the sacraments, Paul Wadell calls Jesus’ relationship to God an encounter of interpersonal communion. See Paul J. Wadell, “Pondering the Anomaly of God’s Love,” 61, 63.

68 For allusions to the liberating orientation of Jesus’ meals and healings, see Black, Healing Homiletic, e.g., 151-56, 177-79; for the freeing and radically-open aspects of the Eucharist in particular, see also Moltmann, Church in the Power of the Spirit, 261-88, and Goss, Jesus Acted Up, 170-73.

69 Ruth C. Duck and James F. White independently observe that baptism regenerates people’s relationships to God and each other through incorporation into Christ’s Body, which is a key facet of shalom. White asserts that the Eucharist is both a “joyful feast” of thanksgiving, and “remembrance” of “Christ’s power to save.” See Ruth C. Duck, “Expansive Language in the Baptismal Community,” in Primary Sources of Liturgical Theology: a Reader, ed. Dwight W. Vogel (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 286-7; see also James F. White, Sacraments as God’s Self-Giving (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), 35-42, 53-61.
liberation of all people has come.” Jesus Christ has come in flesh, so that all people might be free and might freely love.

Jesus demonstrates his sacramental connection with God, and his intention for liberation and healing, through communal meals. For instance, in John 6:1-14, just before one Passover meal, the Johannine Jesus feeds a crowd of roughly five thousand people on “the other side of the Sea of Galilee” (6:1, 4, NRSV). He asks Philip and Andrew where to find bread for the crowd’s supper (verse 6). At Andrew’s timid suggestion, Jesus finds and blesses five barley loaves and two fishes (6:8-12), and asks the crowd to sit down (verse 10). God’s blessing ensures that five thousand people are fed, with baskets full of the remainders (6:13). Because Jesus has satisfied their need for food (see Luke 1:53), the people acclaim him as a prophet (John 6:14).

This story reveals Jesus’ sacramental love for humanity and Creation in various ways. First, Jesus regards the crowd’s needs as equal to his own. He has compassion for them, which is a facet of availability, the moral orientation that strengthens human relationships and portends God’s sharing of power with humanity. Second, through his sacramental love, Jesus fulfills God’s desire for humanity in Genesis: his “fruitful” love multiplies the bread and fish so abundantly that five thousand are fed fully, with baskets left

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over (see again Genesis 1:28). Jesus inaugurates the great Banquet of God’s Reign, where in both material and spiritual senses, all creatures will feast on God’s provident love and grace (see, e.g., Luke 14:14-24 and 22:14-18).  

Third, this text shows Jesus’ sacramental love because Jesus helps his friends and neighbours who are poor. Megan McKenna, Catholic theologian and storyteller, observes that the bread in this passage is barley bread, the bread eaten by people in poverty. By feeding his neighbours, Jesus fulfills his sacramentum—his covenant with God the Creator, later inscribed on his body—to redeem fallen humanity. He fulfills the Jewish law by offering life in the form of bread to those in need (see Leviticus, e.g., 19:9-10, 25:35-39), and they see God’s life in him.

Furthermore, in his solidarity with people who are poor, Jesus’ sacramental love has both material and spiritual implications. In terms of Jesus’ self-identification as the “bread of life” (John 6:35, NRSV), the discourse that immediately follows this passage, John Calvin asserts firmly that Holy Communion is “a spiritual banquet, where Christ attests himself to be the life-giving bread, upon which our souls feed unto true and blessed immortality.” Here, Calvin argues that Jesus’ abundant love offers human beings not only life, but
immortality, life free from death. Through his sacramental love, the Human One offers both material sustenance in community—a social form of salvation—and a spiritual transformation. People who have tasted and seen the Risen One’s sacramental love need no longer submit uncritically to ableism and normalcy. Jesus’ love reveals that life here on earth, and in the world to come, is greater than limitless productivity and commodity-exchange. Through Jesus’ transformative and sacramental love, his friends and lovers, the new humanity, can actively resist the worldly powers of death.\footnote{French theologian of liberation and activist Georges Casalis writes that people who embrace Jesus’ call to new life can take upon themselves a new “class option”: they can side actively with people who are oppressed. See Georges Casalis, \textit{Correct Ideas Don’t Fall From the Skies: Elements of an Inductive Theology} (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984), 26.}

Jesus’ sacramental love for humanity and Creation can lead Christians of all abilities into fruitful relationships. As I shall explore throughout this dissertation, these relationships embody the sharing and symmetry of power found (for instance) in the Simple Way’s \textit{agape}-meal of pizza and carbonated drinks, with street-involved friends, in Love Park in Philadelphia.\footnote{For this episode, see Shane Claiborne, \textit{The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical} (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 232-37.} They can also look like the Jeremiah Community’s “Hub” space on Easter Sunday of 2015, when we shared potluck food like turkey, ham, and salad with a number of our friends from the street. Human beings can incarnate Jesus’ abundant love in our bodies, and in the way we relate to one another; sacramental communities can empower people to embody Jesus’ love.

This explanation of Jesus’ sacramental love raises questions regarding the essence of the sacraments, the rites that make Christ materially and socially present. Thus, the next section will investigate the theological nature of the sacraments, explaining both what a sacrament is, and the ways that baptism and Holy Communion are sacraments. In this
section, I will examine the ways that the sacraments can contribute to a transformative and sacramental ecclesiology of disability, including their inclusive, healing, and liberating aspects for Christians of varied abilities.

2. Defining the Sacraments

In light of these assertions, a sacrament is a rite that illuminates Christ’s presence within a Christian community by means of a visible (that is, material) sign. Initially, the early church called a sacrament a μοστρητον, a Greek noun that connotes a “mystery,” a “transcendental or ultimate reality,” and/or a “secret.” Indeed, this is the beauty of the sacraments: in Jesus Christ, the God of infinite and indescribable mystery has come near to us. Jesus is a sacrament, a revelation of God’s material and spiritual presence; he draws human beings and creation into loving relationship, and provides a concrete basis for the rituals that mark his continued presence with his followers. John’s Gospel expresses it succinctly: while “no one has ever seen God,” Christ expresses God’s total love, grace, and power (John 1:18, NRSV).

Citing Augustine, Calvin claims that sacraments are “visible and outward signs” of God’s grace; like the seal of a nobleman, these symbols directly attest the reality that they signify—the theological reality of God’s love, grace, and joy among God’s friends. Following Emile Durkheim’s paradigm of symbol, William R. Crockett clarifies the relationship between the sign and the signified in the Eucharist: Crockett asserts that, as transformative symbols, the bread and wine can allow people to envision alternative political

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78 For these definitions, and for the lexical form of the noun, see the first two definitions of μοστρητον, in Danker, Greek-English Lexicon, 661-62.

realities.\textsuperscript{80} This claim is central to an ecclesiology of disability, for any political reality that reflects God’s desire for humanity will include embodied difference. My fourth chapter will expand on Crockett’s claim.

Moreover, literally, a \textit{sacramentum} is an oath that a Roman legionary took concerning his armed service. When the soldier made this vow, he recognized that his body would be forfeit should he ever renege, or vacillate in his fealty to the Emperor.\textsuperscript{81} Crockett has noted Ulrich Zwingli’s identification with this definition: for Zwingli, the \textit{sacramentum} is a pledge or oath of God’s presence, embodied in the Christian community.\textsuperscript{82} Similarly, Eiesland argues that Christians with disabilities pledge our bodies to our embodied episteme: the mode of knowledge of people with disabilities performs our strong desire for inclusion in Church and society. Indeed, our struggle for holistic access is a sacrament to the loving God whose justice we seek.\textsuperscript{83}

The sacraments embody God’s invitation to the greater access to equality and justice of which Eiesland writes, and to the dignity and joy of full life. Baptism is an initiatory ritual that confers the transformative love and power of God’s Holy Spirit on a believer or group of believers by means of dousing with, or immersion in, water. According to the \textit{Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry Document} of the World Council of Churches, baptism is “the sign of new life in Jesus Christ” that “unites the one baptized with Christ and with his people.” Baptism is enormously theologically complex, so I will briefly address its salient features, insofar as

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{80}See Crockett, \textit{Eucharist: Symbol of Transformation}, 245-63.
\item \textsuperscript{81}For this thorough definition of \textit{sacramentum}, see Jörg Rupke, \textit{Domini Militiae: Die Religiöse Konstruktion des Krieges in Rom} (Tübingen: Franz Steiner, 1990), 76–80.
\item \textsuperscript{82}For Crockett’s analysis of Zwingli’s Eucharistic theology, see Crockett, \textit{Eucharist: Symbol of Transformation}, 135-40.
\item \textsuperscript{83}See Eiesland, \textit{Disabled God}, 94-5.
\end{itemize}
they disclose the sacraments’ healing and liberating efficacy. Baptism entails participation in Christ’s death and resurrection, repentance from sin, the gift of the Spirit, and welcome both into a church-community and the larger Church.⁸⁴ In short, baptism signifies Christian unity.

Baptism means transformative unity and wholeness for Christians with disabilities. First, baptism is transformative because it changes human relationships. The rite confers a new identity: because we belong to Christ, Christians of diverse abilities are called to resist societal and ecclesial powers of death, and to offer Christ’s gracious inclusion to all. Harlem lawyer and theologian William Stringfellow calls baptism a person’s “public commitment to humanity”; his term connotes a vow to resist systemic forces of oppression. Stringfellow’s description of baptism is apt because, as Ruth Duck also clarifies briefly in terms of black American slaves, baptism grounds the baptismal community’s interdependence and dignity.⁸⁵

Furthermore, baptism enacts unity in Christ: the sacrament binds God’s friends to God, to each other, and to the earth through God’s promise of covenant-relationship. Water and God’s Word offer believers common ground for reflection on God’s equality and justice, and for just and inclusive action to promote God’s shalom. Just as Bono sings in U2’s song “One,” baptism allows God’s friends to “carry each other,” to embrace each other in our gifts and needs.⁸⁶

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⁸⁵ For Stringfellow’s name for baptism, see William Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land* (Waco, Texas: Word, 1973), 161; for Duck’s indirect observation that baptism frees people from cultural constraints, as it should have freed African-American slaves, see Duck, “Expansive Language in the Baptismal Community,” 289-90.

Finally, baptism embodies wholeness: while no physical changes occur when a child or adult is immersed in water, the rite connects baptizands to the source of integrity.\textsuperscript{87} Globalized, normalized, ableist cultures can atomize people, and—in light of the discussion of concupiscence in a previous section—can create needs for objects that do not satisfy. By contrast, baptism can centre people with and without disabilities on Christ, rather than on themselves, and so can open them to the potential for \textit{shalom}—for peace, dignity, and joy in community.\textsuperscript{88}

The sacrament of Holy Communion follows on baptism. In this ritual gift of spiritual sustenance, Christians share a meal of bread and wine in order to remember Jesus Christ, and to re-member people into Christ’s Body—to offer them salvific and healing relationships of equity and intimacy. Communion is called the “Eucharist,” as it represents our thanksgiving for Christ’s gifts (in Greek, \textit{eucharistia}).\textsuperscript{89} According to the \textit{BEM Document}, “the eucharist continues [the] meals of Jesus during his earthly life and after his resurrection . . . as a sign of the Kingdom.”

The \textit{Document} notes more of Communion’s eschatological import by calling it “the new paschal meal of the Church, the meal of the New Covenant.”\textsuperscript{90} Holy Communion is Christ’s gift to humankind that both discloses his radical table-fellowship with women, tax-

\begin{itemize}
\item[87]The distinction between physical and ontological changes in baptism is not relevant for this dissertation; this project is far more concerned with the theological and relational impact of that rite on persons with disabilities than with historical debates on whether baptism is required as an affirmation of faith, or in some other way.
\item[88]Miroslav Volf writes of a self centred in Christ through baptism, rather than centred in its own needs. See Volf, \textit{Exclusion & Embrace}, 69-71. I will return to Volf’s reflections on such a centred self in my fourth chapter.
\item[89]For the definition of $\epsilon\upsilon\chi\alpha\rho\iota\sigma\tau\varepsilon\omicron\omega$, see again Danker, ed. \textit{Greek-English Lexicon}, 415.
\item[90]For both of these references to Communion’s eschatological import, see World Council of Churches, \textit{Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry}, 8.
\end{itemize}
collectors, and people with disabilities, and reveals the New Covenant of dignity and joy
between God and humankind. These literal, social, eschatological, and sociopolitical
meanings mark Communion as the ongoing practice(s) of a baptized life for Christians of
diverse disabilities.

Thus, Communion profoundly impacts believers with disabilities, humanity and all
creation. As Crockett has asserted, Holy Communion connects directly to other Jewish table-
blessings, and indirectly to the Passover meal that celebrates Jewish emancipation from
Egyptian bondage.\footnote{See Crockett, \textit{Eucharist: Symbol of Transformation}, 1-7, 17.} This meal represents the material abundance of God’s love for all, and
so embodies and gestures towards an end to extreme material poverty. Christians remember
Jesus most clearly by doing as he did, feeding hungry and thirsty people with bread and
wine.\footnote{For a clear, concise exploration of Hebrew praxes of remembrance, and the ways that Eucharist remembrance connects believers in past and present, see Stookey, \textit{Eucharist: Christ’s Feast with the Church}, 27-33.}

Moreover, in Holy Communion, Christians remembering of people in poverty
becomes what Christine Smith calls “re-membering”: people not physically present at the
gathering become spiritually present to us.\footnote{For this signal definition, see again Christine Smith, “Preaching: Preaching: Hospitality, De-
Centering, Re-membering, and Right Relations,” in \textit{Purposes of Preaching}, ed. Jana Childers (St. Louis: Chalice, 1994), 106.} In Communion, the members of Christ’s Body
break bread and drink wine with, and on behalf of, people who love God, peace, and justice
in every space and time. Thus, the meal of bread and wine anticipates God’s coming Reign of
dignity and joy.\footnote{Gustavo Gutierrez contends that Holy Communion is both the “point of departure” and the
Holy Communion extends baptism’s theological and practical import for a transformative and sacramental ecclesiology of disability. While both sacraments offer people of varied abilities access to equality and justice in all their dimensions, Holy Communion adds to the unity signified concretely in baptism because it invites us to share our food. The meal of bread and wine offers believers what I have called “physical access” to God’s equality and justice, making people vulnerable and available to each other; in a way both like and unlike any other meal, this meal makes people one. In Holy Communion, the Church’s re-memory of Jesus Christ, and others who are not present, unifies it as it searches for God’s reality of dignity and joy.

Moreover, Communion promises relational integration: in Communion, Christians with and without disabilities can celebrate our shared gratitude to God, who frees us for full life. By sharing the meal, we also cherish our relationships with each other, and with the soil that produces bread and wine.95 Lastly, Holy Communion promises transformation: it looks forward to God’s Reign where things that impede communion—such as fear, shame, and coercion—will no longer exist, and where all God’s creatures will cherish bodily diversity in a renewed world.

This section has defined baptism and Holy Communion as sacraments, rites that manifest Christ, clarifying both their primary function and their connection to Christians with disabilities. The sacraments attest Christ’s loving, gracious relationship to all created things. For people of all abilities, these rites enact and empower divine unity and shalom that proclaims the interdependence and unity-in-diversity of all creation. Building on these

95 Jay Johnson explicitly connects the celebration of the Eucharist to human relationships with the natural environment. See Johnson, Divine Communion, e.g., 31, 116-23, 145-8.
concepts of sacramental unity and wholeness, the next section will use the ecclesiological insights of numerous theologians to illustrate how the sacraments can heal and free people of varied abilities.

3. How Do the Sacraments Heal and Liberate Human Beings?

Because baptism and Holy Communion invite Christians with and without disabilities to live out God’s equality and justice—the mutuality and sharing of power—they can heal and free human beings for God’s gracious and abundant life. The sacraments augment the healing and freedom made possible for people with disabilities in inclusive church-communities. Moreover, the healing and freedom that God’s friends enact and embody in the sacraments facilitates a deeper sense of humans’ moral vulnerability, dignity, and intrinsic worth. In this final section of this chapter, I will examine the impact of these three areas of sacramental healing and freedom.

a. The Creation of Moral Vulnerability

Baptism and Holy Communion heal and free human beings by inviting people to acknowledge their own, and others’, moral vulnerability; these rites signify an ethical disposition of openness towards the needs of others. Tom Reynolds eloquently explores vulnerability relative to disability, advocating for its placement as a primary criterion of society. By examining the trajectory of his life with Chris, his son on the autism spectrum, Reynolds asserts that human wholeness emerges primarily through the intertwining of human contingency with interdependence. Human beings’ need for each other—a need I will explore with greater nuance as this dissertation unfolds—reminds us that we are not necessarily in control of all parts of our existence.96 Moreover, people of able body can easily

96For these insights into human interdependence, see Reynolds, Vulnerable Communion, 104-5, 107-11.
project their fears of moral vulnerability onto people with disabilities, because the latter can exhibit serious limitations, or what the culture of normalcy calls deficiencies. Our limitations may cause able-bodied Christians to shy away from contact; this reticence can become alienating for all parties. Thus, this section will ask how moral vulnerability and loneliness can become signs of God’s grace.

Jean Vanier’s insights into human community partly explain the significance of shared moral vulnerability. While Vanier observes that loneliness can lead to alienation, and can “feel like death,” people of all abilities can join together in love and can allow their seclusion and sorrow to become a creative energy that is usable by the Holy Spirit for God’s redemptive purposes. Vanier claims that some people fear their weakness and exposure to others so deeply that they will use “belonging” as a way to hide those limitations from others. That said, he also defines community as “the respect and love of difference,” and notes that community includes loving other people as they truly are. Although we wish to hide from each other even in Christian communities, Christ’s love draws people together and coaxes us out of our retreat.

In light of Vanier’s insights, one might ask how the sacraments invite people into communal healing and liberation. These rituals have healing power for people of diverse abilities, because they calm our fears and free us from our loneliness: they can coax us to form healthy affective relationships, and show us how to restore broken relationships. The

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97 For Vanier’s stirring discourse on the creative powers of loneliness, see Vanier, *Becoming Human*, 7-9, 20, 25-8; for his claim that people can use belonging as a barrier to inclusion, see *ibid*, 39-45.

98 See Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community*, 44; see also 28-32.

sacraments beckon churches towards the theological reality of God’s powerful and magnanimous presence. Christ can invite people of all abilities to recall their baptismal vows, in order to create affective bonds that can gradually erase fears of rejection. Christ’s love can whisper to his friends through memory, intention, and action as we recall and embody God’s love in Communion. Baptism and Holy Communion can empower us to live out God’s love by re-membering each other.  

I have experienced Christ’s gracious empowerment of vulnerability through baptism, and through the Communion elements. For instance, just as I described in an earlier section, on the day of my birth, I was touched by the power of death and lived to tell the tale. The memory of my vulnerability enabled my first church in Summerside, P.E.I., to love me into graced existence, and later empowered me to accept my contingency as a man with cerebral palsy.

Moreover, the Peace of Christ can embody this same matrix of memory and affection as described in my birth-story, and so can create sacramental solidarity and vulnerability. For instance, in late summer 2012, I celebrated Communion with a friend who was about to leave our church for a short time. After we shared the bread and wine, my friend stumbled over to me, crying. Physically and spiritually, I held my friend with Christ’s love. During that significant hug, my friend and I shared Christ’s spiritual strength in the Communion bread and wine. Immediately afterwards, using that same strength, we affirmed each other through touch and affection. In our embrace, my friend offered me her faith and her fear, and I accepted those states as they were. Our mutual risk of our affections rewarded us with deeper

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and stronger friendship. The elements of C/communion increased our dignity and joy; that dignity requires further elaboration, and so it becomes the subject of the next subsection.

b. The Increase of Dignity

In light of their disclosure of shared moral vulnerability, the sacraments can repair the socially-inscribed wounds of Christians with disabilities, and liberate us from them, by increasing our sense of dignity. The multifaceted access that I have laid out at length in my Introduction, and that I will expound further in the third and fourth chapters, rests on this newfound dignity. When people with and without disabilities can trust each other, and engage in the mutual sharing of vulnerability clarified above, they—we!—can transform ableist social structures into the embodiment of God’s equality and justice, of intimate sharing of power.

I define dignity as the \textit{shalom}—the (w)holistic well-being—in which all creation existed in the beginning (see Genesis 1:27-2:3). Dignity is a social process rather than a personal state: emerging from Christ’s love, a love that creates \textit{Erkenntnis} (affirmation and knowledge), dignity is the well-being that emerges from the interdependence of all creatures, as well as from their complete dependence on God for the gift of material and spiritual existence. As Jay Johnson affirms at length, dignity embodies a partial fulfillment of our desires for God, and God’s for us.\footnote{Johnson affirms human desirability: see Johnson, \textit{Divine Communion}, 20, 35-43, 122-23, 150-52.} When people of diverse abilities have access to our God-given dignity, we can participate in, and promote, God’s glorious love throughout the creation, and beckon all that is to God’s joy.

In the Introduction, I asserted that equality means a connective, gracious mutuality and symmetry of power without uniformity, where people can have their needs met, and
where all are treated the same way in God’s presence. Equality means the flourishing of two or more beings in relationship to each other, and their ability to engage in creative self-expression in parity. In terms of the ecclesiology I advocate, equality thus entails that all people have a responsibility to acknowledge each other’s worth; this acknowledgement ought to issue in care for the neighbour, and for the earth, insofar as people have agency to express that caring.

While people with profound intellectual disabilities, elderly people, and children may not be able to articulate this responsibility for the affirmation of worth, many of them—like Vanier’s friend Antonio—can still act on it out of their own dignity. When they cannot, their allies and caregivers can share responsibility with them in order to serve their best interests. Moreover, Molly C. Haslam describes many different kinds of interpersonal “responsiveness” between people with profound intellectual disabilities and people without such impairments. I do not mean a paternalism that romanticizes the agency of people with complex intellectual disabilities, but rather a desire for people of all abilities to love each other in life-giving ways.

Equality is a social process that depends, in part, on the space for creativity and affection opened by the sacraments. Baptism and Holy Communion allow people of varied

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102 Iris Young’s demand for a polyphonous and pluralistic democracy is germane here: when people are equal, they can ask others to hear their voices, and for agential processes to include their perspective. See Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 116-21; see also 29-30, 130-41, and 152-55.

103 Sallie McFague discusses human beings’ communal responsibility towards each other and the Earth. See McFague, *Body of God*, 199-212.


105 For instance, Chan, a fictional patient with cerebral palsy and Philip, his caregiver, share a game of balloon-volley with others; I will revisit this example later. See Molly C. Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability: Human Being as Mutuality and Response* (New York: Fordham, 2012), 57-61.
abilities to value each other’s dignity as defined above, and to engage in critical conversations about the human exercise of power over other people, the earth’s biosphere, and the general shalom. The sacramental invitation to equality provides Jesus’ healings and parables with great ethical weight: these actions and narratives re-open critical conversations around access and dignity.

The process of dignity focuses God’s friends of diverse abilities on justice. I have asserted that justice is the sharing of power so as to create conditions for social balance and reciprocity in an environment that welcomes creative expression; in this ecclesiology, just action is the social performance of the episteme of vulnerability and increased dignity embodied by people with disabilities. Iris Young claims that justice is the empowerment of human capacities and abilities to communicate about social relations; because justice is action that allows flourishing, dignity is the content of that action. Dignity, with joy, is the embodied form of justice sought by people of all abilities. By virtue of their embodied invitation to God’s grace, and their recalling people of diverse abilities to their bodies, the sacraments invite people to act out equality and justice, the power-relations that support God’s dignity and joy. Moreover, in this invitation to flourishing and right relation, the sacraments lead God’s friends to embrace.

Miroslav Volf describes the precise contours of dignity, equality, and justice through the metaphor of “embrace.” For Volf, embrace is a four-part process. First, both people open their arms; second, each waits for the other, preventing coercion; third, each person closes arms around the other, drawing near in mutual affirmation; fourth and finally, both people

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106 See again Iris M. Young, Justice and the Politics of Difference, 39.
open their arms and step away. Baptism and Holy Communion facilitate this dynamic affective process, because they remind human beings of all abilities of their contingency and giftedness. The discourse on affective access in this project will affirm the sacramental invitation to the Erkenntnis of believers of all abilities. Indeed, embrace encompasses both dignity and worth.

c. Recognition of Humanity’s Intrinsic Worth

Because they exist as material and performative symbols of God’s love, the sacraments testify to the worth of human and created life. If “dignity” is the social process of holistic well-being among God’s creatures, then here I define “worth”—a related, but distinct concept—as the inner, ontological, and individual instance of that dignity. The worth of a human being is an innate possession of holistic integrity. Although not all human beings have the same capacity to express themselves, all can relate to other people, and so express and affirm their worth.

In his essay “The Retarded and the Criteria for the Human,” American Christian ethicist Stanley Hauerwas argues that relationality is the essence of human worth. He critiques Joseph Fletcher’s criteria for the human before propounding his own principles of human essence. Hauerwas notes that some metrics of humanity that were standard in the early 1970s (when the paper was written) perform an “ideology of the strong,” allowing some human beings to judge the fullness of others’ humanity. Hauerwas lists Fletcher’s standards

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107 For a description of this embodied and ecstatic phenomenon, see Volf, Exclusion and Embrace, 140-44.
for human-ness, including self-awareness, empathy, agency, adaptability, curiosity, and identity.  

Hauerwas observes that Fletcher’s criteria are not verifiable; he also claims that Fletcher emphasizes cognition too strongly, and that he ignores the unity of cognitive and physical processes. That is, Fletcher dismisses the oneness of human bodies and human minds. By contrast, Hauerwas asserts that rationality does not automatically make human beings “humane,” for kindness is a vital aspect of our sentience. Hauerwas claims instead that relationality is a higher standard than reason: in fact, Hauerwas contends that rationality includes “our ability to regard others with respect.” The practice of reason in churches presumes compassion.

It is possible to parse rationality’s relation to compassion, the state of having empathy for those who are different than oneself. While compassionate intersubjectivity discloses human worth, the ontological state of dignity, it does not create worth, for that gift is innate. Both human beings who have “normal” cognitive abilities, and those whose rational abilities are limited, have individual worth regardless of their ability to relate to each other, because God made and loves them. When I say that rationality includes compassion, I simply mean that those who can exercise reason will do so most fully when we care in self-giving ways for others who are not like us. Moreover, people with profound cognitive differences—people like Vanier’s friend Antonio, discussed above—can still confer dignity on others through their love and trust.

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109 For all these claims, see ibid, 131-32.

110 For both of these claims, see ibid, 134, 132.
Because they release erotic power and communicate divine love, baptism and Holy Communion can help individual believers to validate their own worth; when they feel God’s love embodied in ritual, believers of varied abilities can then see themselves as new creations (see 2 Cor. 5:18), and can help others to view themselves in a similar light. Moreover, Brett Webb-Mitchell explores the sacramental nature of relationship; in Christian community, relationship comprises more than cognitive ability. Rather, as believers of diverse abilities value each other, Christian communities live—celebrate people, activate their unique gifts, and give them life—through sacramental relationships, amidst a wide range of ability and bodily diversity.111

Similarly, Vanier adds that Holy Communion reveals humankind’s unity-in-diversity. No matter where or how one has lived before sharing the bread and wine, one can join with others through Communion, and can share life together with them. Human beings experience worth not primarily as individuals, but as part of God’s family: God creates all persons as God’s beloved children, meant for communion with God and each other. Christ affirms and enacts this relational criterion of worth in his life, ministry, death, and resurrection by embodying God’s love.

Here, my own experience of God’s love and relational affirmation is pertinent. At the Common Table, the church-service of the Jeremiah Community, we continually assert that all are welcome to partake of the bread and wine. Thus, social workers, theologians, and ticket-vendors share the meal with abstract artists, musicians, and telecommunications workers. When we sing the Sanctus (“Holy, holy, holy!”) and when we share Christ’s body and blood through faith, I feel like I am home, and I know that I am surrounded by my family, the

family of God. My embodied experience of intimacy and intersubjectivity in Eucharistic community promotes, founds, and celebrates human worth and dignity. Moreover, it serves as one example of the relational theological anthropology substantiated in this chapter, and throughout this project.

C. Conclusion

This chapter has briefly outlined key aspects of a theological anthropology of disability as a way into the description of a sacramental ecclesiology of disability, which connects scripture, sacrament, and the bodies of Christians with disabilities. This anthropological discourse entailed two large steps. First, the chapter used a dialectical hermeneutic to explore the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures concerning the meaning of humanity’s creation in and fall from Eden, highlighting some implications of the bodily shame and self-acceptance of Christians with disabilities. Subsequently, it examined Isaiah’s declaration of human contingency and equality in Isaiah 40. Thereafter, it pondered the implications of Jesus’ healing-narratives in terms of the access of people with disabilities to God’s equality and justice, and expanded Amos Yong’s eschatology of disability to show how equality and justice might come to fruition.

Second, after discussing how Jesus’ love restores God’s Image in human bodies, the chapter engaged the relationships of baptism and Holy Communion in terms of bodies of diverse abilities. Jesus’ love for creature and creation, the key to this relationship, is sacramental; that love that depends on and trusts the nearness of God, Parent of creation, allows people of varied abilities to relate to each other and to God with dignity and vulnerability. Throughout his life, ministry, death, and resurrection, Jesus embodies a
relational, sacramental love that offers human beings of all abilities radically open compassion, worth, and dignity.

Thereafter, the chapter aimed to describe part of the workings of this sacramental love in baptism and Holy Communion, foregrounding their embodied significance for Christians with disabilities: these rituals portend shalom for humanity and Creation, and invite all to live out equality and justice. Finally, the chapter explored how these rituals beckon people towards shalom by disclosing human vulnerability in its dignity and declared worth. Affective relationships, charged with erotic power, can ground people’s understanding of their interdependence. God’s love grounds creaturely existence, and offers hope for its future renewal.

All of these reflections of human bodies, and their connections to human community, beg the question of what happens when those communities function poorly or break down. This chapter began by asking how human beings could redress our bodily shame through the love of Jesus Christ; the next chapter will inquire into the ways that Christian churches can either perpetuate or prevent that shame for people with disabilities. Drawing on the ecclesiological insights of Jennie Weiss Block and Kathy Black, amongst others, in the next chapter I will demonstrate the need of people with disabilities for polyvalent access to God’s equality and justice within the Church. I will also contend that human fears of difference can be transformed, by baptism and Holy Communion, into believers’ faith in each other and in God.
Chapter Two: the Church as the Body of Christ

This dissertation strives to outline the full scope of a transformative and sacramental ecclesiology of disability, which also includes Christological and eschatological aspects. In particular, it is focussed on how the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion can help to form and maintain just and loving ecclesial communities that include people with disabilities. Although I focus on these two sacraments as primary, this research can also apply to reconciliation, the Peace of Christ, and other sacraments. To write cogently of the efficacy of baptism and Holy Communion for an ecclesiology of disability, it is crucial to consider the question of how people with disabilities embody aspects of access to God’s equality and justice, especially as they enact the sacraments’ invitation to God’s inclusive grace and love.

It must be noted that, often, Roman Catholic ecclesiologies use the term “ecclesial communities” to refer to churches that do not meet Rome’s definitions of a “church,” such as Protestant churches that do not practice apostolic succession. This is not the way in which “ecclesial communities” is used in this study, for—as I intend to show in the section that follows—by this term I mean the group of people set apart by Jesus Christ to show the triune God’s empathy to the whole world.

The previous chapter described the phrase “people with disabilities,” and explained that phrase by enunciating a paradigm of theological anthropology and sacramental ecclesiology, relative to Christian scriptures. The present chapter will investigate different kinds of “ecclesial communities,” including their formation of sacramental modes of sociality, primarily engaging a hermeneutic of suspicion. Since the chapter will link the Church’s current praxes toward Christians with disabilities to its ideal praxes, it will highlight the Church’s ambivalent relation towards us. As Christ’s Body, the Church has
both perpetrated and, conversely, prevented the oppression of, and discrimination against, believers with disabilities.

Using the insights of Brett Webb-Mitchell, Jennie Weiss Block, and other scholars as ecclesiological touchstones, I will show how the Church has sometimes excluded Christians with disabilities, while also revealing how at other times the Church has embraced us. Theological reflections, pop-song lyrics, and other modes of argument will aid a lived interpretation of the theological aspects of access, for people with disabilities, to God’s equality and justice. This experiential exegesis will ground the next chapter, which explicitly addresses that topic.

This chapter will proceed in four connected steps. First, using Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Jürgen Moltmann’s ecclesiological insights as points of departure, I will sketch the contours of the Church as a community grounded in empathy. A second section will draw on Brett Webb-Mitchell’s and Jennie Weiss Block’s insights into disability-advocacy, and on lived experiences of people with disabilities, in order to explore various experiences of shame, fear, and violence visited upon people with disabilities, and their import for this project.

In a third section, I will “turn the page,” so to speak, and enquire into compassion, connection, and communion among Christians of diverse abilities. Following Webb-Mitchell and others, this discourse on empathy will connect playfulness to caring. Furthermore, it will show how Christians with disabilities can teach Christians of able body to inhabit their bodies differently, as when Diane DeVries, the Texan without legs, teaches her able-bodied sister to dance. This section in particular will buttress my theological claims in the third
chapter about multifaceted access to God’s equality and justice for people of all abilities in the Church.

Fourth, a summative section will further clarify the significance of those same theological claims to radical access, discussing several ways in which, in an ideal sense, the Church offers theological aspects of access to divine equality and justice to diverse human bodies. This section will argue that, because Christians with disabilities evince human identity and integrity in our limitations and gifts, we need physical, intellectual, affective, and spiritual access to God’s equality and justice in sacramental communities; it will also partly address the relation of human beings’ embodied goodness to the theological aspects of access. This section too will reframe the theological examination of multifaceted access to equality and justice in the third chapter.

A. The Sacramental and Ecclesiological Significance of Community

Before investigating the Church’s body-practices, I will briefly define “ecclesial community,” using Bonhoeffer’s and Moltmann’s work as ecclesiological touchstones. This initial classification of churchly community will open the way to other facets of my argument, and will call for further nuance. The Church is Christ’s Body. In Christ—God’s living and loving Son—all of God’s friends and lovers, of all abilities, become the physical and spiritual matrix where the Holy Spirit works to create and convey God’s love, grace, and dignity. This ecclesiological definition finds cogency when one recalls that all human bodies are subject to the process of aging. The provision of divine equality and justice for Christians of varied abilities—large-print hymnals, ramps, adequate lighting, and more—can help all of God’s children
Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor who resisted the Nazi regime, affirms this initial definition of the Church as Christ’s Body through the Spirit. Bonhoeffer calls the Church Christ’s reconstituted Body. Sin—succinctly defined as a power present in creation that causes division—alienates human beings from communion with God, and interferes with our communion with each other. According to Bonhoeffer, sin also causes each person to “[fall] away not only from [his or her] personal vocation but from [the] generic vocation as a member of the human race,” a responsibility that he defines elsewhere as empathetic listening and action.\(^1\) Thus, human beings’ shame, anger, and mutual reproach can both isolate them from God, and prevent them from attending to each other with their innate and God-given empathy.

That said, Bonhoeffer asserts that Christ’s “representative action” on the Cross reunites humanity and God, and reconnects human beings to their vocation of empathy.\(^2\) For Bonhoeffer, the Church is Christ’s earthly Body formed by Christ’s self-donation. John Swinton might say that Christ’s love re-members human beings, stitching us back together in community and saving us from our contingency through God’s grace.\(^3\) Christ’s gifts to humankind re-create the Church as a diverse and interdependent community: rather than allowing human sin and finitude to divide people from God and each other, Christ enlivens us and becomes our peace (Ephesians 2:14). The Church that includes people of all abilities is the glorious Body of God.

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\(^1\) For this definition of sin’s effects, see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: a Dogmatic Inquiry into the Sociology of the Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 115; for his striking portrait of this ministry of empathy, see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 113-28.


\(^3\) For a clear definition of “re-membering,” see again John Swinton, *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 124-25.
Paul Waddell adds a congenial term to Bonhoeffer’s explicit definition of the Church as a Body given life through empathy by asserting that, because Christ has chosen us, the Body of Christ is the community of God’s friends.\textsuperscript{4} Ideally, we are the ones drawn by affection to God, who share common interests with the One who made us, and who share and act out God’s concern for the world. Though not all people with disabilities are friends of the Church, God invites all people, of all abilities, into his grace and love. Because the members of Christ’s Body are God’s friends, we are called to perform actions that increase equality and justice, as God does, within and without sacramental communities inspired by God’s energy.\textsuperscript{5}

Jürgen Moltmann connects Bonhoeffer’s assertion about empathy to the four marks of the Church. As asserted briefly in the Introduction, Moltmann connects the Church’s unity or oneness, the first mark, to human and divine hospitality: the Church’s unity comes from Christ, who draws the friends of God together, and who particularly joins together people from various forms of life with specific gifts and limitations. Because people are drawn together in their diversity, empathy is one of the \textit{ekklesia’s} strengths. Moreover, Moltmann’s claim about unity founds his assertion about ecclesial holiness (the second mark): for Moltmann, holiness means entering into the suffering of the world.\textsuperscript{6} Bonhoeffer offers an intriguing angle from which to consider Moltmann’s stance on holiness: in one sermon, Bonhoeffer says, “The Christian relation between the strong and the weak is that the strong


\textsuperscript{5}For a brief and compelling discourse on justice, see Wadell, \textit{Becoming Friends}, 147-55.

\textsuperscript{6}For Moltmann’s statements on ecclesial unity, see again Jürgen Moltmann, \textit{The Church in the Power of the Spirit: a Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology} (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 342; for his assertions about holiness as action, see \textit{ibid}, 353-55.
has to look up to the weak, and never to look down. Weakness is holy; therefore we devote ourselves to the weak.”

For both theologians, holiness requires empathy; in turn, empathy strengthens human relationship and identity. Bonhoeffer’s claim that weakness is holy grounds this thesis. This chapter and the following two will clarify the holiness inherent in assuming responsibility for vulnerable people.

Moltmann asserts that the third mark, the Church’s catholicity or integrity, is its “unity in extent” and “inner wholeness.” Christ’s Body possesses an authenticity that includes many different aspects of its expression of God’s love. Moreover, the integrity of Christ’s Body is “related to the whole”: although the Church does not currently comprise all creation, it bears witness to the reconciling grace that will reveal Godself to the whole. In turn, Moltmann’s definition of catholicity leads into his outline of apostolicity, the fourth mark. Moltmann defines apostolicity as active, earthly suffering in eschatological proclamation of Christ’s resurrection-life.

Continuing the apostles’ mission means engagement with forces of oppression.

Bonhoeffer’s practical and compassionate response to euthanasia in his own time adds to Moltmann’s portrait of the Church’s marks, and supports his previous claim that life that is weak is holy. Bonhoeffer states that the idea of euthanizing people who are sick presumes that human life has a “certain utility for the community and that life is no longer


8For his illustrations of catholicity and apostolicity, see Moltmann, Church in the Power of the Spirit, 348-50. To investigate his notions of suffering, see ibid, 358-61.
justified when this usefulness ceases . . . ”⁹ He means that people of able body cannot judge the social utility of the lives of people with disabilities; because he affirms the value of life that is thought to be weak or deficient, Bonhoeffer indirectly affirms Moltmann’s paradigm of catholicity.¹⁰ Moreover, Bonhoeffer’s desire to protect people who cannot protect themselves, a stance for people who are different, embodies Christ’s gracious mission in the face of the Nazi regime.

All of these claims depend on a strong sense of the Church as a social matrix of unity-in-diversity; that unity-in-diversity is fundamental to the ecclesiology for which this project advocates. In terms of that ecclesiology, Moltmann is a powerful resource because his paradigmforegrounds diversity as a feature of God’s magnificent creativity and abundant joy. This thesis’ firm location in bodily human experience also motivates my assertions about catholicity. Because it lives and breathes in embodied human beings, the Church exists in human history through the love of Jesus Christ, the love that breaks down societal barriers among people with able bodies and people with disabilities. Diverse people in communities that share Christ’s sacramental love are called to create holistic access to equality and justice in Christ’s name. Bonhoeffer’s empathetic claims about the holiness of weakened life are also central to this dissertation, because it addresses the gifts of the “weaker members” of Christ’s Body.


¹⁰The World Council of Churches strongly affirms the place of people with disabilities as a vital, vibrant part of the whole Church, both by affirming the humanity of people with HIV/AIDS, and by proclaiming the centrality of the “full participation of people with disabilities and illness in the life of the church and society.” See World Council of Churches, Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes (Crete: Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, 2012), 19-20.
While all these portraits of the Church are idealistic, the lived reality of being church often differs strongly from its ideal theological descriptions. For instance, Nancy Eiesland calls the Church a “communion of struggle.”\textsuperscript{11} Regrettably, because human beings are socially isolated as well as separated by sin and death, the various members of the Body disagree on how to embody and enact God’s equality and justice for humanity and creation. Furthermore, as Sharon Betcher observes pointedly, the Church has often uncritically absorbed and perpetuated ableist paradigms from the surrounding culture—worldviews that demand serious change.\textsuperscript{12}

Christians with disabilities, like other believers, live in the Church as it is; nonetheless, we can look forward to its transformation into what it can be through inclusive and sacramental practices of communion. Part of the Church’s mission is to facilitate physical, intellectual, affective, and spiritual access to God’s equality and justice for Christians with disabilities. Christians with diverse bodies yearn for fulfillment in those terms now, not simply in the future. We want healthy friendships, adequate lighting, non-slip floors, wheelchair ramps, and Braille hymnals. The Church of Jesus Christ ought to reorient towards the dignity and joy of persons with disabilities, and become a hospitable place for us, because we are a vital part of God’s mission. As the Apostle Paul implies in 1 Corinthians 12:21-27, the Body’s “weaker” members, like people with disabilities, make the Church richer, fuller, more patient, and more generous.


\textsuperscript{12}See Sharon Betcher, \textit{Spirit and the Politics of Disablement} (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007), 56, 66.
The Church is an ambiguous community. On one hand, it is a community unlike any other, because God’s Spirit infuses it with life, creativity and passion, and makes it into the social site of friendship with God; as Bonhoeffer has clarified, the Church is nourished by mutual empathy. On the other, as the first chapter has asserted, the Church is a community like every other, for it includes human beings’ experiences of shame, rejection, and disempowerment. The Church is a place of healing and of hatred, of celebration and calamity. The remainder of this chapter will explore the realities of exclusion and inclusion within Christ’s Body.

**B. Distorted Images: Honouring the Weaker Member?**

If it sits upon your tongue,  
Or naked in your eyes,  
Give me little bits of  
More than I can try . . .

(Soundgarden, “Fresh Tendrils,” 17-20.)

In Soundgarden’s 1994 song “Fresh Tendrils,” singer Chris Cornell cries repeatedly, “Shame, shame, throw yourself away.” The song appears to be an exploration of shame—a shame where “many [serve] the few,” that shame that makes Adam and Eve turn from each other in mutual recrimination in Eden. In his subdued and subaltern state, Cornell implores a nameless “you”—an interlocutor who may be another, and may sometimes be the singer—to confer shame upon him through a baleful gaze or hurtful word, as in the verse excerpted above.\(^{13}\) Cornell longs to be near his interlocutor; he realizes that that nearness will entail feeling the shame and self-abnegation that pervades the song. The singer approaches his

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\(^{13}\)For all these lyrical references, see Soundgarden, “Fresh Tendrils,” *Superunknown* (New York: A&M, 1994); for the continual lyrical cycle of shame and self-abnegation, see especially lines 13-14, 27-8.
wordless companion; he feels the shame that follows the spiteful gaze or hateful word, the shame that causes self-effacement.

In numerous ways, this song’s lyrics typify and embody the shame felt by many Christians with disabilities. Our able-bodied siblings in Christ—often with the best of intentions!—can pass judgment on us: we feel the shame of judgments of not belonging, not being accepted, being “broken” (or at least needing correction), and/or being undesirable as friends. Conversely, Christians with disabilities also pass judgment when we leave the Church and curse it as a place that does not embody Christ’s love. This dissertation aims to mitigate shame by asking Christians of all abilities to unite in sacramental communities of solidarity.

Jay Johnson argues that shame is “alienation from [human] bodily goodness.” Christians with disabilities know this bodily alienation, because ableist paradigms inside and outside the Church prevent us from appearing normal in normal terms. Many of us are made invisible, or erased from discourse, like Cornell’s speaker. For instance, Eiesland writes scathingly of the treatment of Margaret Orlinski, a young polio survivor: during her first Communion, Margaret was secluded at home, where she felt the paternalizing pity of some congregants in her church. Margaret’s church forced its ritual praxis on her unprotected body.

Disability theorist Tanya Titchkosky explains the rationale for this mode of shame. For instance, she observes repeatedly that people with disabilities are not expected on

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14For a gentle description of our anger at our exclusion, see Jennie Weiss Block, *Copious Hosting: a Theology of Access for People with Disabilities* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 118-19.


16For this grievous account, see Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 107-8.
university campuses. Because her workplace, the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, has no accessible washrooms, she infers that wheelchair-users are not deemed “legitimate participant[s]” in university life. Here, and elsewhere in Titchkosky’s work, the attentive reader can perceive the subtle power of ableist rhetoric. Ableist attitudes, behaviours, and paradigms seek to legitimize only normalized, “healthy” bodies.

These experiences of shame and exclusion are unacceptable within the Church, because God’s friends are called to affirm the value of all human bodies and gifts. These assertions highlight the necessity of clarifying the contours of shame; because of their years of advocacy for people with disabilities, Brett Webb-Mitchell, Jennie Weiss Block, and other scholars can guide this theological exploration of the effects of shame and exclusion in churches.

1. Stopping the Dance of Disability: Theologians of Disability on Exclusion

In Exploring Worship Anew, Pamela Ann Moeller claims that all human beings are “dying for want of Gospel.” Every person entering the doors of a church-building through boredom, fear, shame, or anger may be longing for a radical love that proclaims God’s joy in and compassion for all human beings. Spiritually speaking, this may be true of Christians with disabilities. Whenever lack of access drives us away from the Church, our souls wither.

For the perceived “absence” of university students with disabilities from a particular university campus, see Tanya Titchkosky, Disability, Self & Society (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2003), 97-104.

See Tanya Titchkosky, e.g., Question of Access: Disability, Space, Meaning (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2011), 80-86.

When we do not discover love in Christ’s Body, we may feel disinclined to express it ourselves.

The lack of love that many people of varied abilities suffer in the Church is institutional as well as personal. As stated earlier, many Christians of able body still subscribe to the “medical model” of disability, which inscribes functional limitation onto an individual person’s body. Scholarly use of this model of disability often implies that, in order to be seen as normal by people of able body, people with disabilities need to be “fixed” or cured. While many of us neither need nor want cures, Christians with disabilities may come to feel powerless, because Christians of able body may see our bodies or minds as deficient, rather than wondrously gifted.

The ableist prejudices embodied in the medical model of disability stigmatize many people who are vulnerable. For example, Stephanie, one of Brett Webb-Mitchell’s early protégés, is a fiery young Baptist woman who has not experienced much love. During one of Webb-Mitchell’s therapy sessions, Stephanie fights with another girl in a fit of pique, and breaks the author’s glasses. Rather than become angry with her, Webb-Mitchell uses gentleness to respond to Stephanie, and is initially repulsed by her vitriol. Webb-Mitchell reflects that Stephanie “yearns” for acceptance and questions whether she will ever find a welcoming community. Stephanie carries within her what songwriter Bruce Springsteen calls a “hungry heart”; Springsteen states, “Everybody needs a place to rest; everybody wants

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20See Eiesland, Disabled God, 83-4.
to have a home.”

Moreover, Webb-Mitchell observes the effects of exclusion through pointed educational icebreaker-games like “God’s Banquet-Table,” where participants receive props that force them to eat with specific physical limitations, and the “Labelling and Categorizing Game,” where each of five or six players receives a piece of masking-tape on his or her forehead, and then has to choose an activity for a Friday night based on the way that they would treat each other if they had the disabling conditions indicated on the masking-tape. The purity of Webb-Mitchell’s desire for the total inclusion of people with disabilities informs his gifts as a facilitator.

That said, Webb-Mitchell’s games clarify, and make concrete, some of the ableist assumptions that people with able bodies make about people with disabilities: for instance, choosing a Friday-night activity is a challenge if you are friends with one person who deals with anxiety, or another who has chronic pain in her hands. Webb-Mitchell’s gentle delivery can coax empathetic able-bodied readers to view Christians with various disabilities differently, and to realize their own dependence on others, but they may not always find this easy!

Moreover, many activities can distress people with disabilities. For example, although meals can be sacramental locations of God’s love and grace for people of varied abilities—as I will clarify at great length later—cooking is a challenge for those of us with


mobility issues. My own experience with cerebral palsy is instructive: whether I am cooking pasta, soup, or curry, I must always manipulate vegetables, meat, or other items that require chopping with my left hand before I cut them up. Additionally, since I turn slowly, using two burners at once is a worthy challenge! Cooking, for me, is hard-won proof of inclusion, and I clearly recall my struggle to learn culinary skills in my mid-twenties. At first, making simple pasta felt too hard for me; nonetheless, because of my friends and family, I am included in a roster of good cooks.

Molly Haslam supplements Webb-Mitchell’s gentle resistance to ableist and exclusive attitudes and behaviours in the Church with insight into theological anthropology. She discriminates between Gordon Kaufman’s theological anthropology and her own. Kaufman states that the use of symbol is integral to human agency, because symbols allow human beings to choose, and to use rational capacities; however, models like Kaufman’s bolster the medical model of disability by virtue of their bias towards autonomy and (implicitly) productivity. By contrast, Haslam’s theological anthropology emphasizes responsiveness; following Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, Haslam claims that people ought to display patience and openness in order to meet each other as whole people. She argues that the gracious and patient relationships that she and Buber advocate are transformative.\textsuperscript{24} Haslam’s nuance to Kaufman’s anthropology founds further discussion in later chapters; the next chapter will discuss the symbolic imagination of Christians with diverse abilities, and will affirm simplicity in inclusion.

Haslam’s dynamic portrait of relationship is not always the norm in churches, for Webb-Mitchell’s argument still resonates in this context: people with disabilities are “set on

\textsuperscript{24}For all these citations, see Molly C. Haslam, \textit{Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability: Human Being as Mutuality and Response} (New York: Fordham, 2012), 75-6, 87.
the margins of the Church, because the Church does not know what else to do with them."  

Even in the Body of Christ, we are objectified by some people’s and institutions’ uncritical use of the medical model. Nancy Eiesland offers evidence of the medical model’s existence in the *ekklesia*. She states that, based on an ableist interpretation of Scripture, many Christians of able body view disability as a curse: for instance, she cites God’s denial of ordination to any Levites who have “blemishes” such as “a mutilated face or a limb too long, a broken foot or a broken hand” (Leviticus 21:17-23), and Jesus’ forgiveness of the “sins” of the man with paralysis (Luke 5:18-23). One could add the religious ostracization of men who have had their testes crushed from the “assembly of the LORD” (Deuteronomy 23:1, NRSV). In the twenty-first century, the plight of transgender people who simply want to use a washroom in safety also shows how an ecclesial culture that valorizes ability marginalizes physical disability or difference.  

Eiesland shows that scripture and ecclesial community can both endanger people with disabilities.  

The texts Eiesland cites also reveal the ubiquity of the medical model of disability; for instance, her indictment of the American Lutheran Church for its choice not to ordain people with disabilities, already alluded to in the Introduction, attests to the medical model’s prevalence. She discusses the ALC’s initial decision to support the United Nations’ Year of the Disabled in 1981, as well as the denomination’s blatantly-contradictory 1986 choice to deny Christian ordination to people with disabilities. She observes that the denominational  

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27 See Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 74.
materials that accompanied the latter decision both refused to affirm people with disabilities’ right to self-determination, and failed to mention the history of the North American disability-rights movement. Indeed, the ALC document’s instruction to Lutherans with disabilities to “submit” to their limitations reinforces their oppression, and is the opposite of a transformative ethic! Apparently, if any American Lutherans possessed disabilities, it was their fault, and their problem. Eiesland decries the denial of an ecclesial voice to these Christians with disabilities.28

The mistreatment of Christians with disabilities in all these theological texts reveals to those of us who are impaired what Miroslav Volf calls “a mean streak . . . on the face of modernity,” a strong term meant to evoke reflection. Volf means that modern rhetoric about progress—especially progress away from slavery and war—disguises the West’s own complicity in practices of exclusion and oppression. In Eiesland’s example above, as in many others, Christians with disabilities are what Volf calls the “exploited . . . other.”29 The ALC document rhetorically reinforces the ongoing segregation of many Christians with disabilities.

Most distressingly, Eiesland observes that people with able bodies have co-opted the Eucharist, a rite meant to embody and enact God’s love and justice, and made it into a routine emphasizing bodily and doctrinal conformity. As well as re-telling how Margaret Orlinski was segregated at home for her first Communion—an anecdote already analyzed in this chapter—she recounts Stewart Govig’s experience as a American Lutheran pastor and polio survivor: Govig was denied full ordination until he could perform the service of Holy

28For all these citations, see Eiesland, Disabled God, 77-81, 85-6.

29For this distressing discussion, see Miroslav Volf, Exclusion and Embrace: a Theological Exploration of Identity and Otherness (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 59-60.
Communion without changing any part of its physical rubric, or disrupting its attendant ableist bias.\textsuperscript{30} In this case, tragically, the praxis of Holy Communion—ordinarily meant to invite Christians of all abilities to embody divine unity, diversity, and harmony—was divorced from its celebratory intention by ableist biases within Govig’s denomination. Although Govig did eventually become a Lutheran minister, his experience of the medical model speaks to the ecclesial entrenchment of concupiscent, idealistic, and unrealizable perceptions of human bodies of varied abilities.

Moreover, Eiesland recounts the exclusion of her own body from her Lutheran congregation’s Eucharistic practice. Rather than allowing her to line up with others to receive bread and wine, the elders served Eiesland in her wheelchair in an inconvenient position. Because of sad stories like these, Eiesland observes solemnly that Christians with disabilities often consider the Eucharist a “ritual of exclusion and degradation.”\textsuperscript{31} Eiesland’s numerous first- and second-hand accounts of oppression show that ecclesial discrimination against people with disabilities must change; people with disabilities too need God’s dignity and joy.

Ecclesial discrimination reflects societal intolerance; thus, in a similar vein to Eiesland, Joseph Shapiro documents some abuses perpetrated on Americans with disabilities in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and their feelings of exclusion and shame. For instance, Janine, a young woman with autism, lived in the Behaviour Research Institute in Providence, Rhode Island. Like many other people with autism, Janine used to strike herself with her fists when she was upset. The B.R.I. staff administered slaps, pinches, and even electrical shocks

\footnote{For a brief allusion to Govig’s experience, see Eiesland, \textit{Disabled God}, 113; for some personal reflections on his experience as a survivor of polio, see also Stewart D. Govig, \textit{Strong at the Broken Places: Persons with Disabilities and the Church} (Louisville: Westminster John Knox), 3.}

\footnote{For Margaret’s sad story, and Eiesland’s response to it, see again Eiesland, \textit{Disabled God}, 113.}
to get Janine to obey them. For a time, the aversive therapies worked; in 1985, Janine appeared to be a “normal” teenager. However, she had regressed by 1989, and was capable of little more than folding herself into a beanbag chair.\textsuperscript{32} Janine too is a child of God, and did not deserve this abuse.\textsuperscript{33}

While I have never experienced the abuse described above, I have still felt shame and, at least, the spectre of exclusion in ableist church-communities. For instance, one day many years ago, I was ascending the stairs from my college’s basement when a woman I did not know asked me, point-blank, “Excuse me . . . did you get it done for science?” Her question caught me off-balance (figuratively, and almost literally, too!): I was unsure whether she had asked it out of curiosity, meanness, or some other motive. While I found the idea of having surgery on my legs “for science” laughable, I responded as calmly as I could, “No . . . I have cerebral palsy.” The woman muttered something—possibly an apology?—and left immediately.

My other experiences are also germane: in public, people have crossed the street to avoid me, and I know that people stare at me because of my gait. When others stare at me, I wonder what they see. Do they resent facing their own mortality, as Sharon Betcher has claimed?\textsuperscript{34} Does my awkward gait disrupt the illusion of a streamlined, sleek world that

\begin{footnotesize}

\textsuperscript{33}Other negative ecclesial experiences of people with disabilities abound: one thinks of Sig, a young man with epilepsy and son of a United Methodist minister who, according to Kathy Black, acceded to his evangelical friends’ demands that he find a “cure” for his epilepsy through faith-healing. Sig took his friends’ advice, and stopped using his medication; following this, Sig had a seizure and died. These experiences testify to the terrifying consequences of an unmitigated acceptance of the medical model of disability; this thesis argues for their surcease by proclaiming its alternative vision of God’s acceptance of every kind of human body. For Sig’s sad story, see Kathy Black, \textit{A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability} (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 11.

\textsuperscript{34}See Betcher, \textit{Spirit and the Politics of Disablement}, 204.
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operates on an even keel? Although I know God’s love through inclusive communities, these questions confuse me; they can fill me with shame and anger, and cause me to question my place in society.

In this section, using the insights of several scholars, notably Webb-Mitchell and Eiesland, I have briefly engaged some of the experiences of “dishonour”—shame, fear, and exclusion—that people with disabilities face every day. I have also probed the desires of people with disabilities for inclusion, through Webb-Mitchell’s stories of children in an institution, and Haslam’s reflections on theological anthropology. The next section will discuss Enlightenment narratives of human equality, rationality, and autonomy, in order to reveal the contours of the embodied episteme of disability on which this dissertation is based.

2. Reynolds’ Relational Critique of Three Enlightenment Virtues

Tom Reynolds also asks the kind of questions I ask above about my gait. Reynolds’ queries concern society’s acceptance of his son Chris; he uses his son’s disabilities as a lens through which to critically encounter the voyeuristic gaze of the Enlightenment. Chris Reynolds and I are shamed and excluded because we transform what Reynolds calls the “Enlightenment virtues” of equality, autonomy, and rationality. First, people with disabilities disclose the shadow side of the liberal portrait of equality. While all people innately possess the same rights—and while these rights can protect our diversity—the liberal, individualistic ideal of these rights can coerce conformity, and “rob the other of his or her uniqueness . . . to the point of demanding that the other become like me, like us.”35 Briefly, equality can force people to become identical.

Moreover, Reynolds asserts that the Enlightenment paradigm of equality-as-sameness can assimilate and homogenize differences. He asks whose equality is under discussion: “Are we referring to white, middle-class, and able-bodied males? Does this then mean that African-Americans need to leave the distinctness of their heritage behind . . . ? Does it mean that women must become like men?” He indirectly notes the connection between the liberal ideal of equality and the ableist tendency to “ritualize normalcy”—to cement the grasp of people with able body on power/knowledge, and to cast doubt on those whose bodies do not conform to those norms.\(^{36}\) I affirm the depth of Reynolds’ concern for true, connective equality. True equality—the mutuality of power based in God’s desire for human and creaturely integrity—entails moral, mutual vulnerability to people who are different, rather than demanding their assimilation.

Second, Reynolds explains and critiques the Enlightenment ideal of autonomy. All human beings are blessed with specific faculties for creative expression, critical questioning, and activity distinct from custom and tradition.\(^{37}\) According to the liberal schema described by Reynolds, these individual capacities emerge prior to their social counterparts. Indeed, this priority of individual reason means that civil societies envisioned by Locke, Hobbes, and other Enlightenment theorists are made up of the rational bond of individual persons who join together to protect the liberty of their self-interest. “In other words, we are free to define and shape our own lives to the degree that this does not infringe upon the rights of others to do the same.”

\(^{36}\)For both of the last two references, see Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 82.

\(^{37}\)See *ibid*, 78. For another portrait of autonomous agents who join together in contracts to fulfill goals predicated on self-interest, see Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 73-78, 95-8.
Autonomy is a thrilling, and potentially liberating, concept for all human beings, because it allows us to express our God-given gifts in original and fulfilling ways, to God’s glory. Autonomy can even create the space for justice, the mutual sharing of power that portends shalom, because it allows people to advocate for those who are vulnerable, like people with disabilities. That said, he observes a number of problems with autonomy. For instance, he observes the abstract nature of the Enlightenment ideal of the individual’s emergence prior to society. Also, citing feminist theorists such as Catherine Keller, Reynolds claims that “the capacity to make choices arises and is cultivated . . . within a relational web of interdependence. . . . The individual becomes a person only in the presence of others.” Thus, significantly—as asserted in the Introduction—affective relationships, rather than individual capacities for creation and self-determination, comprise the matrix of the human person. Compassion and connection compel our caring for each other, and inspire our mutual dependency and recognition.

Third, Reynolds studies rationality, the faculty that allows people to ask questions, and gather knowledge. Defined in light of Kant’s categorical imperative, rationality means having the capacity to choose independently of others, observing others’ actions and desires, and abstracting from these experiences the “objective and universal truths in principle shared by all humans.” Thus, rationality, informed by one’s paradigm of others’ self-interest, allows each person to “participate in civic life, moderating thoughts and actions accordingly.”

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38 For these insights concerning autonomy, see Reynolds, Vulnerable Communion, 79, 82.


40 For these insights into rationality, see Reynolds, Vulnerable Communion, 85; for the categorical imperative, Reynolds cites Kant’s 1790 Critique of Judgment, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 161, par. 40.
Rationality allows people to create spaces of autonomy, and to contract together to preserve individual goods. This rational space divides private and public spheres, and grants the state powers to act for the common good. For liberal scholars, “civic and public space” is a moral and ethical theatre.\(^4\)

That said, Reynolds also asks a potent question: “Who is fully rational?” Very few people are able to choose with the purity of heart or clarity of mind that Kant demands; many children, people with low cognitive skill, and those possessing Alzheimer’s and on the autism spectrum do not display Kant’s form of rationality. Moreover, Reynolds asserts that, despite its “impartiality,” reason can serve as a “technique of power”, subverting and destroying healthy relationships.\(^5\)

This dissertation affirms Reynolds’ Foucauldian critique of reason, and his careful evaluation of autonomy and reason. In Canada, Christians with disabilities have suffered shame and fear for decades, because it is assumed that others “know” what is best for us, and can provide it through their rational and capable beneficence. For instance, one former assistant in a L’Arche community describes the way that his house leader treated a core member of his L’Arche house. The core member is non-verbal, and uses pictures to communicate. Sometimes, the house-leader has asked assistants to use a stringent picture-schedule to streamline this person’s consumption of food, and to make him wait to eat. Rather than using reason to discover a compassionate response to the man’s desire for food, the L’Arche team-leader used reason to paternalize a core-member and friend.\(^6\) Thus, rather

\(^4\)See Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 79.

\(^5\)For these insights into rationality, see *ibid*, 85-7.

\(^6\)The information in this paragraph is from a L’Arche assistant in Toronto, interview with the author, June 16, 2015.
than promoting the profound attention to the other that Bonhoeffer asserts—and Reynolds strongly implies—is a criterion of the Body of Christ, the house-leader has attempted to create boundaries for Christ’s Body in her L’Arche house that do not evince Christ’s holistic welcome of difference. This L’Arche house-leader performs some normative behaviour that Reynolds decries in his Enlightenment critique; in particular, the leader’s reactions reveal her fears of disability and weakness.

For my part, as I have turned around (figuratively) to face myself, and have accepted my cerebral palsy as an integral part of my identity, I have ceased to see an abstract concept of rationality as a measure of my personhood. Instead, I have embraced the limits of my rationality, and have learned to depend on other people for cues when I interact with them. Moreover, I have balanced my acceptance of others’ gifts to me with profound self-affirmation. Two or three times a day, I stand in front of my mirror and tell myself who I am, affirming my own integrity: for instance, I am strong, I am compassionate, I am funny, I am normal, and I am a good listener.

However, I am also aware that many people still fear disability, the social and physiological construct that denotes human limitation. Many Christians and non-Christians perpetuate oppressive linguistic patterns, and shore up entrenched architectural barriers. Many people of able body are comfortable with a bureaucratic relationship to disability, one that makes it disappear. For instance, Tanya Titchkosky writes with terror and disdain of a professor at a university in Nova Scotia who claims that “disabled students should go elsewhere”; he means, for instance, that students in wheelchairs ought to go to schools where people have already made changes towards multifaceted access. While this professor bears no ill will towards people with disabilities, he simply does not perceive the need for change...
in his physical environment. His campus, constructed with only able bodies in mind, does not intend disabled students; that is, those who oversee the campus prioritize the needs of able bodies—the ones that are easy to account for—over the limitations and gifts of students with different bodies and minds.  

Because the Church is a community founded on empathy, it is necessary to resist the disappearance of disability behind cluttered bureaucracy and social nicety; thus, this dissertation affirms attitudes, behaviours, and worldviews that recall the needs of people who are vulnerable, and asserts the equality and dignity of every human body. This section has explored Tom Reynolds’ critiques of equality, autonomy, and rationality, and has used people’s personal experiences of disability to suggest ways to redefine those values. In light of this section’s evaluation of these three values, and in accordance with the paradigm of compassionate cognition and connection that this project prioritizes, I will now discuss some negative experiences of what Jennie Weiss Block calls “disability etiquette.”

3. Jennie Weiss Block and Negative Experiences of Disability Etiquette

Jennie Weiss Block adds to the discussion of the societal shaming and disempowerment of people with disabilities by defining “disconfirmation”; this term means the pattern of denying people with disabilities the voice and agency to act for themselves and/or refusing to affirm their existence. She writes: “I was once eating dinner in a very nice restaurant in Washington, D.C. with a well-known disability activist. He has a law degree, heads a large disability agency, is married with three children, and uses a wheelchair. The

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44For this off-putting encounter, and an accompanying discussion of the ways that bureaucratic pragmatism makes the bodies and needs of people with disabilities appear or disappear (the way it “intends” them), see Titchkosky, Disability, Self & Society, 104-16; see also Titchkosky, Question of Access, 35-40.
waiter looked directly at me and asked, ‘What will he have?’ Joseph Shapiro tells a similar story: in the 1950s, Cyndi Jones, a young polio survivor, was denigrated by an advertisement bearing her picture that told children that they did not want to look like her or other polio survivors. In 1966, a university administrator at the University of California, Berkeley told Ed Roberts, another polio survivor, point-blank, “We’ve tried cripples [as students] before, and they didn’t work.” Roberts would later go on to revolutionize disability culture, and to found the World Institute on Disability.

Other theologians offer examples of the disconfirmation of people with disabilities, too. For instance, even Diane DeVries, the dancing and daring woman with quadriplegia, was told that her wheelchair would prevent her from ascending the single step into the choir-loft in her Pentecostal church, and so she would not be able to join the choir! That conversation with her choir-director and pastor led her to leave that church. Moreover, John Swinton observes that a young couple had a son with short-gut syndrome, a disease affecting the length of the small intestine. While the couple longed to help their son, they listened to the members of their church who claimed that the boy’s illness was a sign of God’s displeasure at his being born out of wedlock. That church disconfirmed the parents’, and the child’s, experiences.

Anecdotes like these depict the indifference that people with able bodies can display towards people with disabilities. As Paul exclaims to the Corinthian church, “The eye cannot

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45 For the definition and anecdote, see Block, *Capious Hosting*, 47-48.

46 For Jones’ tragic and touching story, see Shapiro, *No Pity*, 13; for this inauspicious beginning to Roberts’ astonishing narrative, see *No Pity*, 45.

47 See Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 35.

48 For this tragic story, see Swinton, *Raging with Compassion*, 27.
say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ and the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’” (1 Cor. 12:21, NRSV). Brian Brock, a lecturer on disability and moral theology at the University of Aberdeen, extends Paul’s claim. Brock asserts that people cannot justify giving lesser honour to some spiritual gifts than to others: Paul refuses to equate “worldly assessments of stations and talents” with “the divine gifts,” because this error makes the Church into yet another community with regular “social hierarchies.” Christ calls the Church to honour the gifts of all its members.49

It is a serious sin to deny visibility to any member of the Body of Christ. Because they invite people to liberate the connective energies of *eros* for each other, baptism and Holy Communion are meant to re-appear people of all abilities, to re-member us. The sacraments make us whole, allowing us to see from the perspective of vulnerability, so that we can care for each other and the earth as part of God’s redemptive mission. Everybody matters. Indeed, *every body* matters. Disability etiquette allows two parties to become “wholly manifest” to each other in every way; however, this transformation requires changed attitudes and actions.50

Block works to create the transformed attitude and action that disability etiquette makes possible by affirming the visibility and worth of people with disabilities. She asserts that Christians of able body often oppress us through both “language” and “an attitude of low expectations.” First, Block lists many unkind names used by people who do not share our unique perceptions of the world, names like “idiots,” “retards,” “deaf and dumb,” “lame,” “spaz,” “differently abled,” “physically challenged,” “mentally different,” “partially sighted,”


50See Haslam, *Constructive Theology*, 68, for her original statement.
“afflicted,” “crippled,” “victim,” and “deformed.”\textsuperscript{51} I detest words like “lame,” “cripple,” and “retard,” all of which have been applied to me. These words have no place within a loving church-community; since people with a diverse range of abilities are still people in God’s eyes, we deserve to be addressed with gentler language, with names like “friend” and “brother.”

Second, and moreover, Block writes of the low societal expectations surrounding the bar mitzvah of a young Jewish man with “multiple disabilities.” In particular, she observes that a number of people asked the young man’s mother “how she could ‘put him through’ the preparation and the ceremony. It was hard work for him, surely frustrating at times, but it was also the grandest of accomplishments.” She asserts, “We almost automatically assume that a disabled person cannot do as much as a nondisabled person and we are almost always surprised when they can.”\textsuperscript{52} Shapiro corroborates Block’s point throughout his profoundly-affecting book No Pity: most of the people with disabilities he interviews—people like Nancy Cleaveland, Jeff Gunderson, and his friend Jim—are continually confronted by people’s low expectations.\textsuperscript{53}

Finally, Block asserts the value of every person with a disability by listing major points of “disability etiquette.” Under the heading Nothing About Us without Us—a title borrowed from Jim Charlton’s brilliant book—she states the most important tenet of disability etiquette: “Do not make decisions that affect people with disabilities without their

\textsuperscript{51}See Block, Copious Hosting, 48.

\textsuperscript{52}For both of these assertions, see Block, Copious Hosting, 48-9.

\textsuperscript{53}For Nancy Cleaveland’s story, see Shapiro, No Pity, 199-207; for Gunderson, see ibid, 237-48; for Jim’s profound story—by far the longest and ultimately most uplifting in the book—see ibid, 289-321.
participation.” She asks her readers to “use common sense,” and to treat us normally. For instance, she asks her audience to speak directly to people with disabilities rather than to caregivers, to listen attentively and patiently, and to address people with intellectual disabilities simply. As the next chapter will clarify, God’s love embodied in baptism and Holy Communion can help people of varied abilities to enact all these perceptual changes, and to glimpse part of God’s *shalom*.

Block’s list of disability-etiquette tenets is useful for a transformative and sacramental ecclesiology of disability because it warns Christians of able body away from claiming that they know the best interests of Christians with disabilities better than we do ourselves. In a phrase, disability etiquette resists narcissistic forms of charity: Sharon Betcher observes that Western acts of generosity and/or compassion are often ways for some people to feel good for helping others. By contrast, when God’s people practice disability etiquette in church-communities, they can take on the part of the “weaker” or “dishonourable” members of the Body, and expand their perceptions of the world by attending to others’ perceptions. The next chapter will address this by exploring the story of Jesus and Bartimaeus, and interpreting the question, “What do you want me to do for you?” as an act of hospitality that opens small but significant windows into God’s Reign; this question also frees believers to listen for the Spirit’s movement.

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54 For Block’s snappy borrowed title, see *Copious Hosting*, 142; for Charlton’s analysis that gives the borrowed title its cachet, see James I. Charlton, *Nothing About Us Without Us: Disability Oppression and Empowerment* (San Francisco, University of California, 1998).

55 For all these aphoristic directives, see Block, *Copious Hosting*, 145-48.

56 For Betcher’s critique of colonial missions, see Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*, 106-19.
I have had much positive experience of basic disability etiquette in my own church and faith-based communities. For instance, my friends in the Wycliffe chaplaincy continually ask me, “Can you do stairs? Do you find that difficult? Will your balance be okay if we do X?” “No, thanks. I don’t find stairs hard, and my balance is fine these days.” That said, I usually find standing on a concrete surface for long periods difficult, because that makes my back and legs hurt. Paradoxically, this makes Toronto—a very politically-aware and diverse city—a less-than-ideal place for most protest marches. Many of these marches start in Yonge and Dundas Square or Nathan Phillips Square (both asphalt), and end in a park only after participants have walked the entirety of a main thoroughfare like King Street West, Bay Street, or Spadina Avenue. I find political struggle invigorating, but my bodily limitations can impede its material processes.

This section has discussed how disability-etiquette can redress an uncritical reliance on the Enlightenment paradigms of equality and autonomy. Indeed, the first half of this chapter, with its twofold hermeneutic of suspicion and retrieval, has illuminated many demeaning things that people with able body do to people with disabilities inside and outside the Church: even the sacraments can reveal (or, at their worst, betray) human brokenness. In the second part of this chapter, the discourse will “turn around” methodologically to employ anew the hermeneutic of retrieval, examining positive lived experiences of disability for Christians and non-Christians.

C. Positive Lived Experiences of Disability

Jean Vanier’s observations about life at the bottom of the social ladder are a fitting beginning for an examination of positive embodied experiences of disability. As he narrates portions of life at L’Arche Trosly, Vanier states, “Healing takes place at the bottom of the
ladder, not at the top."\textsuperscript{57} Here, Vanier refers to spiritual healing, and possibly bodily healing too, although bodily healing is not explicitly identified: he means that accomplishments—in his case, naval service and becoming a professor of philosophy—do not engender spiritual healing. Only acknowledgement of personal pain, and the assumption of a humble posture, can release people from pain and foster their growth into wholeness, joy, and well-being. For Vanier, paradoxically, healing emerges from engagement with our limitations, and from our recognition of our need for others. Vanier states elsewhere that weakness is integral to human being; his assertion echoes Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiological claim, cited earlier in this chapter, that weakness is holy.\textsuperscript{58}

All people, particularly people with disabilities, can exercise their capacities for the understanding and assumption of human weakness through \textit{compassion}, which is literally the act of “suffering with” another. By itself, compassion means feeling the pains and sorrows of others as if they are one’s own. Vanier and others state that people with disabilities clarify the contours of compassion for people of able body.\textsuperscript{59} In similar discourses, theologians of liberation also argue that the sacraments embody compassion for people who are oppressed.\textsuperscript{60} Most significantly, compassion contains an element of tenderness or “play.” God, our great Lover, wants people of all abilities to reveal themselves to Godself of their own volition. The next section will show, through the ritual and social intertwining of playfulness with

\textsuperscript{57}See Jean Vanier, \textit{From Brokenness to Community} (New York: Paulist, 1992), 24.

\textsuperscript{58}See Jean Vanier, \textit{Becoming Human} (Toronto: Paulist, 1998), 40.


compassion, how God coaxes us to do so. It will also briefly illustrate how that relational matrix of compassion and playfulness positively impacts the multifaceted access of Christians of varied abilities to God’s equality and justice in inclusive and sacramental communities.

1. The Compassionate Connection: Play and Care in Webb-Mitchell

There is an inextricable and innate connection between play and care for people with and without disabilities, inside and outside church-communities that seek to embody eros-filled, sacramental access to God’s radical equality and justice. The third and fourth chapters will outline the contours of playfulness and compassion as affective access. Here, it is enough to note in brief the distinct but related aspects of play and caring, for the links between play and compassion will illuminate some of the positive lived experiences of Christians with disabilities.

Brett Webb-Mitchell writes eloquently of this affective connection between playfulness and compassion in his essay entitled “To Play is to Care” in Dancing with Disabilities. He defines caring as serendipitous, relational, practical, and profound. First, according to Webb-Mitchell, play and caring are related because they create spontaneity between and among people; they involve self and other, demarcate the “space between me and not-me,” and reveal genuine, innocent human relationship. Two people dancing together can guilelessly display this spontaneity. Second, in their linkage, play and compassion involve integrity. Playful actions involve a direct correspondence between “inner thoughts” and “outer actions,” and can make people more loyal to each other. Webb-Mitchell means that playful caring entails mindfulness to each person’s affective needs; affection requires this tender attention. Third, play and care entail practice and experience, and can make
people mindful of their prejudices.\textsuperscript{61} Children engage in play as ritual; their play, especially empathetic play, discloses their worldviews, and allows an observer to note their biases. Fourth, play and compassion both involve elements of creation and renewal, and manifest the possibility of healing for people who care for, and play with, each other.\textsuperscript{62} Games allow people to cooperate, to use parts of the brain that do not always find engagement, and to discern creative solutions to problems. Games embody compassion, because they allow people to display earnest authenticity, to engage in ritual, and to heal.

Vanier affirms Webb-Mitchell’s assertions about the healing and ritualistic relation between play and compassion. “When we’ve had oranges for dessert at L’Arche, we sometimes start chucking the peel about at the end of the meal. Everyone gets into it . . . People who cannot participate in interesting conversations can participate through play.”\textsuperscript{63} Vanier affirms that playful compassion is a component of \textit{celebration}, which he calls a “resource” for the spiritual “nourishment” of people of all abilities.\textsuperscript{64} Vanier’s comments about fights with orange-peels are funny, and suggest the deep connection between play and humour. Webb-Mitchell also observes the good humour of compassionate play in certain anecdotes. For instance, his friend Sal, “a hugger,” knows all the hand-signs to “Jesus Loves Me,” one of her favourite songs. Without preamble, Sal will launch herself at someone,

\textsuperscript{61}For his thoughts on playfulness, compassion, and innocence, see Webb-Mitchell, \textit{Dancing with Disabilities: Opening the Church to all God’s Children} (Cleveland, OH: United Church Press, 1996), 98-100; for compassion’s relation to loyal, see \textit{ibid}, 100-101. In terms of the practice of compassion, see \textit{ibid}, 101 and 103.

\textsuperscript{62}See \textit{ibid}, 102, 104.


\textsuperscript{64}The last full chapter will explore the relevance of celebration for an embodied eschatology of disability.
freckles and all, and ask if they want a hug while giving them one.65 (I do not know Sal, but I already enjoy her way of befriending people!)

Molly Haslam affirms Webb-Mitchell’s argument about the interrelation of caring play and rebirth, asserting that people with intellectual disabilities possess the capacity to respond on an experiential, rather than linguistic, level to compassionate play. She asserts that all human beings have the ability to communicate at preintentional, preverbal, and referential levels; therefore, many people with intellectual disabilities can relate to others, although they cannot set goals, use words, or interpret symbols.66 Specifically, she notes that Chan—a twenty-year-old man with severe cerebral palsy, and a fictional composite of many of her physical-therapy patients—cannot verbalize, but can respond to his caregiver Philip’s gentle coaxing to watch a game of balloon-volley in his group-home. The game, a spontaneous activity in which anyone may join, discloses the empathy that grounds compassionate playfulness.

Haslam asserts that the compassionate inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities can be as simple as Philip’s pushing Chan over to the game of balloon-volley, assuming that he is interested in it.67 In some way, God’s equality and justice are created among people of varied abilities wherever they relate in ways receptive to each other’s paradigms, in terms of what Haslam, channelling Martin Buber, calls “I-Thou relationships.” Such bonds can embody the erotic connection of recognition and acknowledgement,

65For Sal’s touching story, including her amazing rendition of “Jesus Loves Me” complete with hand-signs, see Webb-Mitchell, God Plays Piano Too, 130-31. I do not know whether Sal is a D/deaf girl, because Webb-Mitchell’s vignette does not make this clear.

66For her notions on the linguistic discourse of people with intellectual disabilities, see Haslam, Constructive Theology, 54-7.

67See ibid, 57-61.
Erkenntnis, that Jesus displays (for instance) with the ten lepers in Luke 17. Jesus shows compassion (with or without playfulness) to the ten men simply by greeting them, and acknowledging their need. By exercising this form of compassion, people can heal and help each other in symbiotic and dialogical relationships. Ideally, playful care creates spontaneity, loyalty, and tender, attentive dialogue.

Roger Peters, director of the Selinsgrove Centre, echoes Haslam’s argument about gentle relational dialogue with or without language in order to disclose the healing power of tenderness. Using Pat’s fond relationship with his foster-grandmother as an example, he notes that people with intellectual disabilities testify to human capacities for mutual relationship.  

Shapiro describes a similar dynamic in an open-concept classroom for children with autism: some children read together, some play, and one makes a cup of tea. In ways that promote affective access, these accounts illustrate the cooperative, healing facets of compassionate playfulness.

Many of my experiences of play have been similar to those described above. For instance, from September 2015 to April 2016, I frequently played a role-playing game similar to Dungeons & Dragons with friends. Often, because of my intellectual disabilities, I confused sequences of events for my fictional character, or for others. That said, because we had to work together to achieve goals (for instance, finding a treasure), we had compassion on each other as we played. Our characters grew with us in our good humour and respect, and we projected real I-Thou relationships onto our game. The next section and chapter will

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69For the account of this wonderful classroom, see Shapiro, No Pity, 169-70.
show how, for me, dance is a similar experience of sacramental, blended tenderness and compassion.

These anecdotes and arguments display the significance of compassion and play, in their intertwined state, to multifaceted access. Moreover, compassionate play is not just access; it represents knowledge and power too. Compassionate playfulness allows people of all abilities to affirm each other’s embodied dignity and uniqueness. It can give them an intimate awareness of their capacities, and can help them to address injustices that hinder their flourishing. Second and subsequently, the knowledge emerging from compassionate play gives us power to act and create: in the words of Will Hunting (played by Matt Damon), the self-knowledge of our relational and creative gifts enables people to “just play.”70 As I will clarify in later chapters, the sacraments also embody knowledge and power through their invitation to compassion.

While these accounts of compassionate play reveal its healing, cheerful, and cooperative aspects, compassion nonetheless has a downside. All Christians with disabilities can feel shame, in terms of ableist churches and communities, because we are not chosen to be part of the group. When people of able body do not choose us as friends, colleagues, or lovers, we can feel the disconfirmation described earlier in this chapter. Because the sacraments reveal God’s desire for holistic dignity and joy, they can free people for friendship. While the sacraments cannot coerce friendship their invitation to mutual moral

70When he delivers this line, Will refers primarily to his astonishing facility with mathematical formulae in terms of organic chemistry. Will uses “play” somewhat differently than the author intends in this study: he refers to “play” as gift and as innate virtuosity. One could argue both that the connection of compassionate play to ritual, as defined above, makes room for that virtuosity, and that the ability to “just play” in this way creates the space for greater communal integrity. For this scene and others, see Matt Damon, *Good Will Hunting*, film, directed by Gus Van Sant (Santa Monica: Miramax, 1997).
and relational vulnerability can help people of all abilities to emulate God’s compassion. Chapters Three through Five will illustrate these claims.

These meditations on the importance of compassion and play for affective access to equality and justice pave the way for a later discussion of access-as-perception through theory and narrative. People with disabilities can address the world from a position of joy, dignity, and integrity, and can transform social activities. Moreover, in inclusive and sacramental communities that embody these modes of hospitality, people with disabilities can integrate pain into positive lived experience, and can embody compassionate relation that offers glimpses of God’s transformation and renewal of the world made manifest in the Last Days.

2. Dancing Differently: Nancy Eiesland on Diane DeVries

In August 2015, I attended the wedding of two good friends at L’Arche Daybreak in Richmond Hill, Ontario. After a stunningly beautiful wedding replete with passionate vows, moving prayers, and a full Anglican service of the Eucharist, we experienced a profound moment of integration between Christians with and without disabilities: a number of core members and assistants from Daybreak’s L’Arche houses danced to a pre-recorded song. The song’s continual refrain was, “You are the face of God.” Seeing people in wheelchairs dance with people of able body gave me great joy, and contributed to the wondrous joy of our friends’ wedding-day. In that moment, the core-members and assistants at L’Arche Daybreak demonstrated for us the different dance of disability, a display of interdependence and unity that this section will elucidate.

Sharon Betcher bluntly and sarcastically asserts the specific location of the dance of difference: the social position of disability is, primarily, the body in pain. Betcher observes
that, for most people of diverse abilities, “health becomes a possession, a territory to be held.” By contrast, disability is socially constructed as a site of weakness or a zone of abjection. Stating that more clearly, people who do not have disabilities do not want to have them, and fear the encroachment of disability and illness on personal and public health above all else.  

These attitudes mean that many people of able body fear the weakness and limitation that disability entails, and so view the onset of disability as a tragedy. By contrast, as a man with both physical and intellectual disabilities, I contend that disability is not always tragic, or even painful. Rather, instability, insecurity, and weakness can empower people with disabilities to trust our bodies, and to reach out to others for help when we find our bodies untrustworthy. Betcher quotes postmodern philosopher Gilles Deleuze in a poignant way: “Illness is not an enemy . . . but rather, something that gives a feeling of life.” According to Betcher, illness and pain allow believers with varied abilities to know that we are alive; they attune us to our encounters with the world. Also, Christians with diverse abilities can offer ourselves to each other, and to God, in our limitation, and can know God’s mercy and power in our finitude.

Nancy Eiesland reorients Betcher’s reflections on illness. As discussed in Chapter One, Eiesland retells the story of Diane DeVries, a Christian woman born in Texas in 1950 without legs, and with only upper-extremity stumps for arms. Despite her lack of limbs, DeVries views herself as normal and beautiful: her parents taught her that what others saw as


a “catastrophe” was “just something that happened,” so she claims that she resembles the amputated Venus de Milo. She taught her sister Debbie to dance. Diane dances in a fashion similar to her mode of walking: she rotates her hips, described as strong and muscular. While positive thinking is definitely not all there is to life with disability, Diane’s confidence makes her a skilled dancer.

DeVries’ action, the re-description of debility as dynamic and joyful motion, is a pivotal point (pun intended!) for an ecclesiology of disability. DeVries transforms the action of dance through her belief in her body’s ordinariness. In churches that embody the summons to inclusion symbolized in baptism and Holy Communion, people of all abilities can participate as fully as they desire, because believers in those communities (usually) accompany, value, and support those whose hands cannot hold the Communion chalice upright, whose eyes see only in adequate lighting, and whose ears require ambient noise in order to hear. I am not stating that able-bodied Christians should offer one-sided charity to Christians with disabilities. Rather, I assert that in the sacraments’ dance, everyone can serve and learn from each other. The accounts in this section all reveal that—contrary to the claims of Phil Collins, former singer and drummer of Genesis—we can dance, and we can talk; there is more to us than the way we walk.

The dance of difference motivated by affective access to divine equality and justice begins with increased self-confidence and agency. For instance, Haslam states that Chan is unaware of his own motor-responses to stimuli. Nonetheless, his physical responsiveness

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73 For DeVries’ journey of self-acceptance, see again Eiesland, Disabled God, 33-34; on her modelling of physical beauty à la the Venus de Milo, see 40.

74 See Eiesland, Disabled God, 36-8.

75 Collins sings, “I can’t dance, I can’t talk / The only thing about me is the way that I walk.” See Genesis, “I Can’t Dance,” We Can’t Dance (New York: Atlantic, 1991), 5-6, 13-14, 23-24, 30-31.
increases when he is interacting with Philip and Sara, who care for him: he turns his head more actively, and his eyes gain lustre, when these two people are present. An observer cannot determine Chan’s relational confidence, yet one can see that relationships with others give him the energy to act. Other theologians of disability echo Haslam’s suggestion: loving relationships offer human beings strength and grace to do what God calls them (us!) to do in the world.

Vanier affirms Haslam’s implied claims about agency: for instance, he observes that even children with disabilities who are non-verbal can open up and relax when they know that they are loved. For example, Claudia, his Honduran friend who is blind and autistic, began her life at L’Arche Suyapas in terrible pain; she screamed and smeared feces on the walls. That said, the love of the staff at the house, especially the caring of her house-leader Nadine, allowed Claudia to dance differently. Once she understood Nadine’s caring and the house’s rhythm, Claudia blossomed; she sang as she worked, and quietly and joyfully helped others at their tasks. When Vanier visited Claudia again years later, she said that God had helped her to become herself. This anecdote suggests that love is the water that nourishes the diverse harvest of God’s Reign.

Similarly, though not in a church context, Shapiro observes the increase in his friend Jim’s confidence. Jim spends about twenty-five years in an institution in Faribault, Minnesota; nonetheless, once his siblings have met him, they realize his mechanical gifts, and begin to rely on him to fix things (for instance, a bicycle). In turn, his siblings’

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76 See Haslam, *Constructive Theology*, 77-84.
78 For Claudia’s profound and poignant story, see Vanier, *Becoming Human*, 20-27.
dependence on him increases his unique confidence and agency. His older brother Rob tries to get him a job in an auto-repair shop; moreover, other people—including a new psychologist not employed at Faribault—affirm Jim’s gifts, and advocate for his release.

Upon his release in 1992, Jim finds a good job grading a softball field. Loving relationship is one aspect of the dance of difference.

I have had enough experience of other people’s affirmation to fill far more than the space given me in this project: because of my family and friends, I am mostly content with the dance of difference that comprises my life. I certainly struggle with doing math, with the subtle nuances of touch, with lifting heavy objects, and with physical and psychological balance and direction; these limitations create my relative dependence on others. Nonetheless, my life does not purely consist of crisis and difficulty. Since my early twenties, when I found friends who loved me for myself, I have learned to offer myself, and to accept from others, lasting affirmation.

For example, my retentive verbal memory allows me to write affecting poetry. Moreover, I can remember directions, despite my struggles, and so I have (for instance) learned to cook with my friends’ help, and have navigated small portions of Rochester, New York with alacrity. As I will clarify later, I have increased my body’s flexibility and muscle-tone because of, rather than despite, my bodily injuries. These experiences of bodily and perceptual difference allow me to participate in the life that God offers me, to share that profound love with my communities, to live into my vocation to strengthen Christ’s Body, and to journey towards God’s Reign.

79 For all of Jim’s marvelous experiences before, during, and immediately after his release from Faribault, see Shapiro, No Pity, 311-21.
The last two sections of this chapter have been formative for the argument of this dissertation: the ways that compassion contains playfulness, and the nuances of the dance of difference embodied by Christians with disabilities, explicitly demarcate the alternative vision of ecclesial community that this thesis has proposed. In order to transition effectively from this explication of the positive and negative aspects of ecclesial community for people with disabilities to the exposition of theological aspects of access to God’s equality and justice for us, I will now expand on my examination of “inclusion” in the Introduction, in order to clarify how Christians with disabilities’ varied experiences of self-acceptance connect to our ecclesial embodiment of the theological realities of access to God’s equality and justice.

D. The Churches’ Progress in Terms of Inclusion: the Relationship of Baptism and Communion to the Embodiment of People with Disabilities

Brett Webb-Mitchell calls his 1994 book *Unexpected Guests at God’s Banquet* because he sees all human beings as God’s guests at a banquet of love, as in Luke 14:15-24. The ways that Christians of varied abilities welcome each other are the “table manners” at that feast. Here Webb-Mitchell echoes Block’s list of “disability etiquette” items discussed above.80

I affirm Webb-Mitchell’s assertion: the praxes of exclusion and inclusion are the table-manners with which Christians with able bodies and disabilities engage each other at the banquet of life in God’s world. Thus, this project examines the gestures of both welcome and segregation that comprise people’s behaviour in sacramental community. In order to continue to attend to the hermeneutical lens of retrieval, the last section of this chapter will

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80For an explanation of the feast as a guiding metaphor for his book, see Webb-Mitchell, *Unexpected Guests*, 83-6; for Block’s numerous points of disability etiquette, see again Block, *Copious Hosting*, 142-48.
disclose ways in which the reclaimed goodness of human embodiment coheres, ideally, with the theological significance of comprehensive access to God’s equality and justice for Christians of all abilities. This discussion will survey and synthesize major themes, in order to ground further ecclesiological claims.

The first two chapters of this dissertation have aimed to outline some primary features of a Christian theological anthropology based on moral and relational vulnerability, and, in a related vein, sketched a sacramental ecclesiology grounded in self-acceptance and the welcome of different perspectives. By making these claims, this project has posited that, in an ideal and not-fully-realized sense, the Church is a community founded on an *eros*-filled connection with and empathy for people who are different and who display vulnerability. The Church is also the vehicle of access to God’s transformative equality and justice for all creatures.

Especially in its erotic (creative and life-giving) aspect, human embodiment connects Christians with disabilities to the theological realities of access to God’s equality and justice. Human bodies can eat, work, pray, sing, dance, and console. As described in the first chapter, human bodies physically ground God’s relational Image. Moreover, in their interdependent relationality, bodies lend their substance to Christ’s Body, the Church. Through our bodies, God’s friends of all abilities can celebrate flourishing and right relationship where they already exist, and create the suggestions of God’s *shalom* where they have not already flowered. When it is properly channeled, the energy of *eros*—the creative, healing, and vigorous force of mutual desire that empowers all creation and that portends God’s joyous Reign—can root out and redeem shame, transforming it into self-acceptance within the dance
of difference. In sacramental community, the shame of people with disabilities can be replaced by joy.

The sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion are a vital part of the goodness of human embodiment, and embody God’s invitation to living, dynamic equality and justice for people of all abilities. These rituals beckon Christians of diverse abilities to display empathy with each other because they activate our erotic energies: they re-member human beings of all abilities, restoring God’s Image in us and reminding us to care for our bodies and the earth. As some liturgical theologians assert, the sacraments energize our memories and imaginations; they empower us to envision a way of life that resists personal and systemic forms of ableism.81

Baptism and Holy Communion invite Christians of all abilities to become visible again, after disappearing under the dominating powers of disconfirmation. These rituals can help church-communities to alleviate experiences of disconfirmation and domination by prioritizing the vulnerable and open episteme of disability. The sacraments allow all Christians to recognize each other in our bodies; they can help us to affirm each other’s gifts, create secure and healthy social spaces, and to remind each other of the dignity and joy of God’s Reign.82

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82 Jay Johnson claims explicitly that Communion reminds human beings of their desirability: see Johnson, Divine Communion, esp. 30, 51-57, and 73-82.
The journey of equality and justice begins with baptism. Baptism marks each person as equal, as one who shares in the mutuality and symmetry of power that can ideally exist among all people. This proclamation of social, political, and spiritual symmetry belies the bureaucratic impulse to categorize bodies as “normal” and “abnormal.” The Apostle Paul states that slave and free, Jew and Greek, man and woman are all equal, and all united, in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:27-8). So too are Christians of all abilities; as Paul makes abundantly clear in (for instance) 1 Corinthians 12:15-27, all Christians, of every kind of ability, are part of each other in our diversity, in a Body with many gifts. As we perform the dance of difference, Christians of diverse abilities are united in Christ, and can be prepared to enact divine equality and justice.

Moreover, as the sacrament that demands continual re-membrance of human vulnerability and solidarity, Holy Communion makes present Christ’s Body to itself—representing it—thereby enticing believers into mutual empathy.83 The next chapter will affirm Holy Communion’s summons to vulnerability at great depth. Here, it suffices to state that, because Christ’s body and blood have been given for all humanity, Christ demands that we recall each other’s bodies and fulfill each other’s needs with our gifts. Rather than only promising each other access without acting to fulfill our promise, Christians of all abilities can use our diverse spiritual gifts for justice in Communion. When we eat at that Table, we can practise justice by listening to each other, supporting each other in our frailty (see Isaiah 35:3-5), and affirming our material and social gifts. The sacraments help people of diverse

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83Enumerating seven vital images of the Eucharist, James F. White argues that the breaking of bread enables Christians of varied abilities to praise God joyfully, to remember Christ’s saving power, and to embody the Church’s unity. See James F. White, Sacraments as God’s Self-Giving (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), 54-7. Christine Smith makes the same point in the context of the Abejas’ political protest against their government in Chiapas, Mexico; see Smith, “Preaching,” 102-6.
abilities to name our experiences of pain and promise, disclose our present vulnerability, and to embody God’s future Reign with vigour.

Two examples may illustrate the sacraments’ embodied and erotic affirmation of the theological aspects of access to God’s equality and justice. First, as a way to talk about the shame of the fall, and the *eros*-filled self-acceptance empowered by the Eucharist, Jay Johnson writes compassionately about taking on a convict as a seminary student, and celebrating a Eucharist of “Graham crackers” and “cranberry juice” with that student in prison. Even within the confinement of a prison cell, a space that drains away “every means of human intimacy,” Johnson could feel the hope inspired by Jesus’ broken body and shed blood. For him and his student, Communion meant the restoration of life; thus, Johnson asserts that the meal of Communion contains “wisdom” that can allow people to recall God’s passionate desire for them.

Second, on October 9th, 2016, in the Jeremiah Community’s Thanksgiving Sunday worship-service, I too experienced the theological realities of access to God’s equality and justice through the *eros*-filled empowerment of C/communion. At the table, which included a filling and delicious meal, I sat with some of our friends from the street, and had a lively and joyous conversation; there was plentiful bread and wine for the Eucharist, and all my friends had enough to eat. As we sang Steve Bell and Gord Johnson’s beautiful *Sanctus* a cappella, I felt the entry of the Holy Spirit, and the flowering of God’s dignity and joy.

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84 For this fascinating anecdote, see Johnson, *Divine Communion*, 58, 61.

85 I conflate “communion,” the reality of human intimacy, and “Communion,” the ritual, in this way because Holy Communion, also called “the Lord’s Supper” and “the Eucharist,” represents and reorients both God’s intimacy with humanity, and human tenderness with one another, within the sacramental community. My analyses of Holy Communion in Chapter Three in particular will bear out this claim.
Through the outpouring of love in the sacrament that evening, my friends and I felt our lives renewed and refreshed.

This short subsection has drawn together many themes discussed so far in this project, in order to claim a sacramental connection that can retrieve bodily goodness in terms of the theological realities of access to God’s equality and justice for Christians for all abilities. In turn, the next chapter will show how baptism and Holy Communion allow people of all abilities to embody God’s equality and justice through their invitation to free humans’ erotic energies.

**E. Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed the Church as a community founded in empathy, and revealed some ways in which people with disabilities help the Church to realize a greater unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity through our fuller inclusion in its life. Proceeding in four steps, the chapter continued this thesis’ partial hermeneutic of suspicion, examining the shame, fear, and exclusion experienced by people with disabilities, investigating some of the Enlightenment assumptions that underlie those negative experiences, and observing painful breaches of “disability etiquette” by people of able body. Second, revisiting the lens of retrieval, the chapter both clarified the connections between compassion and playfulness, and linked that cajoling compassion to the embodiment of a generous mode of knowledge by people with disabilities.

Finally, the previous section has outlined the connection of ecclesial hospitality to the theological realities of access to God’s equality and justice through the erotic efficacy of the sacraments. While many ableist behaviours, attitudes, and paradigms prevent the members of Christ’s Body from engaging in the dance of difference, and so hinder our full life in God’s
relational Image, baptism and Holy Communion can activate the erotic energies of people of diverse abilities, re-membering us (giving us salvific glimpses of God’s integrity and joy) and recalling in us our hopeful connection to each other, the Earth, and the divine life.

Building on this exploration of embodied self-acceptance, sacrament, and access, Part Two of this dissertation will explore the theological aspects of access for people with disabilities to God’s equality and justice, through physical, intellectual, affective, and spiritual access to these gifts in sacramental church-communities. This comprehensive concept of access emerges from the embodied welcome to which the sacraments gesture, and facilitates the enactment of faithful and loving relationship, which I will call covenant-faithfulness, among Christians of all abilities. Significantly, this polyvalent paradigm also allows the investigation of our heavenly hope: ideally, embodied welcome can create the space for resurrection and reintegration.
Part Two: Hermeneutics of Retrieval: Access and Eschatology

Chapter Three

Access through the Sacraments: Full Participation in Christ’s Body

This second part of the dissertation will primarily address the hermeneutic of retrieval outlined in the Introduction. The third chapter will discuss the theological aspects of access to God’s equality and justice by analyzing the components of access. It will comprise eight brief sections outlining physical, intellectual, affective, and spiritual access to equality, followed by the theological significance of the same modes of access to justice. Building on that theological paradigm, the fourth chapter will illustrate the practical aspects of access, by showing how believers of all abilities can form open, generous relationships of covenant-love in sacramental community. The fifth chapter will demonstrate how multifaceted access forms part of an embodied eschatology of disability that helps us to realize our heavenly hope.

At this central moment in my dissertation, I wish to re-emphasize that I am contributing to the construction of a sacramental and transformative ecclesiology of disability. Through the lens of the sacraments—rituals that concretize Christ’s presence to church-communities—as well as the sacramental nature of all life, this project examines how people with disabilities constitute an essential part of Christ’s Body.¹ Christians with disabilities awaken all people to God’s passionate desire for the inclusion of all things in a renewed, equitable world of dignity and joy. Because we testify in our bodies to the interdependence, unity-in-diversity, physicality, and ecstasy of all creation, Christians with

disabilities can bear witness to the sacramental drama of divine justice and equality wherein God redeems all things, and makes all things new.

As indicated previously, this chapter will illuminate the theological facets of my thesis statement concerning communal access to God’s radical and transformative grace, which cultivates equality and justice. Using a sacramental paradigm to explore the theological parameters of God’s gifts of justice and equality, this chapter will explore the theological properties of holistic access—the full participation, the giving and receiving of God’s transformative dignity and joy—of Christians with disabilities within inclusive church-communities. Since this chapter will discuss the themes of divine and sacramental equality and justice at length, I will reiterate and reframe their definitions below.

First, in this project, equality refers to connective reciprocity and mutual acts of empowerment between parties of shared value and worth, without uniformity or sameness. In an ideal philosophical sense, equality occurs where two or more entities exist in complete sympathy, in mutual relationship that evinces symmetrical agency. In equal relationships, different beings are disposed towards each other and work lovingly for each other’s good(s). Tom Reynolds adds theological nuance to this philosophical definition: he observes that “equality” does not mean “sameness”: all people are equal, not only those who are “like us.” Equality affirms the differences between people, rather than sameness, and implies reciprocity. Furthermore, parity happens when people recognize each other’s gifts and care for each other across difference. Thus, equality is theologically rooted in friendship, a vital concept for Christians with disabilities. Miroslav Volf observes that all Christians realize their equal participation in Christ’s self-giving Body; I affirm Volf’s claim, even though the

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2For this relational paradigm of equality, see again Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 81.
ecclesial reality of equality for Christians of varied abilities differs markedly from its ideal
description.³

Second, in light of this theological definition of equality as the mutual and connective
symmetry of power between parties that share value and worth, justice means the social
performance of sharing that power. Justice is the acceptance of differences in relation, such
that there is equity. Ideally, justice is the active component of equality. When I write “active
component,” I mean that justice invites human beings into personal and communal
flourishing and right relationship, and bears fruit in the even-handed distribution of goods.⁴
Nonetheless, justice exceeds the simple distribution of goods, rights, and privileges, for it is
the communal embodiment of shalom, the wholeness and integrity that God desires for all
creation in the new world to come. While justice is never fully realized on earth, human
beings can see its partial fruits in the sharing of goods, the ability to access goods, acts of
reconciliation, and healing.

Baptism and Holy Communion invite Christian communities to practice divine
equality and justice in different but convergent ways.⁵ Baptist, the rite of water and the
Word, places all essential human characteristics in the context of Christ’s life, ministry,
death, and resurrection. Ideally, baptism symbolizes the spiritual regeneration of believers
into God’s life of justice, reminds Christians of the truth and goodness of our bodies, and

³For this claim, see Miroslav Volf, After Our Likeness: the Church as the Image of the Trinity (Grand

⁴Iris M. Young begins her discourse on justice by asserting that justice is greater than its distributive
facet. See again Iris Marion Young, Justice and the Politics of Difference (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990), 15-
24.

⁵Attentive Reformed believers may note that, in modern Reformed churches, baptism does not always
precede reception of Communion; instead, an “open table” welcomes those who are not, or not yet, baptized.
Nonetheless, baptism conveys an aura of initiation to churchly identity and belonging, while Eucharist
maintains its emphasis on sustenance. These rites may reveal specific emphases of the life of grace, rather than
their sequence.
testifies to the human vocation of empathy. Moreover, Holy Communion, the meal of bread and wine, cements the bonds of access symbolized in baptism, in an ideal sense, by witnessing to creation’s fundamental interdependence, symbolizing God’s eschatological demands for the end of material poverty, activating memories of equity in Christ’s Body, propounding Christ’s love to believers of all abilities through the elements, and enacting believers’ solidarity with those who suffer.\footnote{For the significance of Communion for the end of material poverty, e.g., Gustavo Gutierrez, \textit{A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation}, 2nd ed., trans. and ed. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), 149. See also Georges Casalis, \textit{Correct Ideas Don’t Fall from the Skies: Elements for an Inductive Theology} (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984), 168; Megan McKenna, \textit{Rites of Justice: the Sacraments and Liturgy as Ethical Imperatives} (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997), 101-14.}

This chapter will have two discrete but related parts; its eight sections will enunciate the theological parameters of equality and justice that I have outlined in a sacramental paradigm. First, I will trace the contours of (1) physical, (2) intellectual, (3) affective, and (4) spiritual access to equality for people with disabilities in church-communities that live out the promises of baptism and Holy Communion. Second, and subsequently, I will outline the form of (5) physical, (6) intellectual, (7) affective, and (8) spiritual access to justice for people with disabilities through the sacraments, in churches that aim to embody divine inclusion.

A. The Sacramental Call to Equality

1. Physical Access to God’s Equality: Counting the Cost

For several months in 2011 and 2012, I worshipped on some Tuesday afternoons in the boardroom of one of the colleges of the Toronto School of Theology, a large room with poor lighting and heavy wooden chairs at the end of a narrow hallway. The space swallows sound, and makes hearing nearly impossible. A number of us worshipped here in order to
display solidarity with a friend in a wheelchair who could not access that college’s chapel, the primary entrance to which was (at that time) a large set of stone steps; happily, the chapel now also has elevator access. The boardroom worshippers had to use a computer with strange and obtuse audiovisual software in order to “hear” the chapel service, to the very small extent that it was audible; to struggle to sing the hymns in time; and generally to participate in the liturgy for that day.

Whenever we sang and prayed in that boardroom, I felt small and disempowered. On one occasion, I witnessed the tears of my wheelchair-mobilized friend and another colleague, who had striven ardently to make the administration aware of our frustration with the sound-quality. We felt the potent presence of theological inequality, because our friend was denied physical access to spiritual and social resources that would have displayed her full membership in Christ’s Body. The college’s extremely-rational response to our friend’s serious problem—giving her a separate, segregated worship-service because she could not enter the chapel—provided only a partial solution. Their efforts to help were vexed by the smallness of their imaginations.7

As I will describe in a later section on the sacraments’ facilitation of physical access to divine justice, my friend’s story ended in a bittersweet way. In light of this, that experience still causes me to wonder about the theological significance of equality, as connective mutuality and symmetry of power, in terms of physical access to ecclesial spaces for people with disabilities. When I write “physical access,” I mean human beings knowing the freedom of full physical participation in communal life: we can have the freedom to move, to act, to

7For Tanya Titchkosky’s definition of pragmatism as the bureaucratic rationality that only “expects” to see certain bodies, see again Tanya Titchkosky, Question of Access: Disability, Space, Meaning (University of Toronto, 2011), 93-105. For her thorough definition of what she calls “expected participants,” see also Titchkosky, Disability, Self & Society (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2003), 104-14.
obtain health-care and nutrition, and to feel unconstrained by pain in community. Churches that practice the inclusion embodied in the sacraments can change a soundproof room into a place of joy.

As defined in the Introduction, theological equality is God’s gracious gift of mutuality and symmetry of power through Jesus Christ, since each person is valued similarly through grace. God’s gift of parity reveals the diverse parties’ mutual interdependence, and connotes reciprocity. Because two people in equal relationship desire each other’s good, equality is a significant component of friendship. So defined, equality is theologically significant for church-communities that live into the sacraments’ erotic and creative witness to God’s gracious inclusion in two ways. First, equality is theologically significant for inclusive church-communities because it creates the space for transformative healing, defined in Chapter One as growth into integration and joy. Because it leads to healing—in terms of every mode of access—equality becomes the social and spiritual threshold of shalom within the Christian community. Sacramental access to ecclesial equality for people with disabilities grounds our liberation, our freedom to be, to give and to receive our gifts in community.

One vital part of the proclamation of Jesus Christ is his desire for the healing of humanity and creation: by welcoming people of diverse abilities and working for their holistic reintegration into community, Jesus implicitly and explicitly proclaims multifaceted access to equality for them (us!). For instance, as Kathy Black observes, Jesus engages with both Bartimaeus and the Gerasene man at the tombs. These stories add depth to this project’s theological anthropology by focussing on the equalizing force of Jesus’ healing encounters.
In Mark 10, Jesus rightly perceives Bartimaeus’ need by welcoming and talking with the blind man. Jesus’ recognition, which Barth calls Erkenntnis—“recognition,” “welcome,” and “acknowledgement” in English—restores Bartimaeus’ personal agency. Erkenntnis is the substance of interpersonal and divine-human relation in sacramental community. This term describes both Jesus’ perception of Bartimaeus, and Jesus’ and Bartimaeus’ mutual recognition of each other as subjects with social and spiritual power. Moreover, Jesus’ clear perception of Bartimaeus heals and transforms his social status. Previously, the crowd shouted him down, but now people push him cordially towards Jesus (Mark 10:49). Bartimaeus models energetic discipleship for Christians of all abilities in sacramental community by disclosing the healing power of equality, made possible when divine and human eros frees human life.

Furthermore, Black observes that Jesus speaks directly to the man with mental illness who lives among the Gerasene tombs. He makes physical and social contact with the person behind the “demon” (Mark 5:3-5). By naming the man’s illness, and expelling it into the pigs, Jesus restores the man to his “right mind” (5:15, NRSV), and allows him to become a missionary to his own people. Black observes that some theologians of liberation see Legion’s oppression by a “demon” as a psychological manifestation of Roman military

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9 For Barth’s initial use of this term, see Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* vol. III.2, eds. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), 176-81; see also Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* Band III.2 ([§§ 43-47] Zurich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1980), 214; for more on Barth’s anthropology, see also Daniel J. Price, *Karl Barth’s Anthropology in Light of Modern Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 117-130.

occupation. Thus, although the townspeople’s fear in light of the man’s healing makes relational sense (who really wants to anger an occupying force?), Jesus’ healing of the Gerasene man still reveals the same erotic, sacramental entry into true equality as Christians of all abilities can experience in communities energized by the promises of baptism and Holy Communion. Jesus recalls the man who lived in the tombs to the embodied knowledge of his identity as God’s beloved child, and reveals to him his mission. Significantly, like Bartimaeus, the man takes to his new work with vigorous joy!

These stories of Jesus’ transformative healing and restoration of equality demonstrate the remedial function of baptism and Holy Communion in church-communities that live into God’s inclusion, because they reveal Jesus’ desire to free the energies of *eros*, of creativity, relationship, and desire. The regenerative waters of baptism can facilitate *eros*-filled healing in churches that include disability by reminding us of the gift of our bodies. The water poured over the baptizand, and the vows made over that water, can extend God’s *Erkenntnis* to all people. In churches that live into this healing equality, people with disabilities can live in joyous relation to God and the Body of Christ through the healing bonds of mutuality and sharing.

Similarly, Holy Communion can facilitate the same healing that we have seen in these stories of Jesus: the ritual elements of bread and wine can disclose this facet of physical access to divine equality by reminding Christians of diverse abilities, through our *eros*-filled relationships, of the strength or resilience of our bodies. Strength means the capacity for

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11 For Jesus’ contact with the demon called Legion, see Black, *Healing Homiletic*, 171; for Black’s reinterpretation of demon-possession as military occupation, see *ibid*, 168-9.

meaningful physical and social activity, durability, and steadfastness. Within sacramental communities that include disability, this strength both grounds Christians of all abilities in our bodies, and testifies to the Spirit-filled bodies that God has promised us in the resurrection. Jesus offers Christians of all abilities strength in our churches: Christ’s ritual gifts can call people out of despair to wholeness and joy, heal with a single word, and evoke people’s genuine identities. In sacramental community, believers of all abilities are called to offer it to others with solidarity, sympathy, supportive words and deeds, and the courage to affirm embodied and essential differences.

I have felt the healing and strength of which I write. For instance, in March 2015 at Wine Before Breakfast, thirty people or so mourned the death of a street-involved friend. The Eucharist, the music, the sermon, and shared pieces of our friend’s artwork reminded us of the gift of material existence. I recall holding one of the man’s good friends by the shoulders as he wept. In that moment, the Risen One broken on the cross healed us through relationship. Through our affective bonds, we grew towards well-being and joy; indeed, in sacramental communities, the healing described above can unfold into open relationships that portend access.

Second and subsequently, physical access to God’s equality is theologically significant in terms of the role of people with disabilities within sacramental church-communities, because the healing described above allows us to act hospitably towards others, and to live into full relationship with them. Here I widen the usual definition of access;

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13 Amos Yong adds that participation in Holy Communion adds to the strength, the physical and social cohesion, of the believing community through the eschatological movement of the Spirit. See Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimaging Disability in Late Modernity* (Waco: Baylor, 2007), 210-11.

physical access to churchly spaces involves not only architectural transformation, but an entry-point into relationship. Brett Webb-Mitchell’s observations of the children at Devereaux Hospital bear out this new definition of physical access as relation. He states that the children taught him about their spiritual lives, and did not allow the adult administrators of the hospital to govern the conversation about spiritual life. The healing that these children experienced in relationship with Webb-Mitchell, and with each other, informed their interpersonal growth in ways that one might call sacramental.

For instance, as has been explored briefly in the previous chapter, Webb-Mitchell’s somewhat-violent encounter with Stephanie—the headstrong young African-American woman who broke his glasses (pp. 114-15)—testifies to the erotic connection between physical equality and relationship. Webb-Mitchell breaks up a fight between Stephanie and another young woman. Later, resisting his attempts to build relationship, Stephanie insists, “You don’t care about me when you leave this place. . . . Jesus doesn’t care about me either. No one cares about me . . . ” Webb-Mitchell listens deeply to Stephanie; his listening aids her healing because he both hears her experience in order to respond compassionately, and gives her the physical space she needs to be herself. Webb-Mitchell’s empathy fosters tangible mutuality of power.

The same intertwined mode of physical and affective access that readers can discover in Webb-Mitchell’s account also inheres in the sacramental life of inclusive Christian communities. Following Luther and Calvin, James Huffstutler and Howard Rice observe that

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baptism is God’s tactile and all-embracing pledge and welcome.\textsuperscript{17} God’s prevenient action in baptism—that is, his engagement with humanity prior to our faith—forms human bodies into the Spirit’s vessels and touches our souls. Moreover, the Communion elements—Christ’s real presence in bread and wine that strengthens us and grafts our obedience onto Christ’s—bring people into relationship with Christ.\textsuperscript{18} Affective bonds form one part of physical access, while physical points of entry can also give rise to relational access. The later discussion of affective access will clarify its relational facets; here I note that as wounded people whom Christ has healed into relationship, Christians of varied abilities can know and be known in sacramental community. For instance, when I worship in the Jeremiah Community with friends who possess mild intellectual disabilities or mental-health issues, I know that God has made us more whole together.

The healing narratives re-described by Black, and Webb-Mitchell’s personal encounters with children with disabilities, demonstrate the same healing and relationship that emerge from the sacraments’ liberation of human \textit{eros}. Baptism and Holy Communion enable the participation of people of varied abilities in Jesus’ life, ministry, death, and resurrection; Christ’s love, realized in the sacraments, embodies human equality for Christians of all abilities through healing and intimate encounter. Furthermore, Miroslav Volf notes that the ideal Church, a “polycentric” organism, also embodies Christ’s desire for shared humanity.\textsuperscript{19}


\textsuperscript{18}See \textit{ibid}, 66-68; see also Volf, \textit{After our Likeness}, 153.

\textsuperscript{19}For an explanation of the Church’s “polycentric” nature, see \textit{ibid}, 224.
Physical access to God’s equality is relational as well as architectural: ideally, the sacraments can help people of varied abilities to form communities where they can discover true healing and relationship. Because the liberation of human *eros* creates the space for mutuality of power in an ideal sense, the structure of the Church ought to represent the needs and desires of all the members of Christ’s Body. This sacramental, fundamental equality helps us to grow gradually towards justice. Of course, alongside healing and true relationship, people also need intellectual access to equality, access that empowers us through baptism and Holy Communion’s ignition of knowledge, memory, and imagination. Thus, I now turn to that intellectual ignition.

2. **Intellectual Access to Divine Equality: Including the Imagination**

Just as Christians with disabilities live out the physical facet of access to God’s equality and justice through church-communities that represent the sacramental imperative towards inclusion, so we also embody—and, consequently, engage in—intellectual access to divine equality, defined as the sharing of knowledge, through imaginative reflection, in ways that challenge ableist ecclesial structures in our communities. Intellectual access can also refer to the secure social spaces where people can affirm each other’s uniquely-embodied intellectual gifts. Through this imaginative reflection, people of diverse abilities can catalyze—and, in our bodies, constitute—the whole Church’s *anamnesis*; that is, we can engage in liturgical and social modes of remembrance and re-membering that act out the drama of the *anaphora*. Our lived experience becomes the prayer, song, and story that we can share with people who need God’s grace.

Intellectual access to God’s equality has two primary components. First, intellectual access connotes the creation of mental spaces where everyone can grasp the knowledge of
God’s love according to his or her ability, using intellectual and imaginative aids. Webb-Mitchell defines imagination as “the capacity to conceive and express what is actually happening here and now, as well as what has been, and could be in the future.”

This definition reveals imagination’s function: imagination allows one to transform, and envision changes to, one’s world. In sacramental communities inclusive of disability, imagination is eschatological. Baptism and Holy Communion can motivate visions of God’s joyous and abundant Reign.

The second component of intellectual access to God’s equality for Christians of varied abilities is linguistic in nature. Here, the term “linguistic” denotes, and subtly advocates for, a simplified use of language that invites all people into solidarity, understanding, and joy within the circle around the baptismal font and the Lord’s Table. Simple, direct language resists the intellectual laziness of using disability as a pejorative metaphorical construct. That is, in a church-community empowered by the sacraments that practices intellectual access to equality and justice, no believer will be “crippled by sin” or “deaf to the word of God.” By briefly exploring story in general, and Jesus’ parable of the Sower in particular, this section will show that narratives shape the intellectual access of people with disabilities to God’s equality. Furthermore, God’s Reign can partly flower in a sacramental space where all people, of all ranges of ability, can engage freely with knowledge, memory, imagination, and language.

From a very young age, I loved to read and to tell stories. For instance, when I was in grade school, we used to have story-time, where every classmate would share a story he or she had written. I recall that my classmates would pay very rapt attention when I told stories.

I am sure that this occurred because my vivid imagination lent my stories drama; it was very likely also true that I told stories out of my conviction that they needed to be told. Whenever something happened to me, or whenever I felt something intensely, I wanted to share it with others. These qualities are still part of my character in my thirties, just as they were at age eight. Thus, it gives me great joy to narrate, and in some sense perform, the great story of access for my readers.

Stanley Hauerwas and Brett Webb-Mitchell also believe that people of all abilities need to tell stories. Independently, both theologians agree that narratives create human identity, and that stories allow people to talk cogently about moral activity. Hauerwas asserts, “Metaphors and stories suggest how we should see and describe the world . . . in ways that rules and principles taken in themselves do not.” Correspondingly, Webb-Mitchell argues that “stories tell us who we are.” Their unanimity about the import of story plays out in different ways. For example, Hauerwas interprets the autobiography of Albert Speer, Hitler’s chief architect during the Third Reich; he insists that Speer’s complicity in Hitler’s “Final Solution” for the Jewish people emerged partly from his grossly-incomplete inner narrative, where he was a simple builder who followed his leader’s orders by creating buildings for the Third Reich’s purposes.

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21 These assertions about narrative corroborate earlier theories. For instance, Michael K. White and Roger Epston contend that the stories that people tell themselves are, in fact, value-laden power-relations that create “meaning” out of their life-experiences. See Roger Epston and Michael White, Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends (New York: Norton, 1990), 27-32.


Webb-Mitchell and Hauerwas attest the necessity of narrative for the coherence and integrity of human identities. Their comments apply to the stories told to human beings of varied abilities through baptism and Holy Communion. As the regenerative sacrament that imparts God’s healing and strengthening love to human beings, frees people from sin, and unites us to Christ’s global and ecumenical Body, baptism tells each believer the story of Christ’s renewal of his or her life; baptism can remind human beings of our communal story’s joyous trajectory.

Moreover, as asserted in the Introduction, Holy Communion uses bread and wine to offer a liberating account of Jesus’ life-giving and liberating ministry, to allow people to share in his death that acknowledges and forgives sin, to strengthen fragile human bodies, and to empower people in their bodies to do justice in the world. Many of the personal anecdotes in this dissertation centre on my experiences in Eucharistic community, and seek to draw out the relational, ecclesiological, and eschatological implications of those memories. I tell these stories in order to determine the ways that churches can resist and transform ableist social structures.

Narratives matter to Christians with disabilities in sacramental communities that aim to embody God’s equality and justice. American-Canadian First Nations novelist Thomas King asserts, “The truth about stories is, they’re all we are.” 25 Human beings create, and can transform, our identities through the stories that we tell ourselves about our actions. As I make this claim, I recognize that not all people have the agency or verbal capacity to tell or re-tell their stories; some people with intellectual disabilities need loving communities to help them tell their stories. That said, stories help people to live out God’s hospitality: they

help Christians of all abilities to enter into the great stories embodied in the sacraments, because they provide us with imaginative exemplars of Jesus’ radically-open, generous way of life. Many of Jesus’ parables show how stories can help God’s friends to proclaim and perform human equality in sacramental communities. Jesus’ simple narratives, such as the Parable of the Sower in Matthew 13, both evoke imagination, and remind the Church of its moral orientation towards inclusion.

Significantly, Jesus’ narratives and his empathic listening-skills display both that imaginative openness that God desires in all communities, and the simplicity of the language that that generous imagination, born of fundamental human equality, calls forth. In terms of the use of language, less is more. Indeed, Jesus’ parables, compact and concise stories that share elliptical symbolic connections, concern God’s topsy-turvy Reign where those who work the vineyard at noon receive the same wage as those who work two or three hours. These stories about farmers, fishermen, and shepherds evoke the imagination of Christ’s vulnerable Body.

One parable in Matthew 13 illustrates both that author’s sacramental imagination, and Jesus’ brief, clear wisdom. The parable of the sower and the seed expresses God’s equalizing and self-giving love: the Sower spreads the “seed,” the Good News of Jesus’ embodied love for humanity and creation upon the path, rocks, thorny places, and field (Matthew 13:4-8, 18-23). That seed takes root. Jesus’ explanation of the parable in vv. 18-23 allows readers to place themselves within the story; one can also grasp the parable’s Eucharistic content.

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26For the connection of Jesus’ parables to God’s Reign, see Sallie McFague, Speaking in Parables: a Study in Metaphor and Theology (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1975), 13-15, 22, 68-71; see also Walter Brueggemann, e.g., “The Liturgy of Abundance, the Myth of Scarcity,” Christian Century 116, no. 10 (March 1999). Brueggemann claims that Jesus’ parables complicate moral issues in order to evoke their readers’ imaginations.
because the Sower sows love the same way that one would sow seeds of barley-wheat. Jesus’ gift of God’s Good News can reach all people, irrespective of context; I suggest that rather than allowing the “thorns” of physical and social cost to “choke” God’s pleasure at inclusion (Matthew 13:7, 22, NRSV), churches that want to embody God’s inclusion can offer access like that described here.

Jesus’ parable points out the linguistic and dramatic simplicity that is necessary for people with disabilities to experience intellectual access to equality. Simplicity is a wholehearted commitment to meeting people where they are; it is the incarnation of the imaginative capacity to enter genuinely into another’s narrative. People who can live simply, in the ways described, above, enact Jesus’ message of love, and can become like little children (see Matthew 18:3).

Indeed, some people with intellectual disabilities embody profound simplicity. For example, Vanier writes of his friend Peter in L’Arche Trosly. Peter tells Jean that, when he prays, he is listening to God. Jean asks him what he hears, and Peter replies that, in prayer, God says, “You are my beloved son.” In a similar way, Trevor Whitney, an Australian Uniting Church chaplain, experiences communion with Barry, an elderly fellow who responds to the Peace of Christ with, “No worries, mate.” This is what hospitality looks

27 In his commentary on the interpretation of the parable of the Sower in Matthew, Frederick Dale Bruner observes that all of the varied kinds of soil are receptive to God’s Word, but only the good soil bears fruit. It is the express intention of this thesis to increase the Church’s fruitfulness, in terms of the inclusion of difference, wherever it is possible! See Frederick Dale Bruner, Matthew: a Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1987), 491-92.

28 For more on the vulnerability and trust of those who possess profound intellectual disabilities, see again the story of Jean Vanier’s friend Antonio in Jean Vanier, Becoming Human (Toronto: Paulist, 1998), 88-100.

29 See Jean Vanier, From Brokenness to Community (New York: Paulist, 1992), 23.
like: if people with varied abilities accept the growing seeds of love that God has planted in us, then our growth through baptism and Holy Communion will help us to live out simple peace, trust, and dignity.

The sacraments provide a similar entry-point of simplicity in terms of intellectual access for people with disabilities. Since they are grounded in the simple drama of pouring water, reading the Word, and preparing and serving bread and wine, they can impart to people God’s desire for humanity to live into God’s *shalom*. The sacraments’ tangible elements remind people of all abilities of God’s grace. Through their simplicity, these rites can help people of varied abilities to live out the drama of God’s hospitality to humanity and creation in poignant ways.

As heralds of divine inclusion, the sacraments can recall Jesus’ baptism into his mission of inclusion and solidarity with all people who are vulnerable (Matthew 3:13-17, Mark 1:9-11, Luke 3:21-23; see also Luke 4:18-19). Since Jesus’ friends are called to emulate him, baptism coaxes people of varied abilities to live simple, mutual relationships of equality. Moreover, Communion invites us to share that Good News materially: the elements can help all believers to testify to the “foretaste” of the “final renewal of creation.”31 When the members of Christ’s Body share our stories, and travel together to God’s *shalom*, we can glimpse God’s Reign.32

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The Jeremiah Community offers another example of intellectual access to divine equality, in terms of simple narratives that heal and build relationship. In our weekly theological-reflection series called “Speaking of God” in spring 2014, one person each week chose to share some of his or her experiences of God simply with the community. During each person’s narrative, we were asked only to listen, and could then ask clarifying questions, before relating the speaker’s experiences to our own. Our ground-rules demanded that we use our imaginations in order to learn more about our vertical connection to God’s equality, justice, dignity, and joy. This weekly practice was a sacramental act because we received each person’s narrative simply and with joy, as the ground receives seeds. Through our narratives, my friends and I in the Community encountered each other in pain and promise, and felt embodied and honest connection.

In this section, I have shown that intellectual access to God’s equality is theologically significant in two ways for the lives of Christians of varied abilities. First, the equality promised to people of diverse abilities in sacramental communities depends on narratives that evoke personal knowledge and imagination; like the parables of Jesus, these accounts enact simplicity, a steadfast commitment to meeting people where they are in social and emotional terms. Second and subsequently, any narrative that describes God or God’s Reign demands simple language, as I shall articulate more stringently in a later section on intellectual access to God’s justice.

Significantly, the narratives of God’s people also depend on their emotive substance, ideally emerging from deep and fulfilling relationship. Affective access to God’s equality, a

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pivotal point of this dissertation, is born of friendship. Simple and authentic relations among believers with diverse abilities, emerging from our intellectual access in sacramental community can pave the way for profound affective intimacy that has a kenotic, or self-emptying, aspect.

3. Affective Access to Equality: The Dance of Friendship

From June 2010 until September 2012, I took part in my best friend’s dance-class: Anton, a tall and limber civil engineer, taught Modern Jive, a form of partner-dance like swing.\textsuperscript{34} Anton and I danced regularly with friends every Monday night. The dance-class forced me to integrate my spatial-orientation disabilities, described briefly in the Introduction, while the simple moves taught me patience with my often-clumsy body. I particularly enjoyed the move called the “basket.” Using both hands, I would spin my partner towards my right or left side; once she was safely tucked into my side, we would walk around the room, and perform other moves like the “breakneck” and the “octopus.”\textsuperscript{35} Because these moves required frequent physical re-orientation, all of the dancers had to pause at the end of each routine to regain our balance.

These dance-moves, and pauses for balance, apply as much to relationships as to dancing: healthy and loving relationships are erotic, because they contain respect, rapport, and pervasive emotional connection.\textsuperscript{36} Over time, I have learned to make space for this kind of comprehensive erotic connection, by offering others physical space to themselves, and

\textsuperscript{34}For more on this wonderful dance-form, see “About UT Modern Jive,” UT Modern Jive Club, accessed July 10, 2014, \url{http://torontomodernjive.com/?page_id=6}.

\textsuperscript{35}While I have danced with men, and while our dance-class was not gendered and was therefore open to people of all sexual orientations, most of my partners were women.

\textsuperscript{36}C.S. Lewis links \textit{eros} to \textit{philia} (the love derived from friendship) in theological and practical senses; see C.S. Lewis, \textit{The Four Loves} (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1960), 92-4, 99-102, 159-60.
giving them necessary time to feel their emotions. My friends and I are equals in an affective, erotic sense: when one of us is angry, we pause for balance; when one move makes one or both of us uncomfortable, we can perform another; when one partner will not dance, I can respect his or her “no,” and find another who will. In their erotic aspect, relationships are both complex and fulfilling.

For Christians of varied abilities, affective access to God’s equality through the sacraments is the ontological adhesive that joins, and strengthens, all the other forms of access. The passionate and bounded dance of affectionate friendship forms the sacramental embodiment of divine equality in human relationships. Some theologians have fruitfully considered relationship as a dance. For instance, Brett Webb-Mitchell has titled one book about his relationships with children with disabilities *Dancing with Disabilities*: he claims that the church can be “sanctuary” and “servant” of all Christians during the awkward dance of inclusion.\(^{37}\) Moreover, Paul Wadell defines the contours of friendship as a “selective and preferential love” where people: want the best for each other, enjoy spending time together, act for each other’s benefit in ways that free the other person, hold shared goods in common, and trust the other person’s strength and support.\(^{38}\) In a phrase, friends desire each other. In sacramental communities where people want to liberate human *eros*, Christians of all abilities can be people “for other people,” imitating Jesus’ “clear-sighted faithfulness and self-conscious devotion.”\(^{39}\)

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\(^{37}\)See Brett Webb-Mitchell, *Dancing with Disabilities: Opening the Church to All God’s Children* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1996), e.g., xiii, 5-7.


Baptism and Holy Communion impact the embodied and erotic dance of friendship among Christians of all abilities in two distinct ways. First, these rituals dramatize God’s desires to live out communion with human beings. Just as the sacraments offer us healing and strength and fire our imaginations, they also disclose God’s being and power in *perichoresis*, or mutual in-dwelling. Volf observes that the Godhead’s three persons complement each other.⁴⁰

Volf describes *perichoresis* as the divine reality of unity-in-multiplicity: God is both one and many, and contains a unifying purpose of creative love amidst multiple (indeed, infinite) aspects. Volf asserts that the Church can emulate the dance of the Trinity in a social sense, insofar as people in whom God’s Spirit dwells can act out the Trinity’s loving and mutual interdependence. Borrowing from Moltmann, Volf claims that catholicity, the Church’s integrity, means that each believer contains every other. All that said, Volf notes that there is no strict human correspondence to the dance of the Trinity.⁴¹ Thus, the relationships of people of diverse abilities inside and outside sacramental communities resemble, but are not identical to, the triune God’s mutual indwelling. The ideal dance of the Trinity is an ecclesial aspiration.

Baptism offers people of varied abilities God’s perichoretic love as steadfast embrace, wiping away our shame and marking us as Christ’s through the power of the Spirit.⁴² In the flowing conflation of water and scripture, Christ re-makes every believer of every kind of ability (in an ideal sense), overlaying human finitude with divine fullness and renewing us

⁴⁰ For his meditations on *perichoresis* and catholicity, see Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 194, 209-10.

⁴¹ For the information in this paragraph, see *ibid*, 193-94, 199-200, 208-10.

⁴² For the incredibly important concept of embrace, see again Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: a Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 140-44.
for a radically-open way of being where people of all abilities can offer God our deepest affections.43

Moreover, Holy Communion represents Jesus’ magnanimous gift of full life to people of varied abilities throughout our earthly life. After baptism renews and heals people with and without disabilities, Communion strengthens and sustains us so that we can offer God our vulnerability and availability in concrete, clear imitation of (though not identity with!) the Trinity’s perichoretic love. Baptism and Holy Communion represent the constancy and nearness of Jesus Christ, friend of humanity and all creatures; thus, they can help Christians with diverse abilities to know God’s recognition and affirmation in our bodies, and to love God in return, with all our multifaceted capacities (see Deuteronomy 6:4; see also Mark 12:28-34).

Second and subsequently, baptism and Holy Communion free human eros, helping us to love each other creatively and with generosity like the triune God’s. That is, the sacraments enable people of varied abilities to love God, and to love each other; they offer affective access to God’s equality. To put that another way, the sacraments allow us to befriend God and each other. This sacramental kind of friendship offers Christians with and without disabilities healing and concrete relationship that affirms our equality; the dance of friendship is the story of reciprocal attraction and commitment despite our pains, and because of our essential differences.

Friendship allows people of all abilities to offer an empathetic “Yes!” to Bono’s yearning question in U2’s song “City of Blinding Lights”: “Can you see the beauty inside of

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43Volf writes that Christ “re-centres” human beings through baptism, allowing every person’s individual identity to God’s ontological plenitude. See Volf, Exclusion & Embrace, 69-71.
The sacraments allow us to see each other’s beauty. They symbolize God’s material, immediate answer to our longing for acceptance. Christ assumes a human body, and offers that body for the life of the world; thus, he displays the beauty of the human body fully empowered by God’s Spirit. Moreover, since Christ offers us connective intimacy with and recognition by God, baptism and Holy Communion allow us to recognize God’s relational Image in each other.

Some theological scholars have described the ways that people with disabilities can embody affective access to divine equality, acknowledging our gifts, and realizing our interdependence, in the freeing dance of friendship with Christians of able body. For instance, Vanier explores kenosis and affective access to equality in a general sense through simple assertions about community. For example, he states that communion “means accepting people just as they are, with all their limits and inner pain, but also with their gifts and their beauty and their capacity to grow: to see the beauty inside of all the pain.”

Similarly, Trevor Whitney’s good-natured friend Barry and his fellow residents—such as Angela, who offers Whitney a geranium that she has pulled from a potted plant—accept each other as they are, beautifully and simply. Whitney observes that, in worship, Communion, and friendship, the residents find “freedom” from both the “restraints” placed on them by their physical and intellectual limitations, and the bureaucracy of the home. Whitney’s description of God’s welcome and his friends’ choice to embrace each other reveals the beauty of friendship.


45See Vanier, From Brokenness to Community, 16.

46For his observations concerning the significance of Holy Communion for (some) adults with intellectual disabilities, see Trevor Whitney, “Intellectual Disability and Holy Communion,” 250, 254-55.
Though it lies outside strictly sacramental community, my old dance-class also demonstrates some of the ways that believers of all abilities can embody mutual, affective access to God’s equality. First, the dance-moves allowed me to accept my physical limitations: a number of them increased my confidence and grace in motion. Just as I had experienced the freedom of Christ’s broken and shared body and blood with Anton and others, so the dance-moves reminded me of the joy of living in my body, and improved my coordination and strength. Baptism and Holy Communion reminded, and continue to remind, me of God’s gift of life; similarly, the dance-moves allowed me to experience the empowering resurrection-life that Jesus offers to all humanity. In the embodied eschatology described in Chapter Five and the Conclusions, I will return to the import of dance as an activity that embodies resurrection-life.

The dance-class example also has a relational aspect in terms of affective access to equality. One of my good friends, a sweet and empathetic young woman, attended the class with me. Before we started dancing together, she and I had had a serious conflict. That said, as we touched, moved away, and called out dance-moves, she and I experienced the same liberation of human *eros* that occurs in baptism and Holy Communion. Our physical dance foreshadowed the dance of communion; the material revelation of our trust and self-assurance briefly emulated the Godhead’s perichoretic dance, and disclosed the Spirit’s gift of mutuality. Through our affectionate dance, the Spirit helped my friend and me to truly recognize and care for each other.

This section has shown that affective access to divine equality has two components. First, affective access to equality through the sacraments is an erotic dance of friendship. Traditionally, *eros* has been regarded as an acquisitive desire that would gain its object;
However, the relational ecclesiology of this project seeks to draw out the self-giving aspect of *eros*, in order to create a framework to explore the catholic personality in the next chapter.\textsuperscript{47} In communities shaped by the sacraments, Christians of all abilities can grasp God’s promise of full and abundant life, and accept our bodies and selves as they are. Second and subsequently, these rituals facilitate affective access to God’s equality for Christians of varied abilities by freeing human beings’ erotic energies, such that we can both desire the God who desires us, and truly love each other with God’s love. The sacraments allow people of varied abilities to create affective relationships that reflect (but do not completely partake in) the triune God’s perichoretic love. This discourse about affective access also segues into spiritual access to equality.

4. **Spiritual Access to Divine Equality: the Embodied Truth of the Sacraments**

The last three sections have outlined the theological significance of equality—a connective symmetry of power that affirms human unity-in-diversity—for Christians of varied abilities in inclusive sacramental communities. First, physical access to God’s equality can offer us healing and relationship; second, intellectual access engages believers’ imaginations with God’s story of redemptive love in the sacraments. Third, affective access to equality through the sacraments allows believers of all abilities to know God’s love, and to recognize and love each other. These three interrelated dimensions of access imply a fourth: spiritual access.

Thus, this fourth section explores spiritual access to God’s equality for Christians of all abilities, access to the sacraments’ communal, eschatological, and ontological truth(s). The sacraments proclaim the theological truth of Jesus’ priority in Christians’ lives.

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\textsuperscript{47}For a fascinating discussion of the Platonic ideal of Love, see Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, trans. Philip S. Watson (London: SPCK, 1982), e.g., I.166-82, esp. 175, 179.
Furthermore, they transform that truth into a joyful spiritual reality as church-communities embody dignified and full human life. God’s love for people with disabilities comprises spiritual access to equality; that access points to the healing and liberation made possible in sacramental communities. I will examine (a) baptism’s invitation into human equality, and (b) Holy Communion’s physical extension of that call, through the three forms of access defined above. This section will be shorter than the other sections on access to equality, because it fills out the implications of the other three modes of access, and cumulatively sums up the other dimensions.

In different ways, both baptism and Holy Communion express the truth that Jesus Christ is the centre of Christian life. Baptism first expresses this truth by embodying Jesus’ transformation of human beings’ essential differences. Just as Paul claims in Galatians 3:27-28, Jesus unites all believers of all ages, sexes, ethnicities, income-brackets, sexual orientations, gender identities, and abilities in baptism. Jesus’ full life in inclusive church-communities proclaims a vital alternative to ableist Enlightenment cultural and ecclesial narratives.

Baptism into Christ’s Body can free people with disabilities from our slavery to the Enlightenment narratives discussed at length in Chapters One and Two by creating the space for physical access to churchly community. Baptism physically introduces Christians with disabilities to the community of healing that grants us real relationship. It heals and regenerates us: through baptism into Christ’s death and resurrection—a death that disabled him, and a resurrection that allowed him to live out fully human life—Christians with disabilities can re-learn the goodness of our bodies.48 Our bodies are contingent and fragile,
and are thus interdependent; the Church is the matrix of that sociality.\textsuperscript{49} My explorations of the import of athleticism for resurrection-life in the fifth chapter will offer further support for these claims.

Second and subsequently, baptism frees Christians with disabilities for intellectual access to equality by embodying an imaginative account of God’s redemptive work in and through human relationship. Baptism recounts John’s baptism of repentance, and Jesus’ baptism at the Jordan, where the Spirit descends on him like a dove (Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-23; John 1:29-33). The rite also retells the Spirit’s descent on the disciples at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-12), and other instances of baptism (e.g., Acts 10:23-48, 16:14-15).

Third, baptism frees people with disabilities for spiritual access to God’s equality by granting us affective access. Jesus’ vital gift to humankind allows every believer to both retain his or her personal integrity and affirm other perspectives; Volf calls this empathy “double vision.”\textsuperscript{50} Because baptism coaxes us to accept Jesus’ gift of full and abundant life, it invites affective rather than cognitive response.\textsuperscript{51} The embodied, freeing, and inspired empathy into which baptism invites Christians of diverse abilities informs our sharing in Holy Communion. The Communion elements make manifest human connections in terms of physicality, memory, and relationship.

\textit{The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability} (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 89-105. For the link between Christ’s resurrection and human finitude, see Barth, \textit{Church Dogmatics}, vol. 3.2: 585, 597, and 606.

\textsuperscript{49} For more on the interdependence of human spiritual gifts, or \textit{charismata}, see Volf, \textit{After Our Likeness}, 222-33, 236, and 240; see also Paul Wadell’s assertion about human interdependence and friendship in Wadell, \textit{Becoming Friends}, 44. For a description of the link between disability and autonomy, see again Reynolds, \textit{Vulnerable Communion}, 81-4.

\textsuperscript{50} For his crucial concept of “double vision,” see Volf, \textit{Exclusion and Embrace}, 207-19, 250-53.

\textsuperscript{51} While Roger Peters makes this argument about the Lord’s Supper rather than baptism, I can affirm that his argument applies to baptism too. See Peters, “Self-Advocacy through Participation in the Lord’s Supper for Persons Who are Conceptually Non-Expressive,” \textit{Journal of Religion, Disability, and Health} 13.3-4 (2009), 300-1, 308.
Just as baptism creates the human person anew, freeing the person from self-centredness and for relationship, so Holy Communion feeds and sustains that orientation towards catholic relationality. Subsequent to baptism, Holy Communion enunciates the theological reality of spiritual access to God’s equality for Christians with diverse abilities, by testifying to God’s abundance through its generous disclosure of the three kinds of access discussed above.

First, Holy Communion facilitates physical access to equality by recalling human connections to the earth and to each other. Human beings are part of the Earth; because our planet is vulnerable to us when it produces the Communion bread and wine, all people are called to care for and preserve our planet.\(^{52}\) Communion also proclaims human equality and divine abundance by offering communicants equal access to physical nourishment. In its remembrance of Christ’s fellowship with and sacrifice for us, the meal reminds Christians of varied abilities of God’s steadfast desire for all to eat well; it embodies the truth that there is enough food for all.\(^{53}\)

Second, Communion can create spiritual access to divine equality for Christians with disabilities by allowing our intellectual access to equality. The re-membrance of Christ’s self-giving death on the cross allows us to recall our experiences of symmetry of power, and to recreate Jesus’ open table-fellowship. Memory, ignited by imagination, can allow believers to re-enact divine equality; shared memories of flourishing can affirm our desires


\(^{53}\)For more on God’s desire that his children end extreme material poverty, and share their food, see McKenna, *Rites of Justice*, 101-18.
for social change. Joyful memories of eating with friends in just ways can empower us to work for justice.

Third, Holy Communion creates the conditions for affective access to God’s equality for Christians of varied abilities through Christ’s love for us in the meal. Christ embodies God’s gracious desire for human equality: his body, broken for all humankind, demands our mutual suffering in weakness and dancing in joy. When one person feels chronic back pain, or the ache of addiction, all the members of Christ’s Body suffer together, as we are all joined together by Christ’s love. Moreover, when equality is restored—when, for instance, middle-class and street-involved people dance together at a house-party—all the members of Christ’s Body rejoice together in ecstatic empathy, exercising vulnerability and solidarity. Moreover, the Communion elements liberate human eros, which Jay Johnson has called our “erotic energies,” allowing us to re-member our bodies’ goodness and attractiveness, and to love our bodies as they are.

Thus, baptism and Holy Communion allow sacramental communities to reveal spiritual access to God’s equality by uniting and clarifying the other modes of access. These rites invite church-communities into divine equality by creating physical access through touch and memory; they enact intellectual access by enabling communicants to share, and so embody, our memories of equality; and they allow people of all abilities to live out affective access by both revealing our ability to place other people first, and showing us that our bodies are good and desirable. All of these sacramental phenomena also display the outworking of God’s justice in ecclesial communities. Thus, the next major section of this

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54 For several “dangerous [American] memories” of disability, and for her own clear definition of Johannes Metz’s phrase, see Jennie Weiss Block, *Copious Hosting: a Theology of Access for People with Disabilities* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 38-49.
chapter concerns justice; this transition is necessary because it outlines the theological contours of believers’ joyous actions towards God’s *shalom*. This coming time of harmony, dignity, and joy can be present to believers in our bodies and our communities, both now and in God’s glorious future. Building on equality’s connective and empathetic symmetry of power, this next section will explore the theological ground of physical access to God’s justice for Christians of diverse abilities.

**B. The Sacramental Imperative to Justice**

The Introduction defined justice as the social performance of God’s radical equality, and as systemic interpersonal and social access to power. The triune God’s justice is the embodied praxis of divine equality, involving both total equity and fair distribution of resources; the sacraments invite all believers towards embodied justice. This section will articulate the theological significance of the four modes of access to justice for people of diverse abilities within inclusive church-communities. First, I will discuss the theological aspect of our physical access to God’s justice, illuminating God’s *shalom* briefly through the lens of self-advocacy, and examining French critical theorist Michel Foucault’s resistance to normative corporeal discipline. The next few paragraphs will affirm both the social aspects of physical access through solidarity, and its constructive facets in terms of principles of universal design.

Second, this section will examine intellectual access to justice, exploring Kathy Black’s positive metaphorical use of the language of disability, in order to reveal the theological contours of justice that appear when people with disabilities are rightly named. I will also investigate the linguistic valence of access as what Titchkosky calls “a form of
perception” through a sacramental lens. Third, every narrative about disability and access to ecclesial resources concerns human relationship: thus, as I have clarified regarding affective access to divine equality, the relationships of people with disabilities in inclusive sacramental church-communities can show us how to befriend each other, and can name relationship as the sharing of power. Fourth, as the cumulative outgrowth of the other three modes of access to divine justice, spiritual access to justice can grant Christians of varied abilities in sacramental communities the capacity to give and receive meaning and truth in relationship. I will now re-tell a story of physical access to God’s justice, part of the story of Jenny’s neon-blue wheelchair.

1. Physical Access to Divine Justice: Enacting Openness to Difference

In Dancing with Disabilities, Brett Webb-Mitchell writes of a girl named Jenny who has cerebral palsy. In 1996, Jenny was a six-year-old who gave the other children in her church rides on her “electric blue wheelchair.” In order to secure money to buy Jenny an accessible van for increased mobility, her family organized a church-wide softball tournament. Webb-Mitchell uses Jenny’s moving story (pun intended) to observe that the members of Christ’s Body cannot instrumentalize each other by claiming that our worth emerges from our productivity. When Christians of all abilities act in solidarity, we can (re-)learn our true value as God’s children, rather than relying on ableist assumptions about contributing to an economy based in normalcy. Webb-Mitchell asserts that God’s economy, typified by the parable of the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16), manifests divine generosity: the owner of the vineyard gives one denarius, a living wage for a day’s work, to each laborer.

55See Titchkosky, Question of Access, 3, 145-47.
56For Jenny’s poignant and pointed story, see Webb-Mitchell, Dancing with Disabilities, 31-35.
irrespective of efficiency. Thus, while the workers hired first may complain about their treatment, God’s gift enacts shalom as economic wholeness.57

This story represents the substance of physical access to God’s justice for people with disabilities. God’s economy of grace allows both mutual solidarity and what the People First movement in Connecticut, a member-run support group for people with disabilities, calls “self-advocacy”—allowing those people with disabilities who can do so to take charge of their own lives.58 God’s grace empowers Jenny to help her church friends by giving them rides, and allows her friends to help her by giving her an accessible van. When Christians of all abilities can express their gifts in community, they honour divine justice. Because Jenny’s congregation can include someone with unexpected gifts, it reflects the Church’s catholicity. In this case, the Church’s wholeness is broadened because Jenny’s church allows her to be herself.

As a man with cerebral palsy, I relate strongly to the justice manifested in Jenny’s story. Furthermore, my intentional Christian community has revealed to me the import of physical access to justice. In the Jeremiah Community, we re-arrange our limited worship-space in order to help people move freely, and to allow them to hear and see clearly; we have also developed rules concerning touch and consent, on which I will expand in the next chapter. Our embodied desire for integrity and dignity offers us glimpses of God’s abundant Reign.

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57 For his brief, gentle exegesis of this parable, see Webb-Mitchell, Dancing with Disabilities, 33-34.

This project articulates both the light side of physical access to justice for Christians with disabilities—like the solidarity described above—and its shadow side. People with disabilities face our ambiguous bodies, which Foucault has called “the human monster,” every time we act. When he writes “monster,” Foucault uses the terms of the eighteenth-century scientific community. Monsters subvert and disrupt norms, resisting and critiquing the Law’s coercive powers. Foucault capitalizes “Law” because he wants his readers to recognize the hegemonic force of normalcy. 59 Monsters’ bodies evade classification and defy coercion. 60 Foucault allows his readers to critique the Law by observing its violence towards human bodies. 61

Foucault insists that the bodies of people with disabilities are not monstrous, because they can be assimilated by force. Disabled persons, unlike monsters, have a place within the Law. 62 That said, often people with disabilities may feel like monsters, because our bodies do not fit normative aesthetic standards, and may be forced to conform to ableist biases in order to partake in society. 63 Following Foucault, biologist and critical theorist Margrit Shildrick observes that people with disabilities often feel pressure to allow the Law to shape our bodies. 64

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60 For Foucault’s use of this fascinating term “monster,” see again Michel Foucault, Abnormal: Lectures at the College de France 1974-75, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2004), 55-64.


62 See Foucault, Abnormal, 63-4.


64 See Shildrick, “Transgressing the Law,” 36-37.
Jacques Derrida’s generous vision of hospitality complements Foucault’s research into normative coercion, for Derrida displays an empathy that militates against the Law. In his essay “Force of Law,” Derrida claims that Justice is always “avenir,” a French infinitive meaning “to come.” Justice is never fully realized, but is “not yet.” Chapter Five on embodied eschatology will show how justice becomes an eschatological orientation and construct. Derrida’s hospitality welcomes “perhaps even the terrorist,” and so may create an unsafe, violent space for human bodies. In order to promote shalom rooted in God’s love for all, and to limit violence, I aim to restrict Derrida’s limitless openness. Thus, following Volf, I advocate for bounded encounter: Volf argues that truth and embrace are essentially related. The other person “matters more than my truth,” so people who disagree can affirm each other’s views in order to preserve peace. That said, embrace is not boundless: Volf claims that “God’s way of knowing” allows people to affirm their interlocutors’ convictions, while also preserving their integrity. True justice requires secure, protected relationships, and creates the space for divergent perspectives.

I wish to emulate Jesus’ generosity; that magnanimity demanded the inclusion of people like lepers, Samaritans, and those who were blind. As Kathy Black points out, Jesus enacts justice for people on his society’s margins, and all who demand Jesus’ attention in the healing stories receive it. As illustrated by Jesus’ encounter with the leper in Mark 1:40-45,

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67 For Volf’s perspective on truth-claims and the necessity of prioritizing relationship above claims about meaning—including the two quotations printed here—see Exclusion & Embrace, 215-20, 223-5, 250-53, 270-72.
narrated in Chapter One, when Jesus acknowledges and welcomes people, he transforms their physical and social statuses. Unlike Derrida’s hospitality, Jesus’ welcome forces his society to encounter the calculating monster within, and leads to his self-giving death on a Roman cross.

In light of both the radical inclusion suggested by physical access to God’s justice for people with disabilities, and Foucault’s exploration of bodily discipline, the story about my wheelchair-mobilized friend at a TST college has a (somewhat) happy ending. In response to the our incomplete worshipping experiences in the college’s boardroom, the faculty—empathizing with our strong desire for inclusion—suggested that the college’s students worship in the classrooms on some Tuesday afternoons. Thus, we performed a disability-themed worship-service in a classroom in April 2012. My friend delivered a powerful homily on inclusion, for which I read 1 Corinthians 12, her text; meanwhile, another friend who is blind chose the music. Because we embodied our argument about disability and justice in a hospitable worship-space, we acted out true inclusion. By enacting mutual value and shared power among people of varied abilities in our chapel-community, we lived into justice, becoming Christ’s Body through love.

These classroom-based services demonstrated the sacramental character of the hospitality emphasized in this project. My wheelchair-user friend, hard-of-hearing congregants, and everyone else could hear and sing the music; the lighting and heating were quite adequate; and the sermons in classroom worship applied directly and clearly to our lives. Although my friend left the theological college without her degree—and even though,

68 Indeed, many of those Jesus heals do not seek his attention: Bartimaeus does, and the woman with the flow of blood does, but the man with the withered hand (Luke 6:6-11) and the Deaf man do not (Mark 7:31-37). For the deaf man in particular, see Black, Healing Homiletic, 94-97.
as Derrida claims, justice was still “to come” and did not fully emerge during that time—we still shared an eschatological foretaste of justice in our community through that special worship-service.

These unique worship-experiences also showed that universal design is an aspect of sacramental justice in inclusive Christian churches. Because architectural changes to ecclesial space can reflect Jesus’ openness to difference, communities that practice the sacramental invitation to inclusion ought to create spaces with adequate lighting, non-slip and level flooring, and/or wheelchair-ramps (among other changes). The material cohesion of a welcoming physical and ecclesial space that helps people attend to the needs of all bodies can augment the sacramental and social solidarity created by engagement with believers with diverse abilities.

The sacramental inclusion that is the theological aspect of physical access to God’s justice allows Christians of all abilities to examine our hearts, and forces us to ask how we will create relational and physical space for those whose bodies and minds are different. When Christians of varied abilities become friends, and when Christians with disabilities offer our gifts to our communities, all the members of Christ’s Body can participate in God’s dynamic and ecstatic Reign. Moreover, physical access to divine justice leads to intellectual

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70 This contention emerges from a conference presentation. See Michael Walker, “Grace in a Place: the Sacramental Facilitation of Physical Access for People with Disabilities to Ecclesial Spaces,” (paper presented at Toronto School of Theology Spring Conference, Toronto School of Theology, Toronto, Ontario, March 14, 2014).

71 In this light, I appreciate Amos Yong’s challenging questions to people with able bodies at the end of his book Theology and Down Syndrome: Yong asks, “Will you repent of your complicity in discriminating against people with disabilities? And following from that, what will you do with the gifts God has given you to renew the world?” See Yong, Theology and Down Syndrome, 295.
access: when people of varied abilities can use our embodied knowledge, memory, and imagination to create community in churches, we can glimpse God’s love in profound ways.

2. Intellectual Access to Justice: Meaning What we Say

As I have stated, the theological significance of intellectual access to God’s justice emerges from its narrative and symbolic links to imagination, knowledge, and memory, as well as from the linguistic simplicity that people with disabilities can encounter in inclusive sacramental churches. In particular, imaginative stories of equality and justice convey simplicity: they use language easy to comprehend—allowing all participants to engage their affective as well as rational gifts—and attest to the context of each participant, as well to the paradigm of the whole community. These gifts allow inclusive churches to be as welcoming as possible. This discussion will foreground my own experience as a person with intellectual disabilities and significant gifts for cognitive, affective, and abstract thought. Although not all people with intellectual impairments share my experience, all can—through their symbolic understanding of the sacraments, and through communal support—participate in God’s life in the Church.

In a social sense, intellectual access to divine justice for Christians with disabilities can occur in two significant ways. First, in terms of access to knowledge, memory, and imagination, the social sharing of power among Christians of varied abilities can be made concrete—and, indeed, nearly holistic—when all the members of Christ’s Body use language in the sacramental community that affirms, rather than denigrates and excludes, people with disabilities.

Some theologians indirectly demonstrate the perils of slippery disability-language. For instance, Stanley Hauerwas repeatedly neglects the clear use of pronouns in his
arguments about intellectual disability; while his use of outdated words like “retarded” also impairs his argument, his vague pronouns—especially his overuse of “we” and “us”—confuse his audience, and make his utopian church-community more remote. For instance, in the essay “Suffering the Retarded,” Hauerwas claims, “Prophet-like, the retarded only remind us of the insecurity hidden in our false sense of self-possession.”\(^72\) One may wonder who “us” is in that sentence: Hauerwas creates a false dichotomy between people with and without disabilities, a binary that I—as a theologian with intellectual disabilities—find unfair. My life does indeed attest to human contingency, but I do not simply remind people with able bodies of their insecurities; rather, at my best, I offer others a living example of God’s dynamic and passionate generosity, dignity, integrity, and joy.

Hauerwas’ imprecise pronouns valorize knowledge premised on production; many Christians of able body live into this knowledge. His pronouns dilute his narrative’s transformative and imaginative possibilities. By contrast, Roger Peters asserts that Christ’s Body unites, across the whole cognitive spectrum, in the practice of Holy Communion.\(^73\) I affirm some of Hauerwas’ conclusions about suffering in “Suffering the Retarded.”\(^74\) That said, I affirm Peters’ point more strongly, for it echoes my own experiences. For instance, the Jeremiah Community’s praxis of Holy Communion would be overly cerebral if it excluded our friends from the street, because they often add a simple joviality and a necessary openness to the meal.


\(^73\)See Peters, “Self-Advocacy through Participation in the Lord’s Supper,” *JRDH* 13, 303, 308.

\(^74\)See Hauerwas, “Suffering the Retarded,” 105.
In sharp contrast to Hauerwas’ ambiguous grammar of different abilities, Kathy Black advocates for positive language for Christians with disabilities. Her compassionate book *A Healing Homiletic* reverberates with her conviction that Christian congregations ought to use language that edifies and dignifies people with disabilities rather than using our conditions as metaphors for lack, sin, suffering, and tragedy. For instance, Bartimaeus’ and the Deaf man’s limitations, in Mark’s Gospel, reveal their social stigmatization rather than their refusal of God’s grace. Furthermore, the single leper healed in Mark’s Gospel speaks to the suffering of outcasts—notably, twenty-first century people who have AIDS—rather than symbolizing sinfulness purified by Jesus’ love.\(^7^5\) Jesus’ friends of all abilities need a “spirituality of friendship,” a discipline embodied as loyalty, openness, gentleness, and empathetic attention.\(^7^6\) Jesus’ affirmation of his new friends, and Black’s re-casting of societal metaphors of disability, displays the sacramental, embodied episteme of disability as a locus of God’s creative being; in sacramental community, people of varied abilities can live out a spirituality of relationality.

Black’s artistry in re-interpreting some of these metaphors of healing points to the second way in which intellectual access to God’s justice can appear in inclusive sacramental communities: intellectual access to justice matures, for believers with diverse abilities, when we can live out our “wonder,” privileging affective, imaginative forms of cognition alongside rational thought. As asserted in Chapter Two, I affirm Tanya Titchkosky’s argument that access is a form of perception.\(^7^7\) Moreover, I echo Marjorie Procter-Smith’s appropriation of

\(^7^5\) For Black’s characterization of these people encountered by Jesus, see *Healing Homiletic*, 86-7, 102-3, 139-40.

\(^7^6\) See Block, *Copious Hosting*, 160-62.

\(^7^7\) See Titchkosky, *Question of Access*, 3, 145-47.
that liberative language: from a feminist perspective, Procter-Smith affirms justice-as-imaginative-perception by naming and reclaiming the liberative linguistic aspects of the knowledge imparted to women through the sacraments. Procter-Smith states that baptism proclaims “the gospel of freedom and equality,” while Holy Communion, the partial fulfillment of baptismal vows, celebrates women’s thanksgiving, re-membrance, fellowship, and comprehension of Christ’s death.\footnote{See Marjorie Procter-Smith, In Her Own Rite: Constructing Feminist Liturgical Tradition (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 153-4, 157, 160-63.} Specifically, she argues that the *epiclesis*—the invocation of the Holy Spirit in the Communion meal—acknowledges “a change in us” (“us” being the community of believers).\footnote{For an explicit definition of the *epiclesis*, see John F. Baldovin, “Eucharistic Prayer,” in The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship, ed. Paul F. Bradshaw, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 192-99; for the quotation from Procter-Smith, see Procter-Smith, In Her Own Rite, 163.}

In light of these considerations, I assert that access—the conditions where people can give and receive in community—is, in part, a radically-generous, imaginative form of knowledge that opens the way for “unexpected participants” in Christ’s Body, such as people with disabilities, to become “expected.”\footnote{For this serendipitous phrase, see again Titchkosky, Disability, Self & Society, 100-5. For Scriptural expansion on God’s radical generosity, see also (among many other passages) Luke 14:15-24.} Furthermore, when people of varied abilities welcome and desire each other in church-communities—when, in self-giving love, we befriend each other—we feel, know, and perform affective access to God’s justice, and realize God’s good pleasure.

3. Affective Access to Justice: the Deep Knowledge of Relationship

Affective access to God’s justice builds on the theological significance of both affective access to equality, and the intellectual access to justice described above. Affective
access to divine justice for people with disabilities manifests in church-communities that embody sacramental hospitality because—in the self-giving love to which the sacraments invite all humanity—people of varied abilities can discover a deep passion for connection and mutual respect in affective relationships that emulate the Trinity’s perichoretic movement. Affective access to God’s justice also becomes concrete in sacramental community because of disability’s open, (com)passionate episteme: the feeling of healing and liberation offered in loving Christian communities can expand our embodied knowledge, and ignite our communal imaginations, so that people of all abilities can envision solutions to unjust social structures.

Brett Webb-Mitchell and Joseph Shapiro, among others, assert the positive and just aspects of Christian friendships, across varied ranges of ability, in transformative and sacramental communities. First, when Webb-Mitchell allows a child to teach him something, rather than imparting knowledge to him or her, he glimpses affective access to justice. For instance, he empowers George, a tousle-haired boy with ADHD who wants to build a church at Devereaux Hospital, by engaging his love of Jesus and of trucks, and by proudly displaying George’s ingenious artwork (including fascinating blueprints!) to others. His sharing of power with George along the sacramental journey of friendship inspires George’s continued healing.81 While Webb-Mitchell’s encounters with George do not explicitly concern baptism or Holy Communion as relational loci, they reveal Webb-Mitchell’s sacramental creation of what Block would call “a spirituality of friendship” that respects George’s gifts and agency.82

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81See Brett Webb-Mitchell, God Plays Piano Too, 120-23.

82For Block’s spirituality of friendship, as well as its Christological and pneumatological bases, see again Block, Copious Hosting, 130-33, 138-39; see also 160-62.
Second, outside of an ecclesial context, Shapiro tells inspiring stories of people with autism and other disabilities that have similar sacramental components. For example, he recounts his interviews with Sam Dashner and Mary Sauerbier, two people with autism. Sam works in a hardware store, and Mary welds fuses for nuclear submarines, under the aegis of community-supported work programs where their supervisors give them tasks fitted to their unique gifts. Jim, the mechanical savant institutionalized in Minnesota until he is reintegrated into his family, offers another striking example: his family empowers him to build machines like bikes and cars, to find new work, and even to date a sweet woman named Robin with an intellectual disability.

All the people described above have experienced the transformative power of friendship that baptism and Holy Communion make possible. When people of varied abilities become friends in communities that enact the sacraments’ “prophetic and empowering” witness to equality and justice, they can transform interpersonal barriers into spacious places where people can experience a house concert, go bowling, or eat ice-cream together. People of all abilities can re-member each other in sacramental communities because these rituals invite them into redeemed, full, integral, and dignified life. Indeed, as many of the previous examples have shown, the sacraments can help all people to affirm their identities, and to embody justice.

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83 For the stories of Sam, Mary, and others who work in community-supported work programs, see Shapiro, *No Pity*, 144-51. For the negative portrayal of its shadow—the abuse of people with autism through “aversive therapies” like SIBIS, exemplified by the Behavioural Research Institute in Rhode Island—see again *No Pity*, 152-58.

84 See Jim’s amazing story in Shapiro, *No Pity*, 289-321; for his first meeting with Robin, see 318-9.

85 While Marjorie Procter-Smith writes of baptism, her words apply to both rituals. See Procter-Smith, *In Her Own Rite*, 148. Also, Amos Yong’s brother Mark, a man with Down Syndrome, can bowl a 118. See Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 80. Moreover, for a very special ice-cream social at the Montreat Conference Centre, see Webb-Mitchell, *Dancing with Disabilities*, 121-26.
For Christians with and without disabilities, the sacraments clarify Jesus’ multifaceted and limitless love, a love that reveals, understands, celebrates, empowers, communes, and forgives.\textsuperscript{86} The erotic, embodied sharing of power that reveals divine and human vulnerability, in sacramental community, is the theological significance of affective access to God’s justice for people with disabilities. Here, Volf’s discussion of \textit{perichoresis} is pertinent again because the Trinity’s transcendent intersubjectivity continually enacts justice. Since God is love made manifest in multiple aspects within the Trinity, so the Church is also called to emulate the polycentric manifestation of \textit{shalom} in its mandate to foster righteousness and dignity for all creation.\textsuperscript{87} Our emulation of the Trinity begins with relationship, for passionate communion with others empowers believers of diverse abilities to bless and heal each other with Christ’s love.\textsuperscript{88}

I have repeatedly glimpsed the love that is affective access to God’s justice. For instance, one of my good friends in Wine Before Breakfast gives me the best hugs I have ever received. Whenever we pass the Peace of Christ, she enfolds me in a generous and intentional embrace that fills me with warmth. My friend shows me an empathetic love that is patient, gentle, and kind (1 Corinthians 13:1); thus, she reveals to me, and to others, the power of love that allows all God’s creatures to become themselves. In fact, Love’s contribution to human identity can help all the members of Christ’s Body to create spiritual access to God’s justice.

\textsuperscript{86}For this revelatory list of love’s powers, see Vanier, \textit{Becoming Human}, 20-31, especially 27.

\textsuperscript{87}For Volf’s exposition of \textit{perichoresis}, see again, Volf, \textit{After Our Likeness}, 194, 209-10.

\textsuperscript{88}Vanier claims explicitly that the Eucharist is a meal of re-membrance. See Vanier, \textit{Befriending the Stranger} (Ottawa: Novalis, 2005), 127.
4. Spiritual Access to Divine Justice: Transformation and Re-membering

The theological significance of spiritual access to justice for Christians of varied abilities in inclusive, sacramental church-communities builds on the importance of affective access. Just as the sacraments embody the equality that represents our spiritual access to the theological reality of God’s love, so they also allow for human participation in that holy quest for justice and redemption. Believers with diverse abilities live in a fragile and ambiguous world tainted by sin; our embodied episteme of vulnerability, mediated by baptism and Holy Communion, can empower us to transform the world around us in accordance with God’s good intentions.

As we learn to love our bodies, Christians with varied abilities can envision transformative changes to societal structures that allow all people to live in dignity and joy. Conversely, the transformation of ableist social structures can enable people to love their bodies, and to live into the theological truths embedded in baptism and Holy Communion, rather than embodying demeaning, destructive patterns. To further enunciate those truths, this last section will examine the theological import of the spiritual access born of the sacraments.

First, baptism creates the conditions for spiritual access to divine justice by facilitating the inclusive solidarity of physical access. Because baptism heals and regenerates the perceptions of people with disabilities about our bodies, it can also transform our paradigms of societal structures. Inverting the Apostle Paul’s axiom, I assert that in Christ, there is both ability and disability: because Christ has absorbed human vulnerability and limitation into the divine life, Christ invites all God’s friends to take on God’s divinity by being reborn through water and the Spirit (John 3:5). Whenever a believer of any ability faces a barrier to his or her access to God’s dignity and joy—for instance, inhospitable curbs,
staircases, or poor lighting—the whole, catholic community can recall our baptisms into interdependence, and act in solidarity.

Second, baptism can create spiritual access to divine justice by granting intellectual access to people of diverse abilities. Because baptism can remind churches of the goodness of human bodies in all their ambiguity and frailty, it allows congregants to rethink hegemonic concepts of beauty and success. For instance, Diane DeVries learned from her parents that her body was normal. Thus, her learning to dance and her description of herself as a person resembling the *Venus de Milo* redefine the limits of ableist aesthetic standards.⁸⁹

For my part—although I have felt, and sometimes still feel, self-pity concerning the vagaries of my ambiguous body—I can run, bicycle, lift weights, perform chin-ups, and row. My body, like all other human bodies, is beautiful. In order to combat the pernicious postmodern lie that appearance or social status makes people human, inclusive churches must continually affirm the simple truth that everyone is beautiful, using every available mode of narration.⁹⁰ The fourth chapter will explore the ecclesial and epistemological import of the resistance of believers of diverse abilities to the idolatrous partial truths of appearance and success; moreover, by describing communities of mutual desire, it will aim to redeem these lies.

Third, baptism fosters spiritual access to divine justice for Christians of varied abilities by allowing us to recognize and desire each other. By coaxing us towards mutual vulnerability and solidarity, baptism creates the space for intimate relationships—the kind God truly wants from us, with us, and for us. For instance, Bartimaeus and Jesus’ encounter

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⁸⁹For DeVries’ astonishing analogy, see again Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 36-8.

⁹⁰For more on the potential desirability of human bodies through the lens of the Eucharist, see Johnson, *Divine Communion*, 53-56.
evinces this realization of the perceptual change born of *eros*. Black observes that Jesus asks Bartimaeus a question that all people with disabilities want to hear: “What do you want me to do for you?” (10:51, NRSV).

Enacting a sacramental form of friendship, Jesus puts aside his privilege of divine self-communication, and perceives Bartimaeus’ desire for friendship in his sightedness. Once the blind man discloses his need to “see again,” Jesus completely heals Bartimaeus and offers him a joy-filled journey into Jerusalem. Bartimaeus throws away his cloak, and trusts Jesus, in complete joy. By contrast, the apostles James and John refuse to trust Jesus’ vision of justice. Jesus asks them a similar question—“What is it that you want me to do for you?” (10:35)—and they demand God-given power (10:35-37). Thus, Jesus’ second question, “Can you be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” (10:38) rings in their ears as they follow him to Jerusalem. For Christians of all abilities, spiritual access to God’s justice means receiving and embodying Jesus’ vision of equity, and sharing power with others.

Like baptism, Holy Communion represents, and re-members, spiritual access to justice by connecting and grounding the other forms of access. First, Holy Communion recalls believers to spiritual access to justice by re-membering past and present instances of physical solidarity. When he literally and metaphorically breaks his body and pours out his blood, Jesus embodies God’s eternal love for humanity and creation. Jesus’ action re-members the past, connecting the Exodus narrative of Hebrew liberation from Egyptian slavery to his efforts to subvert the Roman oppression of his own time. To see how Jesus connects the redefined Passover narrative to the Jewish Exodus—especially in terms of Matthew’s and Mark’s focus on God’s covenant—see William R. Crockett, *Eucharist: Symbol of Transformation* (New York: Pueblo, 1989), 1-3, 6, 17.
groups, LGBTQ people, women, refugees, and others who are oppressed.\(^92\) Physically and socially, Holy Communion represents Jesus’ continual invitation to his friends of all abilities to make all other people present.\(^93\)

Holy Communion creates the conditions for spiritual access to justice for Christians of all abilities in a second way by motivating intellectual access to justice. The meal of thanksgiving reminds us of our imaginative faculties: the sacrament allows us to re-member instances of justice in our own lives, and to envision times and spaces where our loved ones and friends know justice. The bread and wine empower people of varied abilities to join with those who are oppressed, such as Syrian refugees who flee the onslaught of ISIS.\(^94\)

Moreover, the spiritual access to justice promised by Holy Communion is eschatological. Our creative discernment of tools to resist injustice—tools that the fourth chapter will clarify—can grant us access to God’s future where all have enough to eat and drink, where buildings help rather than hinder human progress, and where all who can work can do so with dignity. Communion calls Christians of varied abilities to love and cherish other creatures. Ultimately, the memory of Jesus’ body and blood, generously and openly

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\(^93\)For a moving portrait of what it means to hear people called, “Presente!” even when the government has “disappeared” them, see again Christine Smith, “Preaching: Hospitality, De-Centering, Re-membering, and Right Relations,” in Purposes of Preaching, ed. Jana Childers (St. Louis, Chalice, 2004), 102-3.

shed for all and shared by many people of varied abilities, invites us to act out God’s transformative plan for the future.

Many meals I have eaten with friends in the Jeremiah Community exemplify this dramatic dream of intellectual and spiritual access to justice for Christians with and without disabilities. For instance, in late June 2014, a number of us ate barbecued chouriço sausages and couscous salad in the parking lot of our church in Parkdale, Toronto, before we shared a night of wine, poetry, and other writing. During this spontaneous and celebratory event, all of us—especially our friends from the street—gave each other dignity by telling jokes, sharing stories, and reading Scripture. Our night of creativity became an experience of full Communion.

Third, Holy Communion embodies spiritual access to justice for Christians of varied abilities by facilitating the deep relational knowledge of affective access to justice. As they empower people to relate intimately, baptism and Holy Communion bear witness to kenosis, Christ’s self-emptying love that emerges from equality and interdependence. Similarly, the sacraments attest the emotional integrity of Christ’s Body, our dwelling with each other in joy and pain. When one member suffers, Christ’s Body is pained; when one celebrates, all rejoice (1 Corinthians 12:26). Once people of varied abilities recognize our unity in the transformative bread and wine of Communion, we can truly desire each other, and become better friends.

The mutual desire encouraged and engendered by Holy Communion can, and often does, resemble what Volf has called embrace. People with disabilities can engage each other as friends: we can open our arms to each other in loyalty, edifying and strengthening our friends rather than using others for our own selfish purposes; we can wait for each other,
seeking to fully know each other’s needs before we engage in activity. Ideally, through the solidarity promised and provided by Holy Communion, Christians of varied abilities can embrace each other; the Eucharistic community allows us to be part of each other even when we are separated, and resonates as a love full of trust, in our hearts, after we have gathered together.

Let me give a personal example of spiritual access to God’s justice. In autumn 2014, one of my good friends—a sweet and quiet young woman with extraordinary gifts for empathetic listening and counselling—became involved in an upsetting argument between two of our street-involved friends after a long day. Later, I called her, and expressed my concern for her mental health; my friend both thanked me profusely for calling, and reflected on her stressful experience. In that moment, we both understood the erotic and embodied promises of availability and vulnerability, just as we would as we shared a meal around the Lord’s Table. Despite her fatigue, my friend graciously received my call. Simultaneously, I strengthened my friend by listening and offering her my empathy; during and after our conversation, I knew the mutuality of our (figurative) embrace, and I hope that she did too. In a small and subtle way, we both experienced a part of the C/communion that God promises us.

Wadell writes of Aelred of Rievaulx’s distinction between “spiritual friendships”—friendships where people encourage and empower each other to grow in Christ—and “worldly friendships,” friendships where people only enter into relationship to secure their own needs. See Wadell, Becoming Friends, 103-110.

For Volf’s four stages of embrace, see again Volf, Exclusion and Embrace, 140-44.
C. Conclusion: Widening the Aperture to Practical Aspects of Multifaceted Access

In this chapter, I have explored the theological significance of physical, intellectual, affective, and spiritual access to God’s equality and justice, for people with disabilities in church-communities that enact the sacraments’ erotic invitation to God’s gracious inclusion. Equality is connective and mutual symmetry of power in relationship, without uniformity. It means that two or more beings flourish interdependently: they have similar worldviews, bear each other’s best interests in mind, and support each other in joy and sorrow. In short, people who live into God’s equality are also friends, companions who embody an affective bond. People who live in relationships of equality can, in parity, engage in creative self-expression.

For people with disabilities, physical access to God’s equality in ecclesial community means healing and genuine relationship. Christians of all abilities can engage in erotic and empathetic encounters that both empower us with new reserves of resilience, and lead to growth and wholeness. Moreover, intellectual access to God’s equality allows people of varied abilities to grasp God’s love through imagination: equal relationships create the space for people to imaginatively trust each other, and to engage with each other simply. Furthermore, affective access to God’s equality—the dance of friendship that resembles the Trinity’s mutual in-dwelling—can empower all believers to know and to return God’s love for humankind to some degree, and to love each other with authenticity. The sacraments also offer people with disabilities spiritual access to equality by uniting and clarifying these forms of access.

Significantly, the theme of justice augments access in a particular way. Justice is the communal embodiment of shalom, God’s wholeness and integrity, and the social
performance of shared power among friends and allies who live into relations of equality. Thus, physical access to God’s justice means solidarity among Christians with and without disabilities, which can lead to novel ways to engage physical spaces, such as the principles of universal design. Concurrently, intellectual access to justice—access to liberating knowledge, memory, and imagination—means that, in sacramental communities, Christians can re-frame both our language, and our perception, of disability. Affective access to God’s justice points firmly to the empowering, erotic, and relational love in sacramental community that allows people to tell each other their unique stories, and to experience profound intimacy. Finally, baptism and Holy Communion invite believers into spiritual access to divine justice: these rituals call all people, of all abilities, to both imagine the complete transformation of ecclesial power-structures, and to remake these structures through generous gestures of mutual embrace.

All of these reflections about the theological significance of ecclesial access to equality and justice for Christians of varied abilities have profound implications for ecclesial praxis. The next chapter, named for a singular line in a poignant song, will discuss the practical ways in which the sacraments reveal and realize God’s equality and justice for people with disabilities, and so also realize human interdependence and unity-in-diversity. Chapter Four will clarify the indistinct boundary between theological reflection and ecclesial action in terms of multifaceted access for people with disabilities. Drawing further on Vanier, Volf, and other theologians and scholars, the next chapter will explore both how human beings’ mutual support creates an empathetic portrait of God’s love, and how the Holy Spirit’s gifts to Christians, the charismata, can help people of diverse abilities to display God’s radiant, relational, and revelatory Image.
Chapter Four: One, But Not the Same:  
Connecting Disability’s Alternative Episteme to Access

The previous chapters of this dissertation have focussed on the development of a transformative and sacramental ecclesiology of disability. First, in order to explore how the sacraments invite people to realize God’s equality and justice in church-communities inclusive of disability, I have discussed theological accounts of human embodiment. The Genesis accounts of humanity’s creation and fall, portions of Isaiah 40, and Jesus’ redemption of human bodies in his life, death, and resurrection are components of a theological anthropology, from which emerges my paradigm of an ecclesiology of disability. Second, I have also surveyed the ways in which the Church has included or excluded people with disabilities in light of its mandate as Christ’s earthly Body to empower all humanity. Third, I have defined and examined the theological and sacramental bases of the physical, intellectual, affective, and spiritual access of people with disabilities to divine equality and justice. One vital facet of this paradigm is the reality that intimate relationships, including compassion and respect for difference, ground that access.

This chapter will propose several avenues towards the practice of access to equality and justice in inclusive sacramental communities. Just as U2’s Bono Vox cries in the song from which this chapter’s title is taken, God’s beloved friends are most certainly “one,” even though “we’re not the same.” The first half of the chapter will highlight how “we get to carry each other” (cf. Galatians 6:2). Bearing each other’s burdens socially and spiritually entails

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1I recognize, and affirm, Peter C. Hodgson’s careful distinction between the ekklesia, the Church as it is, and the basileia, the Church as it ought to (and will) be. That said, in this project, I aim to push the ekklesia, however minutely, towards the Reign of God in terms of the multifaceted access I have proposed. See Peter C. Hodgson, Revisioning the Church: Ecclesial Freedom in the New Paradigm (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 35-44.
helping each other in small—ordinary and seemingly insignificant—ways. It also involves helping each other without “taking over”—without acting out abuse, domination, or (their obverse) submission (see Romans 12:7)—and aiding each other by offering and accepting affection, by responding to each other’s cries of, “Help! I need somebody.” Indeed, as we learn to desire each other rightly, Christians of varied abilities can engage in creative practices that emerge from perceptions transformed by the dynamic blessing of self-offering love (see Romans 12:1-2). In order to give each other genuine and practical access to God’s equality and justice, Christians with and without disabilities need to offer each other communal aid.

Building on those habits of mutual aid, the second part of the chapter will show how Christian imitation of the Trinity’s perichoretic motion resembles “dancing with the stars.” The aim of this second half is to portray covenantal relationships where people are generously open to others, which Miroslav Volf calls “catholic personalities.” Believers of all abilities imitate the triune God’s perichoresis, complementing each other and creating new strength and grace through relationship. In truly catholic communities, Christians of all abilities need affective boundaries that help them to “give a little bit,” as Roger Hodgson of Supertramp implores his listeners. These boundaries are assisted by the creation of chesed—

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2For both of these profound lines of verse, see U2, “One,” Achtung, Baby! (Dublin: Island, 1991), 17-18.


4Charles Fensham lists significant missional habits for postmodern Christians. See Charles Fensham, To the Nations for the Earth: a Missional Spirituality (Toronto: Clements, 2013), 52-56, esp. 54-55.

5For a concise description of the “catholic personality,” see again Miroslav Volf, After Our Likeness: the Church as the Image of the Trinity (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 279-82; for a vivid description of the Trinity’s mutual interiority, see again ibid, 191-200, 204-13.

roughly translated as “covenant-faithfulness”—in what I will call “faithful communities,” communities greater than the sum of their members. Christians of diverse abilities bonded in sacramental *chesed* can “walk through walls”—can transform ableist social and ecclesial structures through concrete praxes—by virtue of their embodiment of the *charismata*, the Spirit’s potent gifts to the Church.

To develop all these insights, this chapter will explore Jean Vanier’s and Volf’s ecclesiological perspectives. It will also engage Paul Wadell’s concept of friendship, Tanya Titchkosky’s paradigm of access-as-perception, and Brett Webb-Mitchell’s narratives of radical inclusion. First, I will explore Vanier’s and Volf’s insights on community, on “carrying” or “helping” each other. This part is significant because the *practice* of God’s equality and justice for Christians with diverse abilities depends on the empathy formed in community, the empathy explored throughout this text. Life together in loving, sacramental community requires support and interdependence. Second, this chapter will engage a spirituality of friendship through Volf’s concept of the “catholic personality”: the openness to others that Volf discusses can create empathetic friendships in inclusive sacramental communities. Third, this chapter will discuss the boundaries that Christians need in order to genuinely help and befriend each other. Clear boundaries matter because they allow Christians of all abilities to embody symmetrical power-relations, and to dynamically share power and knowledge. These arguments will anticipate the eschatological discourse of the fifth chapter because, in Christian praxes of access to justice and equality, all people can glimpse God’s already-and-not-yet, joyous, and abundant Reign.
A. We Get to Carry Each Other

In U2’s Top Ten hit “One,” Bono sings repeatedly, “We get to carry each other.” Here, Bono touches on a paradox with great implications for affective access, making in one lyrical line a bold assertion about the cohesive force of human relationship. All people are interdependent, and so get to carry each other in pain and promise, conviction and confusion, love and longing. I assert that Christians of all abilities get to carry each other in sacramental communities embodying equality and justice by offering each other mutual aid in small ways. Thus, my examination of the practical implications of sacramental access to equality and justice begins with a description of meeting and helping our neighbours, a small but powerful act.

1. Help in Small Things

As discussed in the third chapter, Volf argues emphatically that humanity can embody peace and justice through embrace, a physical and metaphorical construct whereby two people share each other’s lives through affection and trust. In turn, in order to embrace others, Christians of varied abilities ought to both understand and embody their own convictions. Critical reflection on one’s own convictions allows one to support those of others. As I have noted, Volf calls this stance of critical reflection “double vision.”\(^7\) He claims that, empowered by the *charismata*—the Spirit’s fluid, immanent gifts to God’s friends and lovers—all believers can live out this openness to other people.\(^8\) Affirming Volf’s argument, I contend that communities shaped by the sacraments’ *eros*-filled, embodied

\(^7\) For a definition of embrace, see again Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace: a Theological Exploration of Identity and Otherness* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) 140-44; for “double vision,” see *ibid*, 250-53.

\(^8\) See Volf, *After our Likeness*, 155-57, 228-34, 279-82.
access to equality and justice can open themselves to others through small acts of service that realize this radical and sacramental episteme.

Helping each other in the details of communal life entails a clear paradigm of physical access. For instance, Vanier observes that, usually, people want to get out of their houses and talk to their neighbours. He asserts both that welcome—an ability to reach out to the other openly and with love—is a sign of spiritual maturity, and that service enlivens community. For Vanier, “service” includes everything from doing dishes to inciting laughter at table by throwing around orange peel. Small actions that welcome, forgive, and mend can create practical space for physical, intellectual, affective, and spiritual access to equality and justice for all believers.

Small actions, like breaking bread and pouring wine or water, facilitate our access in several ways. First, one small, sacramental action that emphasizes human equality is the transformation of physical space. For instance, members of both Summerside Presbyterian Church in my hometown of Summerside, P.E.I., and Trafalgar Presbyterian Church in Oakville, Ontario, have made relatively-recent renovations to their sanctuaries in order to bring them up to current accessibility building-codes. These changes really display part of God’s inclusion!

Adequate lighting, wheelchair-ramps, and wide aisles may all seem like small improvements, but they make the spaces more hospitable for all who use them. The lighting fills the space in both churches, and the slightly-muted colours complement the rich and

9For these pastoral assertions, see Jean Vanier, Community and Growth (New York: Paulist, 1989), 116-7, 261, 265, 297-8, 324.
resonant sonic landscapes of each sanctuary. Large-print hymnals, in use by many denominations, allow Christians with varied visual acuity to sing and play music. Since music is integral to human and Christian life, its communal enjoyment opens the way for goodness, equality, and justice.

Furthermore, assistive technologies such as wheelchairs, hymnals, and even physiotherapeutic equipment can also create the conditions for physical access for Christians with disabilities. Jenny of the electric-blue wheelchair, whose story is interpreted in Chapter Three, testifies to the physical and relational bonds that assistive equipment can foster. In my own life, my parents’ extraordinary material generosity extends to helping me to buy (for instance) the yoga-ball and resistance bands I use every day. These devices increase both my strength and flexibility, so I have the physical power and grace to consistently make the bus trip to my church. Assistive technologies allow believers entry-points into sacramental community.

Second, Brett Webb-Mitchell offers his readers a deeply significant small aspect of sacramental life together: he asserts that the practical intellectual access of Christians with disabilities to equality and justice emerges from truthful narrative. All of God’s friends ought to receive the dignity they need to tell their stories in their own way, or to have their caregivers narrate their accounts. Webb-Mitchell supports his argument by examining the

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10 While the sanctuary in Summerside Presbyterian has relatively-inaccessible steps that lead up to the altar, there exists much greater physical access in that sanctuary than in its former incarnation.

lyrical, yearning, and allusive poetry of a young Jewish man he calls “Ben.” Similarly, Webb-Mitchell notes that campers of varying abilities at the Swedish summer-camp called Ahus (“Arrow”) offer each other equality and justice by (for instance) reading and acting out the news together, and by putting on a soccer game that fully includes the range of physical abilities.

Moreover, because prayer is an embodied activity, contemplative prayer using objects also offers Christians of diverse abilities practical intellectual access to equality and justice. For instance, in the Jeremiah Community, I have prayed using paper, stones, crosses, candles, and other objects as meditative foci. Through our tangible orisons, my friends and I can connect imaginatively, even sacramentally, to the creation and its creator. Intellectual access to church-communities in small, simple ways is imperative for Christians with disabilities, irrespective of level of cognitive function. If Christians of all abilities can tell their stories in their own ways, and see, smell, taste, and touch God in physical objects, then we can incite each other’s imaginations to work for God’s equality and justice, channel our anger and pain into material things, and welcome others physically and symbolically into God’s lively dance of friendship.

Third, since affective access binds together the other facets of access, it is often the small affective acts that strengthen community, and allow Christians of varied abilities to

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13 For these amazing stories, see Brett Webb-Mitchell, “Formation and Transformation at Camp Ahus,” in Dancing with Disabilities: Opening the Church to All God’s Children (Cleveland: United Church, 1996), 70-74.

14 For the importance of what one of my friends calls “takeaway objects” in contemplative and other forms of prayer, see Mark Pierson, The Art of Curating Worship: Reshaping the Role of Worship-Leader (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2010), 105. I am indebted to Joshua Walters for this information.
advocate for God’s equality and justice in places where they are not visible. For instance, in May 2014, I attended a meditation-group in our church sanctuary. A friend and I spent thirty to forty-five minutes in complete silence; during this time, I felt various emotions, many of which were painful experiences of exclusion by my family and friends. Thus, I cried as I prayed. Remembering our covenant in Holy Communion, and re-membering me, my friend listened to my cries. She gave me a glass of water and a hug, and listened to how I felt. As my friend embraced me in my pain, I felt a deep connection that illustrated the liberative healing of Holy Communion. My friend accompanied me through my pain in sacramental silence; in our bond, in that moment, I felt anew the risen life of the Lord Jesus that takes shape in bread and wine.

Fourth, the sacraments allow Christians with disabilities to implement practices of spiritual access to God’s equality and justice through the theological truth and spiritual reality of God’s Reign. Even though every church-community knows human frailty and division, and even though sacramental communities that include people with disabilities testify to our pain as well as our promise, baptism and Holy Communion still unite humanity’s essential differences under the communal bond of love for Christ. As observed in Chapter Three, the water, bread, and wine used in these rituals realize God’s love, healing, and liberation in a material sense, and re-member people of varied abilities. The most significant practical thing that the sacraments do is re-member human beings: they inundate people of all abilities with Jesus’ salvific power by both reminding us of the inexpressible gift of our embodied and interdependent existence, and inviting us to strengthen our vital, eros-filled connections to the earth and the divine.
This re-membering, born of the erotic energies freed by the touch and taste of Jesus’ sacramental love in water, bread, and wine, reminds human beings of our embodied salvation in Christ, and recalls Christians of varied abilities to our salvific work, in the present, of creating flourishing and right relationship for all humanity and all creation. The re-membering of others practiced by Christians with diverse abilities, and so acting for justice, emerges from our generous and open episteme that affirms our love of our bodies and welcomes all other people as they are. Our love for each other and newcomers to the table comes from God’s recognition of us in small ways through the baptismal waters of memory and imagination, and from Christ’s continual, compassionate offer of sustenance to all his friends in Holy Communion.

Liberated by our regenerative baptismal vows, and by our embodied and affectionate praxis of the Eucharistic meal, Christians of varied abilities can act together in small ways to embody God’s radiant shalom in the world. Liturgical theologian Lawrence H. Stookey observes that the Eucharist possesses (indeed, enacts!) a wide temporal range: every time Christians of varied abilities celebrate Holy Communion in the early twenty-first century, they—we!—perform a ritual with the “great cloud of witnesses,” with God’s friends and lovers across every age (Hebrews 11:4-12:2). In a practical sense, Communion’s temporal range promotes spiritual access to equity for believers of diverse abilities because it strengthens us through memory and community. Christians who act for justice do so with the whole communion of the saints.15

This section has shown that human capacities for architectural change, quiet, contemplative prayer, friendly embrace, and communal celebration all emerge from our

15For the temporal range of the Eucharist, see Lawrence Hull Stookey, Eucharist: Christ’s Feast with the Church (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 25-26, 28.
affirmation of God’s welcome and acknowledgement in the sacraments. Because God has helped us in the largest possible way in Jesus Christ, and continues to nourish and support us in small ways in sacramental community, Christians of varied abilities can help each other and practice right relation with each other in like manner. The mutual practice of God’s erotic and embodied welcome hopes for, and anticipates, the transformation of all believers’ physical and perceptual paradigms. Because they portend God’s equality and justice, baptism and Holy Communion testify to our need for physically-inclusive spaces, like the redesigned Presbyterian church building in my hometown.\footnote{For images of this beautiful and well-lit space, see Summerside Presbyterian Church, “Our Church Photos,” Summerside Presbyterian Church, \url{http://summersidepresbyterianpei.ca/our-church-photos/}, accessed December 8\textsuperscript{th}, 2014. Gordon Lathrop also observes the dialectical relationship between sacrament and physical space: see Gordon Lathrop, \textit{Holy Things: a Liturgical Theology} (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), 91-97, 107-10.} The sacraments empower people of all abilities to create physical, intellectual, affective, and spiritual access to justice for each other, because the members of Christ’s Body re-member their calls to Christ’s hospitality. Baptism and Holy Communion can also offer Christians of all abilities access to epistemological change—that is, they can transform human perceptions and enable inclusion rather than domination, abuse, or submission.

2. Help Rather than Take Over

In Eugene Peterson’s ingenious and idiosyncratic translation of Christian scripture called \textit{The Message}, Romans 12:7 reads thus: “If you help, just help, don’t take over.”\footnote{For Peterson’s illuminating translation of Scripture as a whole, see Eugene H. Peterson, \textit{The Message: the Bible in Contemporary Language} (New York: NavPress, 2005).} Paul recommends humility to his friends in Rome, a humility that attests to transformed perception. As Charles Fensham asserts in his analysis of Christian missional habits, “Christian spirituality requires being disturbed in mind and heart to such a degree that it leads
to transformative action.” As a verse, Romans 12:7 is located in the context of Paul’s discourse on the Body of Christ, a discussion explored in the second chapter. Since each part of Christ’s Body has a function (12:4-5), one part (say, the head) cannot usurp the function of another (say, the foot). Rather, Jesus’ embodied love in the sacraments allows the charismata (spiritual gifts) of every member of Christ’s Body to flourish, so that each person can bless the world in God’s name.

Earlier chapters in this dissertation on theological anthropology and ecclesiology have shown how, even in the Church, as Christ’s missional Body, the viewpoint of people of able body is dominant, and subtly directive. Even though people with disabilities also possess various spiritual gifts—gifts like Jenny’s enthusiasm, Ben’s penchant for poetic expression, and Marilyn’s athleticism—we are told that our bodies and minds do not matter. Paul suggests that the bodies of some members of the Church, including people with disabilities, are actually deemed weaker and less honourable by human standards than they are from a divine viewpoint. Ableist norms often govern perceptions. Even as Paul argues passionately that disabled bodies ought to be considered more honourable (1 Corinthians 12:22-23), in the ekklesia, people with impairments are still excluded from the practice and possession of physical and perceptual privilege. The sacraments can offer healing to inclusive churches by coaxing people of able body to help their disabled brothers and sisters without domination, coercion, or submission.

Even in communities founded on the embodied love disclosed in baptism and Holy Communion, Christians with able bodies are used to “taking over” for, rather than “helping,” Christians with disabilities. This domination can occur in two interrelated but distinct ways.

18See Fensham, To the Nations For the Earth, 55.
First, as asserted in Chapter Two, able-bodied members of Christ’s Body may patronize us, because their paternalism presumes that we have no independent agency and are reducible to our disabilities. Indeed, even in the Church, our limitations are often seen as flaws.

Jennie Weiss Block and Joseph Shapiro have independently catalogued many demeaning actions that able-bodied Americans have visited on those with disabilities, from tying people to their beds in places like the Willowbrook Institution in New York, to corporate denigration in the guise of athletic affirmation, as in the Special Olympics.¹⁹ In the ekklesia, many Christians with varied abilities are demeaned through patronization, like children; as my wheelchair-user friend from the Toronto School of Theology could attest, we often find that our able-bodied neighbours meet our physical, intellectual, affective, and spiritual needs with lip-service or a pat on the head.

Second, Christians with able bodies often assert their greater power over believers with disabilities by “taking over.” That is, they do for us what we can already do for ourselves. Even well-meaning ministers and laypeople interrupt our right to self-determination. For instance, many people with disabilities, such as my wheelchair-user friend from my college, can easily advocate for themselves, because they possess greater cognitive function than others. At the other end of the cognitive continuum, Jean Vanier writes of people with profound intellectual disabilities like Armando, who—although he could not speak, walk, or eat—awakened in a “busy” Catholic bishop both tenderness and trust during

¹⁹Shapiro notes that Sue Swenson, parent of a Special Olympian, complains that the Special Olympics subtly diminishes the accomplishments of young athletes with disabilities, and furthers their segregation from able-bodied athletes. For more on the patronization of people with disabilities, see Jennie Weiss Block, Copious Hosting (New York: Continuum, 2002), 38-52, 144-46; Joseph P. Shapiro, No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement (New York: Times Books, 1993), 175-80, 199-207, 298-316, esp. 178; and Tanya Titchkosky, Disability, Self & Society (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2003), 44ff, especially 100-14.
a visit to Rome. Christians with disabilities must be able to exercise what Block calls “consumer control” in order to flourish. Practically speaking, Christians of able body need to ask us, “Do you need help? How can I help? What can I do for you?” (Mark 10:51), prior to simply “doing for” us.

Nonetheless, living in anticipation of shalom, of wholeness and joy, all Christians can re-train their perceptions to acknowledge each other with affectionate welcome. Generally, Vanier observes that people of all abilities possess gifts of welcome, wisdom, prayer, or service that can foster God’s equality and justice. For instance, people who have the empathetic gift of listening can offer people confidentiality. Moreover, some discerning people are “quick to understand what is really needed.” These gifts of service allow Christians of varied abilities to offer themselves to each other without dominating, ignoring, or passively surrendering to each other. These gifts of hospitality help Christians of all abilities to counter ableism in small ways, and to glimpse God’s relational shalom in both material and intellectual senses.

a. The Use of Spiritual Gifts in Physical Access

Christians with disabilities can use the sacraments’ physical and intellectual incarnation of access to resist domination in several ways. First, in our communities, we can assert the diverse gifts that Vanier has named to counter ableist preoccupations with rationality and efficiency. Volf declares firmly that the Holy Spirit offers God’s gifts to all

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20 For this touching anecdote, see Jean Vanier, From Brokenness to Community (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 27.

21 Block’s term “consumer control” possesses unfortunate capitalist connotations. That said, for a definition of this fascinating term, see Block, Copious Hosting, 72; for its practical application in the Quickie wheelchair—whose clever slogan was once, “If you can’t stand up, stand out”—see Shapiro, No Pity, 211-17.

22 For these significant gifts, see Vanier, Community and Growth, 253-54.
believers in non-hierarchical ways. Often, in human communities, menial tasks get less respect, although they are deeply significant. While it is important that some people get to study (for instance) architecture, quantum physics, and Christian ethics, these gifts have equal value in God’s eyes with cooking others’ meals, cleaning buildings, or shining shoes. In God’s eyes, the menial labourer is equal to the professional. Both have value in God’s topsy-turvy Reign.

Christians with and without disabilities can facilitate physical access to God’s equality and justice in ecclesial space by adapting the space in drastic ways to fit the needs of every member of Christ’s Body. While the discourse on “universal design principles” in Chapter Three was meant to highlight the theological significance of access, in this case I intend to point out the material aspect of that social reality. The spiritual and perceptual reorientation of Christians of all abilities through the sacraments can facilitate the transformation of churchly architecture.

For instance, liturgical historian James White observes that American Shaker communities embody simplicity and a focus on the Spirit’s movement. An open space in the centre of a sanctuary, with benches along the sides, could both alleviate physical stresses on many Christians with disabilities, and exemplify Christ’s essential equality and justice. Similarly, the Presbyterian church in Summerside, P.E.I., my hometown, has windows that allow natural light to flood the space. These sight-lines could allow many of God’s friends with varying levels of visual acuity to worship freely. Additionally, unlike its blocky and

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23 See Volf, After our Likeness, 217ff.

angular predecessor, this new church-building has no basement. The architect has ensured that Christians of all ranges of ability share one entrance, so that all believers can maintain their individual dignity. Moreover, because the entrances all have ramps, Christians with mobility issues may feel especially empowered. These simple architectural changes reflect the attitudinal change made possible through altered perception; because it manifests recognition and respect of difference, the transformed church-building manifests what Bonhoeffer calls “costly grace,” the grace that requires risk and reorientation towards the sacramental love of Jesus Christ.\(^\text{25}\)

Similarly, James Huffstutler and Howard Rice confirm the importance of believers of all abilities’ experiencing physical and perceptual access to Christian worship-spaces through sacramental community. In order to invite the Spirit into worship-spaces, Christians need to ask each other what they want to happen in worship, and whether or not all believers can participate fully.\(^\text{26}\) The answers to these important questions should strongly influence, if not dictate, how Christians of all abilities can encounter each other in shared worship-spaces; a later section on a spirituality of friendship will clarify this assertion. These epistemological changes in sacramental church-communities transform the “unexpectedness” of disability—its terror and surprise for many believers of able body—into the expectation of God’s joyful Reign.\(^\text{27}\)


\(^{27}\)For an idea of the fearful surprise people with able body may feel in our presence, see again Titchkosky, *Disability, Self & Society*, 100-5; see also Sharon V. Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007) 1-21, 196.
b. **Embodying Patience: Examples of Intellectual Access**

Second and subsequently, practical intellectual access to God’s equality and justice in sacramental communities emerges from concrete changes in the Church’s *perception* of disability. In order to embody our generous episteme with dignity, Christians with disabilities need to create the space for epistemological change. Should Christians with disabilities fail to attend to the ways that our ambiguous bodies and minds can facilitate what I have called the “dance of difference,” we continually risk having our opinions ignored, or misconstrued, by even well-meaning people of able body. Just as Robert Goss urges queer activists in the Church to “ACT UP! FIGHT BACK! END HATE!” so Christians with intellectual disabilities and our allies can create new sites of mutual and self-giving knowledge and imagination.²⁸

In order to create this imaginative and incendiary space in practical ways, Christians across the ability-spectrum need to create the space for patient encounter. Jennie Weiss Block advocates for this patience, observing that many people with disabilities require “extra time” to perform activities. She asks Christian ministers to “[m]ake this accommodation willingly, in a way that does not make the person feel uncomfortable. Be willing to slow things down . . . or to move from one location to another.”²⁹ For instance, when I eat with friends in the Jeremiah Community, we eat slowly, in order to create space for conversation and genuine encounter. Many of us are lonely, and some of us experience serious mental-health needs or addictions. By listening and sharing our stories, and by thus becoming what Hauerwas and


²⁹See Block, *Copious Hosting*, 145.
Vanier call “friends of time,” we discover mutual points of attraction and empathy. Indeed, this endurance allows Christians of varied abilities to resist the commodification of time, and to relax into the shared dignity and joy to which baptism and Holy Communion invite all of God’s friends.

Block observes ways that sacramental communities can open up extra time for social performance. She recommends “direct and simple” communication to the allies of people with disabilities. She asserts, “Stay focussed on the person and give them time to understand and answer.” I possess logical and spatial disabilities: thus, for instance, it takes me extra time to orient myself when I eat with friends, and I may not always intuit the correct way to do the dishes after the meal. When I play games or worship with others, I may become confused, and may ask my friends to explain the situation to me more slowly, or more simply. That said, that time is necessary, because it allows me to interpret rightly these physical and affective cues.

Although many people with profound intellectual disabilities do not respond to this kind of abstract reasoning, they (we!) can still contribute to communities that embody Jesus’ sacramental inclusion, to a praxis of seeing, hearing, and respecting difference.

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31 Alan Kreider insists that early Christians lived as hybrid people in their local communities by virtue of their patience. See again Alan Kreider, Patient Ferment of the Early Church (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 97-107.

32 See again Block, Copious Hosting, 147-48.

33 For instance, Hans Reinders ponders the affective and abstract capacities of a young woman he names “Kelly”—a young woman who has neither fine motor control nor speech—and argues that her apparent lack of these functions does not impinge on her humanness. See Hans S. Reinders, Receiving the Gift of
Block makes clear: “Do not assume that [people with disabilities] do not have an opinion or good ideas and suggestions.” Christians with disabilities can create the conditions for good ideas—ideas empowered by God’s equality, justice, and love—to surface of their own accord.

Mary Therese Harrington, member of the Society of Helpers, observes that some Christians with profound intellectual disabilities carry their desires for trust and patience into their interpretation of symbols. Harrington writes that a catechist for people with intellectual disabilities ought to embody empathy, creativity, gentleness, and a hospitable disposition. Thus engaged, the catechist will encounter Christians with disabilities with thoughtfulness and joy.

A gentle and empathetic catechist can use symbols such as “flowers . . . warm bread . . . [and] cocoa” to invite Christians with intellectual disabilities into the process that leads to baptism. Practically speaking, the catechist’s evocation of these symbols integrates patient relationship with others, the embodiment of mutual power, into catechesis: for instance, probing the diverse symbolic meanings of sunlight together with people with intellectual disabilities allows their thoughts and true personalities to emerge, because all participants can delve into sunlight’s positive and negative meanings. As Harrington notes, while the sun can

34See Block, Copious Hosting, 147-8.
36For the portrait of a catechist, see Mary Therese Harrington, “Affectivity and Symbol in the Process of Catechesis,” in Developmental Disabilities and Sacramental Access, ed. Edward Foley (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994), 117. For the catechist’s empathy and attention to emotion and symbol, see 123.
37For this evocative list of potential symbols, see Harrington, “Affectivity and Symbol,” 117. For these symbols’ affective potential, see 125.
help people of all abilities to feel happy, and can enrich relational encounters, it can also burn people’s skin! Symbolic exploration within catechesis allows for patient, gentle interpersonal encounter.\(^{38}\)

Moreover, as I have asserted in Chapter Three, symbolic reinterpretation in sacramental community allows believers across the ability-spectrum to argue strenuously for the inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in church life. Again, William Stringfellow calls baptism one’s “public commitment to humanity”; he means that, through its invitation to Jesus’ love, baptism can remind Christians of all abilities of our solidarity with people who suffer, and who resist oppression.\(^{39}\) Part of our baptismal commitment to inclusion, and to the patience highlighted in this section, can issue tangibly in the practice of open Communion. All Christians, irrespective of ability, can share in the broken bread and poured-out wine. Our baptismal vows can remind us to use our imaginations for God’s good, redemptive purposes.

For instance, my relationship with a good friend in the Jeremiah Community, a man with an intellectual disability, can illuminate the patience and affectionate use of symbol in sacramental community described above. First of all, this friend, an older man, calls on those of us with greater understanding of social cues for patience. Because he loves to talk, and often struggles to listen to the nuances in people’s speech, he may miss the meaning of some social cues. Often, when I speak to him, I need to ask him to “hold on for a minute” before I can attend fully to what he is saying, or join him in an activity. Despite his great verbal and

\(^{38}\)For both of these significant aspirations, see Harrington, “Affectivity and Symbol,” in Foley, 128; for her claims that the catechesis of people with intellectual disabilities provokes communal imagination, see 123, 125.

\(^{39}\)See again William Stringfellow, An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land (Waco, TX: Word, 1973), 161.
relational gifts, my friend often finds that his intense desire to be with others and to converse interrupts the larger dynamic of a situation. Furthermore, my friend displays great patience with others in their harried busy-ness, including frantic worship-services and enervating business-meetings. Whenever I greet my friend, he responds with, “Mr. Michael!” with a gentle twinkle in his eye. Whether I am happy, angry, confused, sad, or joyful, my friend will always treat me the same way, unreflectively and humbly displaying his spiritual gift of self-giving compassion.

Significantly, in terms of the patience I have described, my friend knows Anglican liturgy intimately and repeats it with fondness. He has rung the church-bells for many of our worship-services; he also responds to each liturgical movement with a loud “Amen,” and sings along joyfully—and, to our collective consternation, off-key—to most hymns and songs. His understanding of Anglican liturgical symbols allows him to channel his extroversion, good humour, and love for all people into empathetic affirmation in our worship-context. With his spiritual gift of enthusiastic self-donation, and his love of others, my friend steadfastly represents the passionate divine eros that beckons the whole Church towards true inclusion.

This section engages the ways that symbol can help people of varied abilities to live patiently together in sacramental community. All Christians, of all abilities, possess gifts and messages worthy of celebration. Imagination helps believers to embody God’s Image, facilitates the use of symbol, and allows them to help each other. That said, imaginative visions of justice require perceptual transformation: only by envisioning changed attitudes towards multifaceted difference can Christians envision, and enact, access to God’s equality and justice. When Christians of all abilities desire each other in our difference, as the
sacraments coax us to do, we can hear each other say, “Help! I need somebody.” Human beings need each other in order to fully experience God’s grace in community. Thus, the next section concerns an inclusive, sacramental spirituality of friendship, in terms of covenantal human relationships.

3. Help! I Need Somebody: a Covenantal Spirituality of Friendship

In the Beatles’ 1965 song “Help,” John Lennon sings, “Help! I need somebody! / Help! Not just anybody . . . ” Accompanied by his song-writing partner, Paul McCartney, Lennon sings about losing his “independence” to a relationship—perhaps a new lover—and of being awestruck by his new friend’s revelation of him- or herself. He expresses gratitude for his lover’s self-disclosure—“I do appreciate you bein’ ‘round”—and admits his essential contingency and his feeling “insecure”: “I know that I just need you like I've never done before.” In no uncertain terms, Lennon pleads for his lover to shore up his limitation, and to aid him without reservation: “Help me get my feet back on the ground! / Won’t you please, please help me?”

Much of this project concerns the affective connection and belonging of which Lennon sings: all human beings are interdependent, rather than independent. Moreover, the last two sections have illustrated that physical and intellectual transformation of access for Christians with disabilities is both the cause and the effect of affective access to God’s equality and justice. Although each person is unique and infinitely valuable, people need each other in order to be fully human. We can only actualize our fullest potentials by embracing and being embraced by others. When people of varied abilities encounter each

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40For all of Lennon and McCartney’s direct and profound assertions of human interdependence and mutual need, see Beatles, “Help!”
other, our lives change in “oh so many ways.” The true ground of humanness consists neither in solitary, rational thought (a la Descartes), nor in the replacement of faulty parts, as in a machine (as Henry Ford might have asserted). Rather, marvellously, love and relationship comprise the essential features of human being. Thus, God’s friends must always strive for loving relationships: we, Christ’s friends and lovers, are called to create access to divine equity that includes intimacy and portends dignity.

Many scholars of disability substantiate this assertion. For instance, for Jean Vanier, relationship is a sacramental and transformative vehicle of God’s grace: he claims that people of all abilities can empathize more easily with each other when we understand that God’s Holy Spirit loves us. The Spirit draws people into community for mutual support; Vanier states emphatically that people who are lonely need communities to “welcome” them, to offer them the communal acceptance that I have called “simplicity.” God accepts God’s friends simply, and calls us to do the same. Jay Johnson concurs with Vanier about relationship: affirming the power of Holy Communion to free human eros, he states, “Abundant life will blossom only when people find themselves loved for exactly who they are, rather than despite who they are.”

The relational constancy that Vanier and Johnson describe relates to the Hebrew concept of chesed, a word that means “covenant-faithfulness,” “loving-kindness,” or simply

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41See again Beatles, “Help!”, 12.

42For this claim, see Vanier, *Becoming Human*, 20ff, 135.

43See Vanier, *Community and Growth*, 265, 274, and 283; concerning simplicity, see also pp. 161-2 above.

44For all this information, see Jay Emerson Johnson, *Divine Communion: a Eucharistic Theology of Sexual Intimacy* (New York: Seabury, 2013), 36-49, esp. 43; emphasis in original.
“love.”\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Chesed} is expressed in \textit{covenant}, a non-contractual bond that binds two parties in fealty to each other: Walter Brueggemann observes that the covenant in Hebrew and Christian scripture both presumes obedience, and offers intimacy: God gives up heavenly security to relate to humankind.\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Chesed}, integral to God’s \textit{shalom}, opens up affective access to divine equity.

Jay Johnson points indirectly to the materiality of human desire for God and each other. The basin, the grapes, and the bread represent not only God’s abundance to humankind, but the human offering of our labour to return part of God’s tangible creation to God. Moreover, the sacraments point human beings to our desire for each other. By remembering us, baptism and Holy Communion free people of diverse abilities to be faithful to each other.

Baptism and Holy Communion disclose both the limits of human desire, and our clear reflections of God’s boundless love, by motivating our acts of \textit{chesed}. By freeing human \textit{eros}, the sacraments free believers of varied abilities to help each other. As friends in sacramental community, Christians of diverse abilities can create lifts into the chapel for those in wheelchairs, pray (and sometimes weep) with friends who experience chronic pain or anxiety, and step back while those who are slow to turn in enclosed spaces, like me, receive Communion. Moreover, the elements of the sacraments represent faithful hospitality

\begin{footnotesize}

\textsuperscript{46}Brueggemann observes the link between covenantal obedience, lament, and praise: see Walter Brueggemann, \textit{Covenanted Self: Explorations in Law and Covenant} (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 20-34; he also notes the “subversive” (countercultural) character of covenantal intimacy. See Walter Brueggemann, “Covenant as a Subversive Paradigm,” \textit{Christian Century} (November 12\textsuperscript{th}, 1980), 1094; see also for the ways that covenants form identity, see Volf, \textit{Exclusion & Embrace}, 147-56.
\end{footnotesize}
as well as an inclusive and creative mode of justice; thus, in physical, political, and ecclesiological terms, a basin of water, a sheaf of wheat, and a grapevine can realize God’s just Reign.\textsuperscript{47} In their materiality, the sacraments testify to the faithful life of Jesus, who proclaims freedom and wholeness for all.

A spirituality of friendship, of \textit{chesed} or covenant-faithfulness, mediates the affective and spiritual access of Christians of varied abilities to divine equality and justice in ecclesial communities. Jennie Weiss Block could be defining \textit{chesed} in her practical list of the qualities of friendship: friends help, listen, take risks, and become vulnerable to each other. They display hospitality, loyalty, trust, honesty, respect, and generosity.\textsuperscript{48} These are actions friends take in sacramental communities: in these ways, we can reach out to each other to bolster our communal dignity and joy. Because not every person can be friends with every other, and because some people have very limited interpersonal energies, practically speaking, members of catholic and sacramental church-communities ought to display patience with each other.

In light of the human need for friendship, Paul Wadell enumerates several friendly actions. As noted before, friends are attracted to each other through agreement, like each other, and want to spend time together. The glue for healthy friendship is desire and (some) affective similarity. Friendships are mutual and freeing, and possess an innate trust and faithfulness where people look out for each other’s interests.\textsuperscript{49} Wadell also states that

\textsuperscript{47}For the ways that physical signs portend God’s grace, and display its fragmented appearance in the world, see again Lathrop, \textit{Holy Things}, 91-97; for the ways that the sacraments disclose the material aspects of justice, see this project’s description of Holy Communion, and the expositions of physical access to equality and justice.

\textsuperscript{48}For the full list of friendship’s qualities, see Block, \textit{Copious Hosting}, 160-61.

\textsuperscript{49}For this important list of the dispositions of friendship, see again Paul J. Wadell, \textit{Becoming Friends: Worship, Justice, and the Practice of Christian Friendship} (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2002), 55-65.
“spiritual friendships”—friendships where people are formed together, over time, in lives of virtue—are the truest friendships. Spiritual friends can know and emulate God’s selfless love together.⁵⁰

Theologians and sociologists of disability describe this sacramental friendship in different ways. For instance, Block notes that Torontonian artist Judith Snow depended on her friends’ support for a dignified life: when Judith was physically and emotionally depleted by the demands of assisted living, five friends formed the Joshua Committee. Pooling their resources, they cared for all of Judith’s needs until she could perform tasks for herself. Her friends’ empowerment facilitated Judith’s professional and personal happiness and fulfillment, including the joy of marriage.⁵¹ Judith’s bond with her friends displays the _eros_-filled energy of _chesed_.

Covenant-friendships comprised of trust, constancy, and shared value can even grow in the entertainment industry. For instance, Adam Clayton, bassist of the rock group U2, was best man to Bono, the band’s singer, during Bono’s wedding to Alison Stewart in May 1982. Although Clayton did not know all of a best man’s duties, Bono and Ali still had a happy, chaotic wedding-day.⁵² Bono and Adam’s friendship has even entailed brushes with death. For example, in 1987, while U2 were campaigning to make Martin Luther King’s birthday a holiday in the U.S., someone threatened to shoot Bono if the band performed “Pride (In the Name of Love)” at an Arizona concert. During the third verse of that song, Bono saw

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⁵⁰For Wadell’s account of spiritual friendships via the fascinating medieval monk Aelred of Rievaulx, see again Wadell, *Becoming Friends*, 107-11.

⁵¹For Judith’s wonderful story as described by Block, see Block, *Copious Hosting*, 160-62.

Clayton shielding him with his bass-guitar.\textsuperscript{53} True friends lay down their lives for each other (John 15:13).

I too need others to live out covenants with me in my life; I have already named some of my true friends, including Anton, my dance-teacher, who helped me to cultivate shared interests and freed me to become a more whole person. Naomi, my dear friend who has a doctorate from a Canadian university, has also formed me as a person. Naomi is an avid reader and short-story writer, so she and I have read much of each other’s creative and academic work between the spring of 2005 and the time of this writing. She listens to my relational complaints, edits most of my papers, encourages me to write more lucid poetry, and even visits me in Toronto. Naomi is a wonderfully faithful and self-giving friend; she has expressed Jesus’ sacramental love to me, and has provided me with abundant affective access to God’s equity, love, and grace.

This short section has aimed to clarify some of the practical, covenantal, and sacramental aspects of friendship, the embodiment of affective access to God’s equality and justice. It has also observed the Spirit’s joyful and dynamic activity in true and lasting friendships. Friendships between and among people of diverse abilities are practical aids to divine equality and justice because, as Vanier and Wadell assert, no one can be completely happy on their own. Friends share each other’s values, and give to each other: friends listen, drink tea, tell stories, and help each other through troubles and dangers. Furthermore, true friendships are sacramental because they draw people towards God’s abundant life and self-giving love. That said, friendships, and all relationships, require boundaries in order to create the conditions for God’s dignity and joy. Thus, the next section will explore how the Spirit

\textsuperscript{53}See U2 and Neil McCormick, \textit{U2 by U2}, 197.
allows us to “give” only a “little bit” of ourselves, faithfully and with integrity, in covenantal relationships. Boundaries are the obverse of affective access, facilitating rather than inhibiting God’s love and joy.

B. Dancing with the Stars

The theme of this second half of this chapter is the development of the “catholic personality,” the person open to all other people, based on the practical aspects of access discussed so far. In particular, its first section will explain how the Spirit facilitates some practical facets of multifaceted access to God’s equality and justice for Christians of varied abilities, including the creation of clear and yet permeable affective boundaries.

In this respect, lyrics from another U2 song are indirectly instructive. During the bridge of the high-energy rocker “Volcano,” a song from the 2014 album Songs of Innocence, Bono sings, “You were alone / but now you’re not alone . . . YOU AND I ARE ROCK’N’ROLL.”54 As usual, the Irishman sings the truth: even when human beings feel isolated, no one is alone. Ideally, human beings are made for each other, in the eros-filled, open dance of friendship. Moreover, theologically speaking, the Spirit allows God’s friends to imitate God’s perichoretic, ecstatic dance of friendship and love. Human beings constitute the energetic, relational rhythm that offers its backbeat to good songs; concurrently, self-giving human relationship is the heart of rock-and-roll’s rhythmic and raucous joy. Friendship within clear but permeable boundaries allows people of all abilities to give and receive affection in just and loving ways. This section will begin by describing the fear of difference that can hinder that practical access.

54 The U2 album is a song-cycle whose title explicitly recalls William Blake’s identically-named 1789 volume of poetry. For Blake’s astonishingly-diffuse body of work, see, e.g., William Blake, Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake, commentary Harold Bloom and ed. David V. Erdman (London: Anchor, 1997). In terms of the U2 record, see U2, “Volcano,” Songs of Innocence (Dublin: Universal, 2014), lines 28-9, 33; capitals in original.
1. Give a Little Bit . . .

As noted in Chapter Two, human beings often fear difference, because physical and intellectual divergence can look like weakness. For example, Titchkosky observes that, in the bureaucratic discourse that constitutes most university administrations, disability is “a justifiably excludable type”; university staff will even tell stories in order to justify that exclusion. Bureaucracies fear human bodies, because bodies make messes and complicate clean, dry formulae of growth and success. Arid rationality can dry up compassionate human hearts.

One may wonder how this discourse of “justifiable” exclusion can emerge. Vanier asserts that this mode of anxious ostracism emerges from the fear of difference. He states that people who are alike join together to buttress their strengths. While the separation of people “unlike us” from those “like us” can be constructive—and is constructive, in the case of affirmative action for people of colour and people with disabilities—it can also suppress essential differences. Belonging can become “a place where we can hide” from others who need us. Indeed, many Christians of able body can hide their fears of their bodies through the false gloss of physiological homogeneity. This conformity can harm Christians with disabilities; we can feel like physical and attitudinal barriers in the Church mark us as those not chosen for “in-group.”

55 For some of the stories that exclude, e.g. people in canes and wheelchairs, see Tanya Titchkosky, The Question of Access: Disability, Space, Meaning (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2011), 73-81, especially 75-6.

56 Indeed, Iris M. Young argues cogently that affirmative action is discriminatory in the best possible sense, insofar as it both disproves the “myth of merit”—the ideology asserting tacitly that the people who have social and professional power have it because they deserve it—and testifies to unjust professional hierarchies. See Iris M. Young, Justice and the Politics of Difference (Princeton: Princeton, 1990), 192-224.

57 For more on belonging in stringently-defined groups, see Vanier, Becoming Human, 47. For the possibility of hiding from belonging, see ibid, 52-56, 107-12.
However, the Church need not settle for fear of difference. Theologically, God offers access to equality, justice, and abundant life for people with disabilities through the love and grace mediated in sacramental community. According to Volf, the Godhead’s mutual indwelling models loving human encounter. Just as the Godhead’s three members interact equitably with each other, so God calls God’s friends to do. Human self-donation is the embodied praxis of divine love, the love that breaks down barriers, and drives out fear (1 John 4:7).

Moreover, as Volf clarifies, whenever people live into these Trinitarian relationships with each other as the Church, using our Spirit-filled gifts to benefit each other in the covenantal and sacramental ways described above, Christ is present among us. Karl Barth posits a similar argument, claiming that baptism is the point where the Holy Spirit marks Christians as renewed and recreated individuals. The Spirit manifests Christ’s presence across the span of believers’ lives, beginning with baptism. As discussed earlier, these insights have a particular impact on practical physical access to equality and justice, because the perceptual shift entailed by our embodiment of the Spirit’s gifts can change the architecture of church-spaces.

My experience in the Jeremiah Community exemplifies this Spirit-filled perceptual and physical change. Jeremiah is committed to gestures of imagination and generosity. As clarified in Chapter Three, recognizing the limits of our energy, we try to create physical 

58 For ways in which the Church resembles the Trinity constitutionally, see Volf, After Our Likeness, 172, 192ff.

59 See Volf, After Our Likeness, 227-44, esp. 228-30.

60 For this insight into the Church’s constitution as the dwelling-place of a renewed humanity, see Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics vol. 4, bk. 1, eds. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), 688.
spaces that welcome all people; this task includes the constant reshaping of our physical worship-space. For instance, we always bring out extra chairs, so that we can offer seating to anyone who enters. Similarly, we have altered our Eucharistic practice to make it more child-friendly, including simpler call-and-response songs and empowering the children to act as sacristans. Our low Anglican liturgy enacts simplicity for the sake of our children and neighbours. Simultaneously, some of us work towards as-yet-unrealized dreams of a food-security hub in Parkdale, Toronto as a gesture of hospitality.\textsuperscript{61} Through the erotic bonds created by Holy Communion, the Spirit helps us rearrange our space: our commitment to our baptismal vows, and our understanding of solidarity with our neighbourhood, empower us to create safe spaces for others.

On the other hand, hospitality towards and by people with disabilities in sacramental community can, and does, also require clear physical and affective boundaries. Because all people are contingent—all of us, particularly people with disabilities—believers across the ability-spectrum can express the triune God’s love only in bounded ways. Safety is part of practical physical, intellectual, and affective access to God’s equality and justice. By writing thus, I do not mean that Christians of varied abilities can, or ought to, create impermeable communal barriers that discriminate against people in terms of essential characteristics; our mandate of holiness means that the Church is not a club where everyone is “just like us.”

Rather, I mean that physical and psychological safety—for Christians with disabilities, for women and children, and for people who are old or infirm—creates the conditions for human flourishing. Healthy affective and discursive boundaries reinforce

\textsuperscript{61}For the Community’s still-nascent plans for a food-security hub, see Jeremiah Community, \textit{Project Proposal: from (Monastic) Stability to (Missional) Growth} (Toronto: Anglican Diocese of Toronto, November 2014), 16-7, 30-32.
communal security within the Church because, when people of varied abilities recognize and affirm their gifts and limitations, they can give themselves to each other consistently, generously, and genuinely.

Healthy boundaries in sacramental communities can foster intimate affective relationships. Practically speaking, churches that want to include people of varied abilities ought to set boundaries that both respect the needs of the most vulnerable, and affirm the group’s social cohesion. This approach to interpersonal boundaries would prioritize the gifts and limits of the Body’s vulnerable members, while also preserving the relational bonds created through the erotic energies of water, bread, and wine. Just as Jesus’ sacramental love affirms and transforms people, so Jesus calls the Church to meet people where they are, and to define clear (but not cold or distant) boundaries. Boundaries help Christians of all abilities to “give a little bit” of ourselves, to share ourselves safely with each other. Churches that offer people of varied abilities secure belonging are spaces where, through the Spirit, God’s dignity and joy can flower fully.

Some members of the Jeremiah Community struggle with creating secure, tensile, and group-oriented boundaries like these. For instance, I distrust and dislike silence, while several of my friends need it in order to be themselves. At my own cost, I have learned—on occasion—to let my friends cook, eat, drink a cup of tea, and/or pray in silence. Although words are very good, and can strengthen communion, they are not always integral to it. Similarly, after a long period of uncertainty around tactile boundaries, our leadership-team asked the whole Community to shake hands, rather than hug, during the Peace of Christ. This liturgical gesture means that people can offer each other genuine intimacy and trust, while still giving each other affective security. We still touch, and fully include and welcome, each
other; nonetheless, we shake hands rather than hug in order to allow people to give themselves to one another authentically.

The praxis of the Peace of Christ within Jeremiah illustrates one aspect of the clear boundaries to which the whole Church is called. In the Peace, Christians of varied abilities enact and embody our re-membrance.\(^{62}\) In our embrace, we welcome God’s Spirit, who has already accepted and acknowledged us, and affirm each other. The Peace testifies to our altered perception: each person with whom I shake hands is a person loved by God, unique and inexpressibly valuable. Concurrently, the Peace also gestures towards our communal status of spiritual siblings with Christ. As stated in the Introduction, in terms of the African principle *Ubuntu*, I am because we are. In sacramental communities, the individual is a part of the group, and his or her needs cannot be prioritized above the overall unity and well-being of the group.

The epistemological and practical changes recommended so far in this chapter—changing church spaces through universal design and perceptual alteration, building covenental and sacramental relationships that reflect God’s faithful love, and enflaming our communal imagination by telling and retelling our narratives of liberation—are *praxes*, and not possessions. Christians of varied abilities are called to perform church. Self-giving means offering oneself to “tenderly care” for the other person’s needs, even when that caring entails withdrawal.\(^{63}\) Right relationship—as expressed in the Beatitudes, *righteousness* (Matthew 5:1-11, Luke 6:20-22)—occurs most clearly in small actions such as praying in silence or doing dishes. Self-giving means knowing (recognizing) one’s physical, intellectual, and

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\(^{62}\)James F. White observes the significance of the sacrament of reconciliation, of which the Peace is one part. See James F. White, *Sacraments as God’s Self-giving* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), 75-79.

\(^{63}\)See Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace*, 189.
affective limits. In our incompleteness, pain, and poverty of spirit, human beings comprehend our need for each other: in sacramental community, each person can act out divine vulnerability and availability. The next section will clarify the significance of clear affective boundaries for communal acts of great love.

2. Walking through Walls

The previous sections of this chapter have outlined several avenues to practical physical, intellectual, affective, and spiritual access to God’s equality and justice, embodied in sacramental, inclusive church-communities. This section will illustrate how clear relational boundaries, modelled in part in the previous section, can empower Christians of varied abilities to work together to act out God’s equality and justice. Feelings of security, communal belonging, and safety allow people both to belong, and to reflect God’s Image of love. God’s Spirit invites and impels believers into an organic unity of witness and purpose, calling Christians of all abilities to offer each other affective security and belonging through hospitality.

Humility, a posture of ecclesial praxis, creates the conditions for that secure hospitality. As stated in Chapter Two, Brian Brock argues that Christ’s Body must emulate the triune God’s perichoresis in a social sense. Volf concurs, stating that Christians who emulate the Trinity’s love must be “open to all other people.” In Christ’s Body, the eye needs the hand, and the head the foot (1 Cor. 12:22). Humility enables the Body’s varied parts to relate healthily, so that they can serve each other and live out the triune God’s chesed

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65See Volf, After our Likeness, 155-57, 217, 279-82.

in mutual and potent relations of empathy. Indeed, empathy grounds and motivates affective access to God’s equity.

The practical inclusion of persons with disabilities in the Church through humble empathy allows the Church to fulfill its catholicity, its internal integrity and wholeness. Peter Hodgson claims that, unlike other social institutions, the Church exercises a distinctive “intersubjectivity”: God’s friends are not just part of each other’s lives, but are one, such that joy and suffering affect Christ’s whole Body. Hodgson advances Moltmann’s claims about catholicity discussed in Chapter Two: the Church proclaims its inner wholeness through its outer mission to the world. Thus, the Church’s catholicity impacts its apostolicity, its embodied commitment to proclaiming God’s Reign of dignity, peace, and joy on Earth. When it includes disability, the Church proclaims Christ’s universal love with greater efficacy.

In light of the Church’s need to holistically include people with disabilities, Brock and Volf highlight an interpersonal openness that Volf calls a “catholic” personality—a person open to the Church καθολικός, Christ’s whole, universal Body. This humble and self-giving person, oriented towards communal dignity through the sacraments’ eros-filled joy, embodies healthy, tensile belonging that offers individual and communal integrity. This renewed person is humbled through Christ’s cross and baptism; Volf clarifies this humility,

67 For Hodgson’s claims about catholicity, see Hodgson, Revisioning the Church, 66; for Moltmann’s, see again Moltmann, Church in the Power of the Spirit: a Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 349.


69 For a definition of καθολικός, see, e.g., καθολικός, def. 1, in Frederick William Danker, ed., Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2001), 493. For an examination of the decentralized self’s linkage to ecclesial institutions, see Volf, After our Likeness, 279-82.
arguing via Paul’s claims in Galatians 2:19-20 that the renewed human being is de-centred from self (“crucified with Christ”) and re-centred on Christ (“Christ lives in me”) through faith and baptism. This Christ-centred person can make peace with others, as well as discern and do righteousness.⁷⁰

Volf’s understanding of this de-centred self, of the eye that accepts and empowers the hand, has at least two practical implications for inclusive, sacramental church-communities. First, baptism and Holy Communion can ground Christians’ openness to one another: ideally, these rites beckon believers towards authentic engagement through their summons to equality and justice. They can both enable believers of varied abilities to focus on the bond of Christ’s love, and draw attention through God’s materially-displayed loving-kindness to places where equality and justice are not fully realized. This dissertation has disclosed the fragility of these sacramental ideals in earlier chapters: sacramental churches very often testify to human brokenness and isolation, rather than wholeness and connection. Conversely, the sacraments can point to the catholicity of Christ’s fragmented Body, a body with varied dis/abilities, by highlighting believers’ material interdependence. Expressed simply, these two liminal rituals—rites that disclose the “threshold” between Earth and Heaven—create the space for human beings to pay attention to each other, and to affirm each other in body and soul.

As an example of altered perception, Jennie Weiss Block’s visions of two very different Eucharistic assemblies illustrate the difference between groups centred on self, and groups oriented towards otherness. In her first portrait—a Roman Catholic Mass from which people with disabilities are absent—Block asks, “Where is Tim Jackman, who uses a wheelchair, and can’t get up those steps? Where is Mary Palmer, who is legally blind and

⁷⁰For Volf’s discourse on the decentred self, and its implications for belonging and exclusion, see Volf, Exclusion & Embrace, 69-71; for the catholic personality’s relation to truth, peace, and justice, see ibid, 189, 249, 270-72.
can’t read the bulletin?” The able-bodied congregants who attend that Mass may not miss those who are not present, because they are not open to difference in certain ways. That said, a renewed understanding of vulnerable Eucharistic community would allow them to take notice.

By stark contrast, Block’s second vision of a Catholic Mass portrays a gathering where the priest has cerebral palsy and speaks through a computer-program, and the usher has Parkinson’s disease; these realities cry out for recognition. People with disabilities need to feel God’s radical welcome and affirmation in their (our!) sacramental communities; we ought to seek the humble acceptance of our siblings of able body, and to humbly offer them that same approval. This imaginative access to divine equity through humility and empathy can lead to practical physical and spiritual access, because that access acknowledges the needs of both people with mobility issues and people whose legs are whole. Since the congregation in Block’s inclusive Mass practices this recognition, the believers with disabilities become vehicles of God’s grace. Their gifts illuminate God’s great gift of Godself to humankind. The Eucharist accentuates the welcome that already exists when God’s friends accept divine generosity.

Volf’s “catholic personality” has a second implication for equal, inclusive, and just churches. Baptism and Holy Communion reveal human beings to themselves as they truly are, because they materially symbolize our contingency, our need for interdependence, and our communal potential to manifest God’s transformative equity. Moreover, by creating the humble and empathetic space for perceptual openness, the sacraments foreground our interdependence, and allow us to “walk through walls.” These rituals show God’s friends of

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71For this portrait of an unintentionally-exclusionary Mass, see Block, *Copious Hosting*, 114-5.
varied abilities their true essence, for good and ill, because both sacraments entail the death of the false self, and restructure that ego to include the other person’s gift and need. The sacraments can make people fully human, like the Jesus who can walk through walls in Luke 24:36-37. As Vanier suggests, Volf’s decentred personality is the self that no longer aspires to power and privilege, the “visible” and “hidden compulsions that push us to seek our own glory.”

The sacraments facilitate the creation of perceptual openness to difference in diverse but related ways. In baptism, believers of all abilities can acknowledge human fragility and limitation, and express our concrete choice of God’s expansive life. In turn, Holy Communion re-orient individuals—singular egos—toward Christ and each other, and can encourage each person to understand the scale of his or her need. Apart, human beings are small, and can be selfish; together, we become larger conduits of God’s meaning and beauty. Sacramental interdependence can look like conversation over a meal, or stacking chairs in the chapel.

This section has described the kinds of people that Christians of all abilities can and ought to be in order to live out practical aspects of physical and spiritual access to equality and justice in inclusive churches. It has formed Volf’s and Vanier’s insights into a vulnerable pneumatology, in which God’s Holy Spirit empowers Christians with and without disabilities to become “catholic personalities,” practicing gracious openness to people of all kinds. God’s radical hospitality entails perceptual transformation: Christian praxis that includes disability allows God’s friends to use the sacraments to create spaces of vulnerability and availability, and allows God’s friends of all abilities to communally embody our faith in friendship.

72For these profound words, see Vanier, *Becoming Human*, 121.
3. Faithful Community

I can, and do, categorically (and often loudly) assert that I have been happier since the summer of 2009 than ever before. Since August 2009, when I moved out of university residence, I have experienced numerous instances of true and lasting chesed. Since I have many friends from various church-communities, and since I see them quite frequently, this faithfulness emerges primarily, but not solely, in the Church. I share my life with friends at church; sometimes, those friends even spill beer on my good blue jeans (don’t worry; I’m not bitter).

Loyalty through the Holy Spirit demands faithful community, a fidelity that loves the other person in his or her difference. This form of all-encompassing love that embraces others in their uniqueness demands a covenant, a bond of fealty. For instance, writing of faithful church-communities, Vanier expands the notion of covenant-love through the lens of trust: he asserts that “people stand at the door of our wounded heart.” People of all abilities yearn for belonging and friendship. We stand at each other’s doors and knock (see Revelation 3:20), asking to be recognized as equals and partners, often in the face of physical and psychological pain. Life in sacramental community means learning to open the doors of our hearts to others. Moreover, Vanier observes, “Love is neither sentimental nor a passing emotion. It is the recognition of a covenant, of a mutual belonging.”73 Here Vanier implies that mutual trust and love require a perceptual shift towards interdependence. People of diverse abilities cannot simply live in community because we “want to,” or because we “feel like it.” Feelings are changeable, and our desires are not always ordered towards mutual vulnerability and availability. Thus, buttressing Vanier’s point, I assert that Christians of all

73 For these two quotations, see Vanier, Community and Growth, 27, 56.
abilities should love each other by keeping promises. Quite often, chesed resembles this continuous engagement with the world.

Significantly, chesed highlights the promises made between God and God’s people; Christians express this relationship of promise through the sacraments, through which God invites humankind to transformative equality and justice. Baptism and Holy Communion point to God’s undying faithfulness for Israel in past and present, and for humanity’s and the Earth’s joyous future. Indeed, the Christian scriptures bear that covenant’s name: Jesus’ words, and the actions of his life, ministry, death, and resurrection, comprise the “new testament” of God’s faithfulness to humanity and creation, and God’s promise to offer the Earth future shalom.

Both of the sacraments, and the communities that form around them, share in God’s covenant. First, as asserted previously, baptism is the covenant of human repentance of sin and of our once-for-all public commitment to God’s redemptive work; the choice that communicants, or their representatives like parents or godparents, make for God in baptism is an affective choice, based more on faith and trust than on rational process. When Christians of varied abilities commit to the spiritual access to equity embodied in baptism, we live into our covenant. Furthermore, Holy Communion represents God’s promise of holistic equity through marvellous material provision; it also symbolizes human beings’ loyalty to each other in the midst of frailty. Even though, eventually, Christians of all abilities will fail each other, Jesus still calls us to embody our shared life through Communion. Paul argues that the bread conveys unity: “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one

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74 For the significance of baptism for the divine-human covenant, see, e.g., Ruth C. Duck, Worship for the Whole People of God (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013), 167-72; for important metaphors for baptism, see, e.g., James F. White, Introduction to Christian Worship (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 189-93.
body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Corinthians 10:17, NRSV). Our commitment to feeding people physically and spiritually symbolizes both our acceptance of God’s provision, and our reciprocal promise of hospitality.

I have experienced the sacraments’ invitation to embodied covenant-love in many communities inside and outside the Church. For instance, one of my dear friends from Toronto, Hannah, has consistently exemplified this tenacious sacramental loyalty. Hannah always gives of herself to those who ask, and she offers herself to those who wish to borrow her positive energies (Matthew 5:42). For instance, in fall 2009, she helped me to learn to cook pasta by offering me the ingredients (my readers can imagine my surprise). I was struck by that act of faithfulness, and by its consistent repetition: for more than eight years, Hannah and I have prayed, eaten, drunk, danced, sung, and hiked together. Hannah has consistently put my needs before hers, and has taught me to do the same. To use Wadell’s term, Hannah is a “spiritual friend” who has healed and freed me to become more myself. Thus, it is a pleasure to visit her, to talk on the phone, and to remember her birthday. In large part, the kingdom of Heaven is like this. Hannah’s generosity, cemented in the bonds of sacramental community, portends God’s future gift of God’s Spirit.

C. Conclusion: Anticipating an Embodied Eschatology

In this chapter, using Vanier’s and Volf’s insights and paradigms of the Holy Spirit as metaphorical points of departure, I have outlined a practical ecclesiology of disability. The chapter has explored a number of practical avenues towards physical, intellectual, affective, and spiritual access to God’s equality and justice for Christians with disabilities in sacramental communities. First, I have explored the ways in which human beings in church-communities can help each other. Second, I have examined the essence of that mutual aid in
terms of the formation of communities of “catholic personalities” through the sacraments and the Spirit. In terms of helping, people of diverse abilities primarily help in small ways. Cooking meals together, doing dishes, and cleaning house all are concrete manifestations of what the sacraments symbolize; these actions facilitate physical and spiritual access to divine equality and justice.

Additionally, God’s friends can help each other without taking over: Christians with diverse abilities can provide each other with intellectual access by practicing “disability etiquette” and by living together in ways that enrich and enliven our communal imagination. As well, once we learn to help in subtle ways, without coercion, domination, or submission, all Christians of all abilities cry, “Help! I need somebody!” We exist in embodied and erotic matrices of relationship, creating affective access to equality and justice through friendship and chesed. The sacraments empower us to accept each other, and to realize these emotional bonds.

Moreover, when we join together in sacramental community, Christians of all abilities “dance with the stars”: the Holy Spirit allows us to emulate the Trinity’s unending, ecstatic dance of perichoresis. Moreover, in inclusive, sacramental communities, people can learn to give only what Roger Hodgson of Supertramp calls “a little bit.”75 As we become “catholic personalities,” people who are generous and open, believers of all abilities can create healthy relational and emotional boundaries that aid our participation in God’s work. Also, when Christians of diverse abilities join together, we can “walk through walls,” transforming societal and ecclesial structures in order to create greater inclusion. Perceptual changes facilitate these transformations: through the sacramental liberation of divine and

75See again Supertramp, “Give a Little Bit,” e.g., 1-4, 8, 10.
human *eros*, the sacraments invite all human beings to see each other as we are, and so to attend more closely to the motion of God’s Spirit.

Significantly, multifaceted access to divine equity both creates and invites the further creation of covenant-faithfulness. A crucial aspect of *chesed* on which I have touched only briefly in this dissertation is *eschatology*, scholarly discourses on the Last Days. God promises to offer future integrity, dignity, and joy to all creation. That holistic integrity depends on Jesus’ resurrection-life; this glimpse of humanity’s full potential underlies the multifaceted access to equality and justice that has been the focus of the last two chapters. As interdependent catholic personalities who want to act out God’s love, believers of all abilities can live out what I will call their “heavenly hope” for embodied resurrection together. Thus, in the next and final chapter of this project, prior to my Conclusions, I will explore how a sacramental and transformative ecclesiology of disability leads to a realized and still-to-be-embodied eschatology of disability.

This dissertation has outlined possibilities concerning the creation of a transformative and sacramental ecclesiology of disability. It has explored the ways that people with disabilities require essential aspects of access to God’s equality and justice in ecclesial communities by invoking the sacraments’ erotic, embodied invitation to divine hospitality. The first chapter engaged suspicion and retrieval, the separate but related parts of a twofold interpretive dialectic, to ground a preliminary theological anthropology and Christology of disability, and to illustrate how the sacraments invite Christians of all abilities to use their erotic energies for connection, healing, and liberation. The second chapter extended the partial method of suspicion to reveal the ways that Christians with able bodies have exploited, denigrated, and oppressed Christians with disabilities; in terms of retrieval, that chapter also outlined the contours of a novel spirituality of friendship and compassion for people of all abilities. The chapter concluded by examining the links between gestures of inclusion and the theological meaning of multifaceted access to God’s equality and justice for Christians with disabilities in sacramental communities.

The third chapter used this sacramental Christology and ecclesiology of disability to explore the theological aspects of physical, intellectual, affective, and spiritual access to divine equity through the sacraments. The sacraments offer believers of all abilities healing, strength, and solidarity, coax us to remember our experiences of equality and justice and to re-member each other when these manifestations of dignity are not present, and point us to the theological and eschatological aspects of dignity. Moreover, the fourth chapter denoted practical facets of that same access. It observed that, in sacramental communities, Christians of diverse abilities can both help each other, and can form covenantal relationships. Our
bonds of loyalty can help us to become “catholic personalities,” or people open to all others.¹

Most significantly, this chapter showed that when Christian communities truly live out this sacramental openness and hospitality, they can “walk through walls,” transcending the trivial limitations of post-Enlightenment cultural custom to embody fundamental and pervasive dignity and joy for all.

Prior to my conclusions, this fifth chapter will define the contours of resurrection for Christians of all abilities. Building on the multifaceted access described above, and Volf’s generous concept of the “catholic personality,” I will employ Volf’s concept of embrace and Amos Yong’s analyses of the Spirit’s transformative power for human beings to show how embodied, or realized, eschatology contributes to God’s shalom. Here, embodied eschatology means the present transformation of disabled bodies and inaccessible communities, and the earthly glimpses and foretastes of God’s future dignity and joy. The first section will relate celebration and embrace to eschatology; conversely, the second will examine the eschatological value of pain. Embrace matters to eschatology because it allows people of all abilities to realize their dignity; Yong’s discussions of the Spirit and resurrection will underscore the eschatological meaning of God’s undying love for all people. These reflections, and some experiential insights, allow me to depict the possible contours of the heavenly hope for Christians with disabilities.

Building on Volf and Yong in these ways, I will draw on the reflections of Vanier, Titchkosky, Betcher, and disabled sociologist James Charlton in order to show what the Kingdom Come might look like for Christians with disabilities. A brief personal narrative

will help me to illustrate the theological and ecclesiological connections between Volf’s notion of embrace, Vanier’s idea of celebration, and a sacramental, embodied eschatology of disability.

A. The Erotic and Expressive Importance of Embrace

Initially introduced in the first chapter, Volf’s idea of embrace indicates a gesture that allows Christians of varied abilities to welcome and affirm each other, in God’s embodied and erotic dignity, equality, and justice. Let me illustrate embrace further with a story of my own.

On October 31st, 2015, I had had a rough week: some interpersonal conflicts had left me feeling a degree of hopelessness and despair. Thus, I was unsure that I would attend my friends’ Halloween party in Parkdale. In the end, I dressed myself as the Shadow of the Past, with a hint of dark irony, and went over. As I drank wine and ate from two large tables, I embraced others literally and metaphorically. I met several new friends, and had profound and intense conversations; I hugged, and was hugged by, other friends, and—after we danced confidently to Annie Lennox, Daft Punk, and Whitney Houston—another friend kissed me on the cheek before I went home early. While I had not known Hope would attend the party, I met her in the dance of mutuality and in a glass of red wine. These reciprocal encounters partly restored me to myself, and empowered me to carry on the “constructive journey” to God’s Reign with my friends.²

This story clearly expresses the utility of embrace for a transformative, sacramental ecclesiology of disability. Although I was dressed as the Shadow of the Past, and still felt a degree of despair and shame in my body, our experiences of drink, touch, and dance

²For this felicitous phrase, see Charles Fensham, To the Nations for the Earth: a Missional Spirituality (Toronto: Clements, 2013), 95-101.
reminded me of friendship’s joyful exchange. Moreover, our encounters that evening affirmed our mutual dignity, and helped us to engage in prolepsis, the joyful anticipation of God’s Reign. Moreover, our embraces were mutually affirming. Because my friends met me where I was, and because we welcomed each other with sacramental love, we took part in God’s shalom that night.\(^3\)

Significantly, my anecdote does more than simply describe the act of embrace in living relationships of mutuality. It also anticipates the connection between the embrace of equals and celebration, a significant part of God’s shalom. As Jean Vanier articulates a clear definition of celebration as a joyful and supportive encounter, I will next clarify his definition.

### 1. Celebration: Vanier on the Joy of Living and Loving with Disabilities

Vanier’s primary assertion about the nature of celebration provides a touchstone definition for an embodied eschatology of disability. He states, “Celebration is nourishment and resource. It makes present the goals of the community in symbolic form, and so brings hope and a new strength to take up everyday life again with more love.”\(^4\) Vanier’s definition resonates with my anecdote. Celebration is a gift from God; it is an act whereby people of diverse abilities take joy in life through specific encounters and rituals meant to foster growth and well-being.

Celebration is a tool that people use, with great joy, to regain their ability (pun intended) to go about daily activities and tasks with vigour and purpose; Vanier’s words “nourishment,” “hope,” and “strength” all reveal the link between celebration and embodied

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\(^3\)For the full idealistic explanation of embrace, see Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace*, 140-44.

eschatology. In my story, my friends and I shared food and wine, material symbols that strengthened us to dance together in joy. Celebration, which includes embrace, is an immediate physical mode of joy, and a categorical affirmation of affective and *eros*-filled relationship. In celebration, ideally, people with varied abilities can share their joys, their gifts, and their deepest needs with each other.

Moreover, as Volf uses embrace in his texts to promote peace with justice in the world, celebration both causes and testifies to peace. In sacramental communities like the ones this dissertation describes, people of diverse abilities join together and display *eros*-filled energies in ritual and in other ways. Divine and human *eros* can make manifest the peace that Volf describes. Thus, covenantal friendships can actualize embrace as an instrument of peace.

For instance, in an ideal sense, friends may embrace as a celebratory sign of peace and celebration without conflict; my worshipping-communities offer proof of this mode of embrace, which fosters physical and spiritual affirmation and resilience. Unhappily, embraces can also signify betrayal, as they do for Jesus: Judas, one of his closest friends, greets him with a kiss before he hands him to the Romans (Matthew 26:49). Such embraces drain people of life and hope. That said, celebratory embrace, and the grace it offers people, are an integral part of reconciliation. Friends, or enemies who become friends, may embrace in order to seal the affirmation they have experienced in God’s presence. As a facet of celebration, embrace allows people of varied abilities to partake in the abundance of God’s grace. I will return explicitly to embrace in a few pages, where I describe the eschatological outlines of forgiveness.
Celebration and embrace unite, sometimes eschatologically, in shared meals. Specifically, this project has referred to Holy Communion, and to other forms of what Vanier calls “nourishment,” as instances of affective access. Sharing a meal requires practical gestures of support and inclusion, which are eschatological themes. By eating together, people ingest present physical and spiritual sustenance, and anticipate future sharing of culinary bounty. In her Massey Lectures, philosopher Margaret Visser likens table-manners to clear social and affective boundaries, and argues that manners can form people into those willing and able to care for others.\(^5\) Visser’s point is cogent here because, as communal activities, shared meals can portend God’s Reign, gesture towards peace and healing, and embody the divine Erkenntnis (welcome, recognition, and acknowledgement; recall the earlier discussion of Barth) that God’s friends can offer each other as catholic personalities. Moreover, food can facilitate intimacy; even though all human bodies contain the possibility of brokenness and betrayal, meals frequently prioritize human joy over human pain because of the emphasis on mutuality and solidarity.

Beyond their capacities to empower people in their dance of difference and friendship, as in my example from Halloween 2015, celebration and embrace can empower human beings to do God’s will. Even so, Christians across the ability-spectrum often feel hopeless, or helpless, facing the enormity of ableist social and ecclesial structures. The entire project so far has laid out the magnitude of the task that Christians of varied abilities must take up: through the hospitality embodied for and by us in the sacraments, we must work to redeem socially- and spiritually-exclusionary praxes, such as the disconfirmation of faith-

healing services, the bureaucracy of placing stone steps in chapels, and the dehumanizing stares of neighbours of able body.

In light of the problems faced by God’s friends of varied abilities, it may be helpful to recall Jesus’ great gift to humankind. In baptism and Holy Communion, Jesus Christ offers human beings whole and dignified life, to the fullest of our potential(s). God’s life is not simply a “pie-in-the-sky” life that we will claim as our reward at the end of a long and dreary journey through a valley of tears (e.g., Psalm 83:7). Rather, Jesus offers us a model of a life painstakingly dedicated to the inclusion of all people. Fully-human life—Christ’s abundant life—is a life of inclusion; when I danced with my friends in Parkdale during Halloween 2015, or when Jenny offers her friends at church speedy rides in her blue wheelchair, we actualize the strength and nourishment of celebration in sacramental community, and glimpse God’s Reign. Indeed, Jesus’ disruptive “cleansing of the temple,” as it is retold in Matthew 21:12-17, is an eschatological event. Jesus allows the inhabitants of Jerusalem to briefly glimpse God’s Reign as he replaces “all who were selling and . . . buying,” the emissaries of capitalism, with “the blind and the lame,” the most vulnerable people of their society (see Matthew 21:12, 14, NRSV). God’s friends are called to do as Jesus did by offering our sympathy and solidarity to others.

This section has connected celebration and embrace to an embodied eschatology of disability. Celebration is a mode of embodied life where people can freely express joy; examples of celebration include dinners in L’Arche Trosly, and my friends’ Halloween party in Parkdale. Celebration is the simple act of taking joy in life through encounters and rituals that create well-being and growth; celebratory joy anticipates the wholeness of the entire

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6 To reread the touching story of Jenny’s electric-blue wheelchair, see Brett Webb-Mitchell, Dancing with Disabilities: Opening the Church to All God’s Children (Cleveland: United Church, 1996), 31-35.
fragile creation in the Last Days, despite the inherent pain and loss of contingency. Concurrently, embrace is an expression of peace and joy between two or more people; its eschatological content is the parties’ mutual wish for (and corresponding reality of) (w)holistic well-being, and it looks forward to God’s steadfast affirmation of the individual parties in their innate worth and equality at the end of time. As Barth and Haslam observe independently, embrace is possible through the recognition of the other person in him- or herself. Volf also explicitly connects embrace to peace and justice. As vehicles of Jesus’ risen life, celebration and embrace allow Christians of varied abilities to discern and do God’s will, just as Jesus does in the cleansing of the temple.

2. Journeying towards Integrity: Pain, Suffering, and Bodily Transformation

As we have just glimpsed some of the eschatological import of mutual celebrations in sacramental community, we ought also to investigate the eschatological significance of pain within the resurrection. The acknowledgement of Jesus’ presence with us in sacramental communities enables people of all abilities to affirm God’s presence with us in our suffering. The crucified Jesus felt extraordinary pain, because of asphyxiation and blood loss; after his resurrection, he integrated the wounds received into his risen body. With wounded feet, Jesus can still walk through locked doors (John 20:19-23); with wounded hands, he can still eat broiled fish (John 20:9-14). Jesus’ risen body displays both wounded humanity and complete divinity.

In sacramental community, human beings of all abilities are called to embody that same incorporation and integration of pain. John Keats, the English Romantic poet who died

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7For one statement on mutual recognition and welcome between people, see Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, vol. 3.2: 175, 399; for Haslam’s assertions about I-Thou relationships, see Molly C. Haslam, Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability: Human Being as Mutuality and Response (New York: Fordham, 2012), 73-91, 104.
of tuberculosis (1795-1821), understood part of pain’s eschatological significance. Keats states emphatically that the world may indeed be a “vale of soul-making”; in a poignant letter, he speculates to George, his older brother, that suffering enables souls to gain “identities.” He asks, “Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a Soul?” Keats observes that pain can form and toughen human characters.

That said, by making this observation, I do not mean to state that bodily suffering develops souls, or that physical pain and the psychological pains caused by ableist perceptions are identical. Rather, I mean to affirm Keats’ point. Pain reveals the limits of human capacity, and allows human beings to know ourselves uniquely. Pain also discloses our humanity, precisely because our pains contrast sharply with God’s abundant grace to our communities. According to Elaine Scarry, professor of literature and scholar of pain, suffering eats away at sentience, isolates people, and resists the descriptive power of language. Because it erodes sentience and evades precise linguistic capture, pain separates human beings from each other, and interferes with the mutuality of embrace. Pain’s disruption of embrace makes Christ’s connective gift of equity in sacramental community

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9John Swinton asserts, “Raw pain inevitably inspires hard questions,” and makes an important distinction between kinds of evil: while moral evil is the kind of evil that human beings do to each other, natural evil—the kind of evil suffered by many people with disabilities—is evil not under human power, brought about by ordinary events. Swinton wants to offer people tools to resist moral evil, rather than giving them intellectual categories to explain how or why it happens. See Swinton, Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 12, 50-51; for Jesus’ role in redressing evil, see also Thomas E. Reynolds, Vulnerable Communion: a Theology of Disability and Hospitality (New York: Brazos, 2007), 188-89, 197-209.

greater, because by offering us divine and human communion, Christ empowers people of diverse abilities to share both joys and pains.

Despite its aversive qualities, pain can offer human beings signs of God’s heavenly hope. Pain reveals the limitations of all human beings of varied abilities; precisely because it isolates us and recalls our inherent fragility, our suffering reminds us of our need for each other. Pain both centres human beings in their bodies, and points us all towards interdependence. In our pain and want, Christians, and all people, of diverse abilities can long for the present and future restoration of our ambiguous bodies and transient human relationships. Sacramental communities centred on God’s inclusion can aid in the integration of pain.

As a man with spastic cerebral palsy, I am no stranger either to pain in itself, or to its eschatological implications for human diversity and interdependence. When I walk into a wall, or fall onto concrete—events that happen far more often than I want to admit!—I cry out for the resurrection-life made possible through sacramental healing and relationship: I long both for the touch of the Lord Jesus in bread and wine, and the empowerment that my friends can offer me when they embrace me with their love. More poignantly, as a person with scoliosis, I often experience lower-back pain when I have not stretched for several days; I alleviate this pain with calisthenic devices, stretching, and strength-training at the gym. When I experience physical pain in sacramental community, I yearn for the self-giving love and imaginative solidarity to which baptism and Holy Communion invite believers of all abilities. In a proleptic sense, I look forward both to the company of my friends, and to Jesus’ sacramental love—the love that portends God’s joyous, harmonious shalom—in mutual and
interdependent relationship with the communion of the saints. In my pain, I want to know God’s passionate and pain-free future.

Significantly, this eschatological relationship to pain and joy is the reason I have written this dissertation. By writing thus of the relationships of baptism and Holy Communion to divine equality and justice for people of all abilities, I aim to discern the contours of God’s hospitality in my life, and to enact a part of his purpose for me. My life consists (in part) of my pain, God’s promise, and our mutual power. Since I can invite others to acknowledge the pain, power, and promise of my life, I can both embody the irrepressible relationality for which the triune God has formed me, and impart to others the necessity of our interdependence and trust. As I negotiate with my pain, God’s promise, and our power, I gradually discern the shape of God’s grace.

Sharon Betcher asserts that, in our pains, Christians with disabilities often possess that discernment, which she calls the “wisdom that admits suffering.” This wisdom is the evidence of the Last Days that we can present to the world, because when we admit our suffering, we also reveal our desire for its alleviation, and its replacement with God’s dignity and joy. The wisdom that admits suffering acknowledges the connection between vulnerability and pain, even though it does not claim that all suffering is redemptive. Rather, as John Swinton asserts, any community that integrates experiences of suffering—and, in Swinton’s case, moral evil—into its understanding of life must also have the discernment to engage in practices that resist evil. In the fourth chapter of this project, I have articulated

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12John Swinton claims that a practical theodicy demands these praxes. See Swinton, *Raging with Compassion*, 84-89.
several praxes that resist ableism, such as helping each other in small ways without domination, and engaging in covenantal relationships.

Resistance to evil, even in the face of death, is another crucial facet of a sacramental and embodied eschatology of disability that incorporates pain. Jesus’ life, embodied in the sacraments, can offer human beings dignity and joy, even in places of death. Baptism and Holy Communion can energize believers of all abilities for lives of connection and solidarity. For instance, United Church of Christ minister Christine Smith writes of her experiences of “crucifixion” and “resurrection” as she recounts her visit with the Abejas people in Chiapas, Mexico: she knows the outrage and lament of “crucifixion” as she joins the Abejas’ procession around a “sculptural outcry” that commemorates the massacre of forty-five people by the Mexican government on December 22\textsuperscript{nd}, 1997.\textsuperscript{13} Smith decries this cultural and social destruction; nonetheless, she also sees candles lit to re-member the massacre, and during the Communion liturgy, hears the loved ones of those were killed say, “They live with us.”\textsuperscript{14}

The sculpture, the candles, and other objects testify to the solidarity that represents physical and affective access to God’s justice. Furthermore, the Eucharistic celebration binds up the social fabric of the Abejas community, reminding them of their equality with their oppressors, and inviting them to imagine a time when their victimization will be no more. For Smith, the celebration of Communion and the embrace of people who speak three different languages reveal the empowered, risen life of Jesus, the Christ with wounded limbs.

\textsuperscript{13}Swinton might state that the Abejas are here practicing \textit{lament} as a form of resistance to evil. For his powerful discourse on lament as such a tool, see Swinton, \textit{Raging with Compassion}, 103-29.

\textsuperscript{14}For the fuller version of this moving story, and its implications for “the purposes of preaching,” see Christine Smith, “Preaching: Hospitality, De-Centering, Re-membering, and Right Relations,” in \textit{Purposes of Preaching}, ed. Jana Childers (St. Louis: Chalice, 2004), esp. 99-104.
This discourse on pain attests to its import for a sacramental, transformative ecclesiology of disability. While celebration and embrace offer people strength, pain is the sign that cautions believers of all abilities to trust God and each other. Keats and Betcher observe that pain can engender wisdom in Christians of varied abilities. My own pain and the pains of the Abejas witness to God’s multifaceted grace in sacramental community. As a warning-sign, pain invites people to engage in intimate, trusting relationship with each other, and with the God who loves us: the covenantal and catholic relationships of people of diverse abilities embody our eschatological hope for human wholeness, the integrity of all creation, and the incarnation of divine joy. The next section will now demonstrate more fully how forgiveness relates to the Last Days; as we forgive, Christians of all ranges of ability can offer our pain to God, and hope for God’s Reign to flower. As Jürgen Moltmann clarifies, when Christians of diverse abilities suffer alongside other believers, and act in solidarity with people who are oppressed, they—we!—enact the Church’s true holiness as an eschatological trait or principle.\textsuperscript{15}

3. The Heart of the Matter: Volf on Forgiveness and Solidarity

“You keep carryin’ that anger, it’ll eat you up inside.”

(Don Henley, “The Heart of the Matter,” 44.)

In his award-winning ballad “The Heart of the Matter,” Don Henley asks his lover to “put it all behind” her, because “the people in [her] life who . . . hurt [her] pride” are not to blame for her continued bitterness. He claims that his lover must lay down her anger, or it will “eat [her] up inside.”\textsuperscript{16} Henley observes the human tendency to bear grudges for long

periods, a habit that (while it may seem natural) can also consume the grudge-bearer in negative emotion.

Here, Henley probes the content of forgiveness, a significant facet of human life that reveals facets of and embodied eschatology of disability. Forgiveness is complex: briefly, one part of forgiveness is the choice to release another person from one’s anger, and to create emotional boundaries. In inclusive churches, forgiveness occurs when people choose to see God’s Reign of dignity and joy, and to seek justice despite injury and insult. Also, forgiveness is a free offer to offenders to share in God’s Reign; Christ forgives and frees us so that we can forgive and free others. Forgiveness is significant for Christians with disabilities because, when we release our siblings of able body from our anger, we become catholic personalities. Also, as people open to all others, we open ourselves to possible reparation and justice in the long run.

Miroslav Volf takes up the concept of forgiveness where Henley leaves off. In order to enunciate the eschatological import of forgiveness, Volf explores various images of God, depicting God as a creator and a lover who bestows gifts liberally on creation. Divine forgiveness is based in grace: God is not a negotiator or a judge, because humans cannot offer God anything that God does not possess. Neither is God a magnanimous “Santa Claus”

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16 For these starkly poetic claims about forgiveness, see Don Henley, “Heart of the Matter,” End of the Innocence (New York: Geffen, 1989), 41-44.

17 James K. Voiss, S.J., has interpreted forgiveness through multiple lenses, and would probably critique the non-exhaustive definition articulated here. See James K. Voiss, Rethinking Christian Forgiveness: Theological, Philosophical, and Psychological Explorations (Collegeville, MN: Glazier, 2015), e.g., xi-xx, 9-39, 389. Moreover, the theological issues concerning forgiveness and the possibilities of restitution or reparation are complex; because of the nature of this work and my space constraints, I cannot explore these issues here in their fullest nuance.

18 For the splendid idea of God as lover, see Miroslav Volf, Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 28-31, 71-3, 105-10.
Rather, God offers Godself to humankind through media that include the Church, the sacraments, and relationships, in the hope that people will return God’s love, and offer it to others.

Like his mentor Moltmann, Volf offers Christians of all abilities a glimpse into the *eschaton*. As material vehicles of God’s grace, dignity, and joy, baptism and Holy Communion can give Christians of all abilities the power of forgiveness. When we acknowledge the hurts that we do to each other in sacramental community, we can restore part of our covenant with God, make space for altered perception, and glimpse God’s promised *shalom* in our relationships. Ideally, in a sense only partly embodied in churches, this *shalom* may involve both (as Volf suggests) the victim’s looking towards God’s future, and the offender’s seeking forgiveness.

Volf suggests the connection of forgiveness to the transformed perceptions of the resurrection in several ways. First, he asserts that, because blame is an integral part of forgiveness, forgiveness first means “to name and condemn the misdeed.” That said, because absolution of this kind means releasing someone from the debt s/he owes me, it also allows one to “forgo the demand for retribution,” and even to forget sins, as God does. When believers of varied abilities refuse to integrate old offenses into our full humanity, we live out the Last Days. In sacramental community, forgiveness forbids bitterness and portends God’s Kingdom, because reconciliation and justice invite people of all abilities to relate to God and each other in love.

Second, Volf asserts that forgiveness is selfless. Forgiveness, “to forgo a rightful claim against someone who has wronged us,” is for Volf “a gift that we give . . . to the one

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¹⁹For God as a judge, see *ibid*, 24-26, 131-32, 143-45; for God-as-Santa-Claus, see *ibid*, 26-28, 136-38.
who has wronged us, whether we are emotionally healed as a result or not.” Volf means that North American cultures have gotten forgiveness backwards; thus, unhappily, in his lyric above, Don Henley is incorrect. While forgiveness can release us from our anger at another, it is primarily a choice to release the other person from the debt s/he owes to us, in order to live into God’s reconciliation. Forgiveness also creates new relational boundaries between the injured party and the one who injures, and so redresses the effects of hurt, such as anger, spite, bitterness, and betrayal. Forgiveness is an eschatological choice: it is an action that invites God’s shalom, because renewed emotional limits create a new form of wholeness blessed by God.

I have hard experience of forgiveness and its import for resurrection-life. Despite Volf’s idealistic rhetoric, the limitations of forgiveness become apparent to me first: all my life, I have felt sorrow and anger because I have known the judgmental God that Volf describes. My experiences of judgment, projected as they are, emerge from two places. First, I feel anger because my body does not fit urban architecture, especially Toronto’s glass, steel, and concrete!

For instance, as I addressed in the first chapter, in mid-March 2012, I fell down the stairs. At one moment, since I had just given a class-lecture on Christology, I felt like a star! In the next moment, I lay at the bottom of the stairs at odd angles, as terrible pains radiated through my left leg. In my pain, I was bemused, and called on my friends for help, including buying me groceries, and having patience as my foot healed. Volf is correct; I can release a person from the debt s/he owes me, but how can I forgive a staircase, or an obtruding stone? As an eschatological practice, forgiveness may be better suited to

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20For Volf’s discussion of the parts of forgiveness, see ibid, 166-74, esp. 166, 169, 173-4; for the quotation about emotional healing, see ibid, 169.
people than to environments or social systems; nonetheless, reconciliation is vital to earthly life for believers of all abilities.

Second, I feel sadness and anger because, as I grew up, I did not always find, in my family, the physical and verbal affirmation that I needed to flourish. Because it was difficult for the members of my family to affirm each other, I sometimes feel bursts of anger that leave me unable to focus, and I often hesitate to trust other people with forms of touch more personal than a handshake. While many of my friends have helped me to consistently feel the love and joy that God brings to people of all abilities, these psychological and spiritual wounds remain. It is difficult for me to envision, let alone enact, forgiveness in parts of my family; that said, God calls me to that reconciliation, because it provides the basis for renewed relationship. Rather than hearing the many words left unsaid, I long someday to speak openly and lovingly to my family, for that loving speech portends the hope and joy of God’s shalom, of divine integrity and joy.

To offer my readers a sense of the eschatological content of forgiveness, I have discussed my anger and sadness concerning my physical environment and my relationships with my family. Although I cannot forgive my environment, I can work with my body so that it functions more positively within its limited range of motion (the next section will describe my athletic experiences). Additionally, while I struggle to fill the gaps that my family has left in my affective life, I choose to release my relatives from some of the debt that they owe me, and I choose to affirm myself. My choice to forgive empowers me to reach out in person and by phone to my family, and to engage happily and fruitfully in their lives. God has forgiven me through the media of bread and wine. Thus, because in sacramental community I know God’s forgiveness, I choose to forgive my family, and feel the nearness of God’s shalom.
The experiences I have narrated of the Jeremiah Community and Wine Before Breakfast aid my ongoing, eschatological quest to release my family from my anger; the sacramental character of church-community opens possibilities for the mutual support of believers of all abilities in clemency.

Rita Nakashima Brock affirms the necessity of communal support in forgiveness thus: “The resurrection affirms that no one person alone can overcome brokenness. Each of us lives in each other in Christa/Community. In caring for each other and in passionately affirming erotic power, we struggle on our journey to create spaces for it to flourish.”

Brock means that God’s Reign occurs when people of varied abilities use human eros to increase each other’s integrity, and to create communities that include solidarity with oppressed people; indeed, in an ecclesiological sense, this is what being the Body of Christ means. The desire for God’s justice compels our communal journey towards its present and future expression. Although Brock’s discourse does not affirm bodily resurrection as such, her analysis coheres with the eschatological themes discussed above, including embrace, forgiveness, and solidarity.

The embrace of solidarity and forgiveness among Christians with and without disabilities in inclusive church-communities can contribute to a realized eschatology of disability in one final way. The sacraments embody God’s forgiving and tender touch, but they also make manifest God’s relentless pursuit of righteousness with God’s people. Baptism and Holy Communion actualize Christ’s presence amongst believers through equity and true holiness. James White asserts, “The sacraments’ contribution to the battle for justice

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21See Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: a Christology of Erotic Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 103. “Christa/Community” is one of Brock’s names for the community formed by erotic power.
is contained in the term ‘persistence’,” and argues that Holy Communion is both a source of sacred power for the Christian community and a vehicle of “condemnation” for any society that falls short of God’s Reign. Gutierrez adds that the Communion elements of bread and wine symbolize, and realize, justice because God uses them to promote human liberation from oppressive situations.

The physical re-membrance of Christ in the elements, and the spiritual and social re-membrance of our oppressed brothers and sisters in (for instance) France, Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and the United States testifies to forgiveness, and to embodied and eschatological hope: whenever people lament the destruction of war and terrorist attacks, part of the redress of that lament is the salvific work of reconciliation between conflicting parties. Volf asserts that God has forgiven human violence through Jesus’ cross; through his broken body, Jesus forgives the ways that Christians of all abilities disconfirm, shame, exclude, and hurt each other. Thus, in the Eucharist, God’s friends can celebrate God’s radical hospitality to humankind: in particular, Christians of all abilities can rejoice in the new relationships born of Christ’s self-donation, and can embody the heavenly hope of access to God’s equality and justice for all people.

Justice mediated through the sacraments is an eschatological event for people with disabilities, just as it is for other oppressed groups, because of the embodied vulnerability of

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22 See James F. White, Sacraments as God’s Self-Giving (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), 108, and 110; for another view of a contemplative life that anticipates the eschaton, see also Fensham, To the Nations for the Earth, 53, 63-4.


24 For this special conciliatory function of the Eucharist, see Volf, Exclusion & Embrace, 115, 121-25, 129.
these rituals. The material elements offer people the grace to forgive, and to hope for redemption. For example, as I pray in chapel at school, or at church in Parkdale, I am united in spirit with Syrian refugees. Human *eros*, freed by Holy Communion, empowers me to forgive by praying for peace in Syria, and by working for peace in my context. C/communion also allows Christians of varied abilities to forgive each other, offering hope for renewed and redeemed communal life.

Moreover, the ritual elements of baptism and Holy Communion invite human beings of varied abilities not simply to perform reconciliation, but to live out renewed hope for human and creaturely integrity. In God’s Reign, I hope that I will no longer suffer back-pain; Ian hopes that he will possess two functional ears; Jane hopes that her legs will be consistently sturdy, and hopes for ramps for her wheelchair when they are not. The triune God’s perichoretic dance, emulated in human relationship, empowers our hope for a different world, and witnesses to Jesus’ resurrection-life. Nancy Eiesland asserts one of the meanings of resurrection: “Resurrection . . . offers hope that our non-conventional, and sometimes difficult, bodies participate fully in the *Imago Dei* and that God whose nature is love and who is on the side of justice and solidarity is touched by our experience.”25 I affirm Eiesland’s conclusion, for the hope of renewed, transformed life in my body motivates me each day. My athletic experiences especially awaken me to God’s resurrection-life in my body; athletic activity offers me the energy to hope and work for the dignity and joy that God promises to believers of all abilities.

4. Reaching Out to Touch the Flame: Proleptic Reflections on Athletic Experience

I want to run, I want to hide
I want to tear down the walls that hold me inside
I want to reach out and touch the flame
Where the streets have no name . . .

(U2, “Where the Streets Have No Name,” 1-4)

In these opening lines from U2’s anthem “Where the Streets Have No Name,” singer Bono declares his intention to go “where the streets have no name” through the exercise of power: he wants to run, hide, break down barriers, and grasp the spiritual source of his energies. This project shares Bono’s concerns. By writing about multifaceted access as I have done, I aim to tear down walls too: I want to explore the texture and width of the ableist barriers that prevent the full ecclesial participation of Christians with disabilities. Also, like Bono, I want to reach out and touch the “flame” of divine and human eros. That creative spark, present in human bodies and relationships as well as social systems, anticipates God’s Reign of dignity and joy, because it invites human beings to create the vulnerability, healing, and solidarity that God desires for all God’s creatures. Simply, exercise helps me to see, touch, and share that spark.

Because it channels human eros, I delight in physical exertion: I love to go to the gym. I enjoy it because I have learned how many of my muscles work, and know that I can (for instance) lift one hundred pounds with little ache or strain; I appreciate meeting new people, and have established an easy rapport with several of the young men and women who work at the athletics desk at Hart House at the University of Toronto. For me, workouts at the gym are a sacramental experience, because they offer me several avenues into the holistic
well-being of God’s Reign of dignity and joy. Below, I will elucidate three of these interconnected avenues.

First, my athletic experiences, particularly at Hart House, the student-union building at the University of Toronto, contribute to a realized eschatology of disability by offering me glimpses of physical access to God’s equality and justice, and addressing some of my needs for bodily and spiritual healing. When I began my regimen in autumn 2007, I felt nervous, and ashamed of my body; I had internalized great shame and disconfirmation. At twenty-three, I still felt that my body lacked attractiveness, strength, and integrity relative to “true” athletes. Because my legs and arms do not always do what I demand, I feel ashamed and angry, and I know what Paul calls the conflict between the laws of the body and the Spirit (see Romans 7:14-23, esp. 23).

Nonetheless, as I continued to go to the gym, I noticed my new strength that allowed me to fulfill more of my physical needs, and to do specific tasks. Walking long distances used to tire me, but running and bicycling empower me to undertake longer journeys. Moreover, shoulder-workouts allow me to lift heavier objects, such as boxes of books, or furniture; thus, I can help my friends move house, and go hiking without losing my balance. Moreover, greater strength and flexibility in my legs gives me confidence: my strides are longer and quicker because I possess greater core-strength and balance. These changes offer me the healing that comprises part of physical access to God’s equality and justice; for me, working out is eschatological, because the healing and strength I experience at the gym help me to intuit the contours of embodied resurrection for myself. I do not believe that all people with disabilities will be completely healed or offered “perfect” bodies in the resurrection, because God desires our diversity as much as our wholeness. That said, when I work out, I
feel the dignity and joy of greater physical function. I sense that my regimen is continually transforming me into what Paul calls a “new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:18, NRSV), a new person full of God’s life.

Second, my athletic experiences contribute to an embodied eschatology of disability because they allow me to experience affective access to God’s equality and justice through mutual encounter. My newfound confidence in my body has helped me to make some new friends: some of the kinesiology students who act as trainers for other students, and the older men who work out alongside me, accept me as part of the group. They can see my physical weakness, and they affirm my newfound sense of accomplishment. The trainers show me how to do things like lift forty-five-pound steel plates onto the leg-press, and the old men joke with me. These bounded friendships bring me joy, and facilitate spiritual healing as well as the physical recuperation that I have already experienced. Thus, I contend that Hart House is one place where people of varied abilities can express themselves fully, a place of true justice.

Let me give another example. In May 2014, I grew tired of using the rowing machines to work out my shoulders, so I asked one of the trainers for advice. She told me that the chin-up bar would have the same effect on my shoulders as the rowing machines. My friend showed me how to use the chin-up bar: during my first attempt, I pulled out the pin too fast, and injured myself. My friend helped me up, and we resumed our training. After a short time, I performed twelve chin-ups; my friend affirmed me both then and at intervals thereafter. After about five months, I had gained enough confidence to perform forty chin-ups independently and safely.
In the anecdote above, my friend’s affirmation offered me a foretaste of eschatological hope, because she chose to befriend me on my quest for healing. In a small way, that encounter liberated the same erotic energies as the sacraments. My friend acted in solidarity with me, and patiently affirmed me in my body; she offered me patience, empathy, and the welcome of difference that I have enunciated in Chapters Two and Three. Her acknowledgement of my need, and her patience with me, allowed us to begin the journey towards theological equality: we were able to fully and creatively be ourselves, in human and divine dignity. I contend that the Spirit was empowering our interaction, and offering us a degree of wholeness and joy. Our encounter recalled our connection to the divine in a material sense. My friend from the athletics desk may not have known it, but by teaching me to use the chin-up bar at Hart House, she offered me God’s self-giving and other-seeking love, and (incrementally) embodied divine fullness.

Third, building on that same concept of covenantal relationship, my athletic experiences offer me an entry into a contemplative spirituality that clarifies the eschatological hope of Christians with disabilities. Paul Wadell writes that the contemplative person “wants to see things as they really are in themselves because [s/]he knows that seeing is essential to goodness.”

My exercise regimen certainly helps me to see things more clearly, even if I cannot truly see them as they are; the release of endorphins as I exercise allows me to think with clarity and calm, and in a way not completely captured by prosaic description, enables me to feel God’s presence in my pains and stresses. My workouts alleviate some of the stress that I constantly carry in my body; when some of this affective burden is lifted, I feel more kindly disposed towards other people, especially my loved ones.

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26 See Paul J. Wadell, Becoming Friends: Worship, Justice, and the Practice of Christian Friendship (Grand Rapids, Mi: Brazos, 2002), 126.
Moreover, exercise empowers me physically and spiritually to work, and to pray, for increased equality and justice in the world.

I use the word “kindly” above deliberately: once exercise has centred me on my bodily experiences of God’s grace, I can act simply and with dignity towards others. For instance, I can offer myself more freely to friends on a Wednesday or Saturday evening, because the gym restores my affective and spiritual balance, and offers me dignity and joy. Hart House indirectly reminds me of the movements of the Spirit that I have seen in sacramental community. My workouts relate to the sacraments because they empower me to enact the healing, strength, and intimacy that baptism and Holy Communion promise and provide. Physical exercise allows me to touch the flame of which Bono sings: the endorphins released by exertion—the human *eros* that frees my body and imagination—empower me to bear God’s relational Image, and to offer myself to others in integral and inspired service. My gym time informs my dissertation, and my work and play in sacramental community, because it enacts the same re-membering as baptism and Communion, reminding me of the earthy and salvific promise of the human body.

In this brief section, I have attempted to outline some small glimpses of the heavenly hope of Christians of varied abilities for Jesus’ risen life, using my athletic experiences as a focus. This section has alluded to the ways that my workout-regimens at Hart House make space for renewed physical strength and healing, surprising and sacramental friendships, and contemplative spirituality that empowers me to serve God and others in the world. These qualities point to God’s inclusive, harmonious and joyous *shalom* for Christians of varied abilities because my workouts accent God’s redemption of my body. As I ride the recumbent bike or mount the chin-up bar, I can feel my scrambled neurons being enlivened by the
Spirit; moreover, although my experience of resurrection is incomplete, as I lift weights, I feel the enthusiastic embrace of the One who made bread, wine, and human flesh.

These limited physical and spiritual experiences, mediated by the Hart House gym, link to the Church’s eschatological hope because they provide me and my friends with tactile and tensile relationships and with joy. Bounded, intimate encounters like those described above can allow people of diverse abilities to feel the joy that God has in store for all God’s friends. The next section will expand on these eschatological insights by using Amos Yong’s pneumatological work on disability as a palette for a partial portrait of resurrection-life.

B. Pain and Promise: The Eschatological Significance of Present Transformation

As significant as God’s future Reign of dignity and joy will be for Christians of varied abilities, present transformation is equally important. In an ideal sense, every human life can give and receive joy, irrespective of ability or agency; moreover, every human life can be a conduit for God’s love and grace. Even though the discrimination and oppression examined in Chapter Two and throughout this project is part of human life, people of varied abilities can partially glimpse, taste, and otherwise sense the wholeness, harmony, and blessing that God promises to us in this life. Moreover, even though the pain and suffering articulated earlier still occurs in the lives of people with disabilities, God’s compassion and joy also inform our lives.

As with every community, life in sacramental churches is a process containing both promise and pain. In their theological and sociological arguments about disability, Amos Yong, Sharon Betcher, and James Charlton enunciate different parts of that process, and reveal the beauty and joy of embodied human life. When people know and accept their
limitations, God’s new life can flower precisely from the pain. When our communities lift up our pains and illnesses to God, good can blossom, and human lives can flower like the blossoms of Heaven.\textsuperscript{27} This section will explore Yong’s insights on the Holy Spirit, the resurrection-life, and disability; by doing so, it will reveal certain ways that Christians of varied abilities can redeem our pains.

1. **Access as Transformed Bodily Experience in Yong**

In *Theology and Down Syndrome*, where he relates the life-experiences of his younger brother Mark, a man with Down Syndrome, to theology, Amos Yong outlines a “pneumatological eschatology.”\textsuperscript{28} This term entails a vision of the Last Days, and of resurrection, that emerges from the Spirit’s transformative work. As already discussed in Chapter One, Yong bases his eschatology on Paul’s account of bodily transformation and redemption in 1 Corinthians 15:40-49 (see also, e.g., Romans 8:23), and Gregory of Nyssa’s doctrine of *expectasis*, the soul’s infinite journey into God’s love. These two sources sketch the contours of potential resurrection for believers with disabilities, and reveal the source of our healing.\textsuperscript{29}

Yong asserts that “Paul teaches a resurrection of the body that preserves but also transforms personal identity.” Furthermore, resurrected bodies—regardless of their previous abilities—will be “glorious,” will attest the Spirit’s life-giving powers, and will resemble the

\textsuperscript{27} John Swinton argues that, while not all suffering is redemptive, true friends can help their loved ones to live through their experiences of evil as a witness to God’s unending love. See Swinton, *Raging with Compassion*, 177-78 and 216-27, especially 221-24. For a cogent argument for the expansion of hospitality towards people with disabilities, rather than their “theological trivialization,” see also Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 29-34, 37-39.

\textsuperscript{28} Some of the information in this section comes from one of my papers. See Michael Walker, “Love, Liturgy, and Life: Disability Re-Examined Via Reinders, Hauerwas and Yong” (“Disability and Theology” [TSX7090] paper, Toronto School of Theology, December 2012), 19-21.

\textsuperscript{29} Moltmann clarifies that Holy Communion impels that healing and risen life. For the Eucharist’s connections to healing, see Moltmann, *Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 190-93, 252-53, and 275-76.
wounded body of the risen Jesus. Yong argues that Paul uses adjectives like “powerful,” “imperishable,” and “in incorruptible” to attest God’s elevation of human bodies to God’s terms, rather than to reify an ideology of strength. Yong’s argument coheres with my interpretation of the sacraments’ gifts of healing and strength, and my discourse on my athletic experiences: the Spirit will offer all risen believers strengthened and healed bodies that fully disclose God’s grace. In particular, empowered by the Spirit, bodies with difference will both manifest God’s Image through confident encounter, and express physical healing and integrity.

Yong’s claims ought to give all Christians with disabilities eschatological hope, because they mean that the Church elevates and honours the weakened parts of Christ’s Body above the strong ones. In particular, Yong’s argument, via Paul, that the risen Jesus is the first instance of embodied resurrection, can motivate our hopes for bodily empowerment: since Jesus can walk through walls and eat broiled fish with wounded limbs, so our different bodies, with their limits and pains, will be blessed in similar ways by the Spirit’s life-giving eros.

Yong also observes the present significance of diverse gifts for an inclusive Church. For instance, he asserts that military veterans and children with intellectual disabilities can enrich the Church with their gifts; he also claims that chaplaincies, veterans’ associations, and inclusive Christian-education classrooms can help such people to realize these gifts.

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30 For all these claims about the resurrected body, see Amos Yong, Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimaging Disability in Late Modernity (Waco, TX: Baylor, 2007), 272-4; for a strikingly-different portrait of resurrection, see also Eiesland, Disabled God, 98-105.

31 For all these claims about the gifts people with disabilities can offer the Church, see Amos Yong, The Bible, Disability, and the Church: a New Vision of the People of God (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 106-112, esp. 107-10.
When Christians of all abilities serve each other, the Church can embody God’s joy in vibrant wholeness.

Furthermore, Yong’s reflection on Gregory of Nyssa’s doctrine of *epectasis* reveals heavenly hope for Christians with disabilities by measuring the *eschaton*. Gregory argues that God’s grace propels human souls towards God’s love. Thus, Macrina—Gregory’s sister who developed a tumour—will retain her scars in eternity. Moreover, the sanctifying process could continue forever, as the Spirit transforms people as they are. This facet of *epectasis* suggests that God loves to transform human beings, allows believers to resist the conviction that disabilities will be normalized or erased at death, and allows Yong to assert that, because *epectasis* is partial, disabled Christians may keep their wounds and “phenotypical features” in the resurrection.\(^\text{32}\)

Yong’s claim about the resurrected identities of people with disabilities makes profound sense in present sacramental communities. Communion aids the perpetual process of sanctification by inviting people of all abilities to re-membrance. Throughout our lives, we consume Christ’s broken body, and drink Christ’s shed blood. Thereafter, the Communion elements refract our brokenness and make us whole, because the bread and wine remind us of our availability to, and vulnerability with, each other. Enlivened by the Spirit, believers with disabilities will recognize their own bodies in the resurrection, and know themselves as God’s children forever. This claim reinforces the catholicity of a Church that includes disability.

\(^{32}\)See Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 282.
Significantly, Yong observes that Isaiah 56:3-5, Jeremiah 31:8, Micah 4:6, and Zephaniah 3:19 all proclaim God’s love for people who are blind, deaf, and lame.\textsuperscript{33} Just as physical impairments will be transformed in the \textit{eschaton}, believers with disabilities will become more fully themselves in transformed environments. Yong also implies the possibility of universal salvation for all: the \textit{eschaton} will facilitate not only bodily, but relational healing. Thus, he asks Christians of able body to welcome Christians with disabilities, rather than trying to cure us.\textsuperscript{34}

Yong’s pneumatological reflections can ground an embodied and experiential eschatology of disability. His assertions about the Spirit’s life-giving powers in 1 Corinthians 15 can allow Christians of varied abilities to anticipate God’s transformative blessing. In the present, hospitable actions in the Church inclusive of disability can display the dignity and joy of the Last Days: the faithful community addressed in Chapter Four will offer the world outside the Church glimpses of God’s desire for all creation in the world to come. Moreover, when \textit{shalom} arrives, God will offer human bodies healing and strength, in the midst of our wounds.

For instance, as described in Chapter Three, offering a family with a wheelchair-user child an accessible van can empower a child to actively participate in her friends’ lives. Furthermore, these experiences can have an infinite length and depth, as Yong’s reading of Gregory points out: when Jenny—Brett Webb-Mitchell’s young friend in the electric-blue wheelchair—is resurrected, she may no longer use assistive technology, but will still recognize herself as God’s beloved child who used to zip through a church in a neon-blue

\textsuperscript{33}It is noteworthy that eunuchs—persons who are castrated—are unwelcome in the Jewish Temple (Deuteronomy 23:1), but are later welcome in the baptismal community (Acts 8:26-39).

\textsuperscript{34}For these claims about universal salvation, see Yong, \textit{Theology and Down Syndrome}, 285, 292-5.
power wheelchair. The doctrine of *expectasis* allows people of varied abilities to ponder the mystery of promise mixed with pain. Moreover, since disability testifies to human interdependence and need for trust, it is a gift; it is also a vital feature of human embodiment, and thus requires welcome.

Yong’s claims about the significance of the Church’s present embodiment of resurrection hope and joy testify to the significance of the ecclesial mission to the whole world, beyond the inclusion of persons with disabilities. In that light, Jürgen Moltmann asserts that the Church is both *latent* and *manifest*: the Church is latent when, as a sacramental community, it prepares itself to testify to Jesus’ presence in the world. Moreover, the Church becomes manifest whenever it acts out or embodies that testimony.\(^{35}\)

I have asserted throughout this project that the Church can become latent in the ways that Moltmann describes, so that in the abundant Reign of God it will manifest God’s glorious, generous love. As the latter half of this project has depicted, when the Church includes all kinds of essential difference, it partly possesses and testifies to God’s immanent (materially present) love, power, equality, and justice. Moreover, my summative Conclusions chapter will explore the implications of an inclusive Church’s mission for other groups of people, because Christians with disabilities are not the only ones who can benefit from an alternative ecclesial episteme centred in sacrament. All other people who are vulnerable, such as people of colour, queer Christians, children, and older people, can also participate more fully in open and loving church-communities.

Present, realized eschatology in these terms—the embodiment of the Church’s global mission—resembles the partial but joyful realization of access. Access is made manifest in

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\(^{35}\) For more on the latent and manifest Church, see again Moltmann, *Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 357-61; for more on the manifest Church in particular, see 275-80.
the anticipatory glimpses of God’s *shalom* through our experiences of equality and justice. On a societal level, the heavenly hope of access for all resembles movements that resist cultural forces such as racism, sexism, fascism, and ableism. For instance, the Women’s March on Washington on January 21st, 2017 occasioned a corresponding array of protests around the globe that both proclaimed female and male equality, and vehemently decried the U.S. Republican administration’s treatment of women.\(^\text{36}\) Around the world, for all groups, equality and justice resemble empowerment, and the sharing of goods and resources, in relationships of solidarity.

This section has used Yong’s pneumatological and ecclesiological insights to illustrate resurrection-life for Christians with disabilities. Yong’s discourse on the Spirit’s revitalizing and empowering effect on human bodies clarifies my contentions about the sacramental access to justice provided by my exercise-regimen. Moreover, Yong’s examination of *epectasis* reveals the length of the Spirit’s transformation of people with disabilities, and affirms us both in our phenotypical features and our identities. Simultaneously, some of Yong’s claims about the eschatological future also impact other vulnerable people, such as women and queer Christians. Yong’s claims are significant for a realized eschatology of disability because they allow people with diverse abilities to integrate our pains. Just as a previous section briefly examined my own experiences of pain in eschatological terms, so the next section will plumb the depths of human limitation for

heavenly hope. This section will expand my previous reflections on the eschatological, even salvific, lessons of pain by examining some believers’ lived experiences of illness using Sharon Betcher’s postmodern paradigm of bodily wholeness.

2. Illness as Cognitive Fluidity in Betcher

Someone swears his true love
Until the end of time
Another runs away
Separate or united?
Healthy or insane?

(Audioslave, “Be Yourself,” 17-21.)

In the above quotation, popular music again clarifies part of the heavenly hope of Christians with disabilities. In Audioslave’s 2005 smash-hit single “Be Yourself,” lead singer Chris Cornell describes both the covenant-faithfulness outlined in Chapter Four, and the ultimate betrayal of abandonment, a fate to which many people with disabilities are accustomed. In five spare, poetical lines of verse, Cornell covers the whole ground traversed by this dissertation.

That said, by lyrically asserting these relational and spiritual polarities, Cornell creates the conditions for their dissection. Both oaths of endless loyalty—the chesed or covenant-love described in Chapters One and Four—and running away from commitment are instances of “normal” human behaviour. As he sings in the refrain, self-acceptance grounds human relationships, and manifests our ultimate happiness or well-being: “To be yourself is all that you can do.”37 Audioslave’s song is pertinent to this exploration of illness as a harbinger of eschatological hope for Christians with disabilities because, whether one is “healthy” or “insane,” one enters into life and genuinely becomes authentic by accepting

37See Audioslave, “Be Yourself,” Out of Exile (Los Angeles: Interscope, 2005), e.g., 11-12.
one’s strengths and weaknesses. More simply, people’s acceptance of their pains can buttress their integrity.

I state that the acceptance of pain grounds integrity. Because of the scoliosis that accompanies my cerebral palsy, I suffer chronic pain in my back and legs. Whenever I do not stretch my hamstrings and quadriceps daily or at least weekly, my legs and back hurt. As I wrote above, I want the pain to stop. I want to feel strength in my right leg so that someday I can kick a soccer-ball with my as-yet-unborn children. When my body hurts, it is telling me that I need to respect it before I can perform other activities. If I do not respect it, I will experience low-level, and sometimes pronounced, pain, which denies me physical access to God’s grace. Thus, even though pain is a tool, I want release from physical pain in the Last Days. Pain can teach people that bodily inequities require redress, but amplified pains can deny joy to God’s friends.

Sharon Betcher indirectly affirms all these claims, observing the universal longing to be healthy. That said, in globalized cultures health is often understood as that which is free of illness; health is “a territory to be held,” and an instrument of social “control” and “civility.” Citing Gilles Deleuze and Friedrich Nietzsche, Betcher argues that the idealist metaphysics practiced by the heirs of the Enlightenment creates health as a place of bodily transcendence. Betcher claims that modern philosophies view health as a phenomenon, even though it is actually a process where people discover the ways that they can experience well-being and joy.38

Indeed, as my reflections on athletic activity may clarify, health is not biological transcendence for Christians with diverse abilities. Rather, our true health, and our

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38 For her thoughts on the Enlightenment paradigm of illness, see Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*, 168, 161.
embodiment of heavenly hope, consists in our embrace of limitation and our affirmation of interdependence. True health means asking people for help when we need it. Significantly, Betcher claims that Deleuze “puts out the welcome mat to illness,” because illness allows one to recognize one’s limits. Chris Vais, a Canadian Presbyterian minister who died of ALS, might add that healthy embodied relationships are part of God’s promised eschatological hope and wholeness.39

Betcher, Deleuze, and Vais all imply that illness conveys divine grace, because it allows people to observe and enjoy small bodily sensations. Betcher asserts, “Illness can give back the body’s relationship to the world.”40 When Christians of varied abilities feel ill, we can feel our bodies telling us to slow down, and can listen to our bodies. Thus, rather than writing my dissertation, I can drink a cup of coffee, or listen to birdsong. Indeed, my reflections on chronic pain also add nuance to my earlier discourse on “soul-making” à la Keats. The school of pain is only the first step along the journey into God’s grace. At its best, pain teaches people humility before God, but pain cannot exist forever. In the present, divine and human healing and affection limit our suffering, and in the future, God will remove it. Even though Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” limits his elation at seeing God’s Reign, the Spirit offers all believers present grace in our pains, and will transform all our pains in the future (2 Cor. 12:1-10, 1 Cor. 15:42-49).

In light of the significance of pain, Kathy Black and Rita Nakashima Brock independently describe the social and physical ramifications of disease and illness. As

39For Betcher and Deleuze’s insights, see ibid, 162-3; for the eschatological hope of Chris Vais’ journey with ALS, see Chris Vais, For Words: a Journal of Hope and Healing (Toronto: Greenmor, 2002), 96-100, 107-11.

40See Betcher, Spirit and the Politics of Disablement, 176.
already stated in Chapter One, Black defines disease as a process whereby biological signals create what she calls “socially recognizable meanings.”\(^{41}\) Disease affects the body, while—by contrast—illness is a social construct: it disrupts one’s public image, and affects the body’s relationships to the world. Brock expands on Black’s insights thus: “Sickness points to the social and relational dimensions of individual disease. Sickness reveals brokenheartedness, and produces suffering.”\(^{42}\) For Brock, disease shows the bodily manifestations of human beings’ inner pains, and creates further pain because it augments our inner alienation. Brock’s point requires extrapolation, because alienation can also refer obliquely to the lack of access to equality and justice experienced by most people with disabilities: we are alienated from our society because society deems our bodies unfit, or not-quite-right. This project has aimed to describe this partial alienation, and to testify to its contrast, theoretical and practical access to God’s dignity and joy.

In order to redress the physical and spiritual alienation of Christians with diverse abilities, it is important to create the conditions for us to name our pains. Elaine Scarry contends that, while pain in itself is not communicable, institutions that allow human beings to bring pain to speech allow the recreation of human life and culture.\(^{43}\) In that light, Christians of all abilities can most clearly serve each other, and articulate the heavenly hope that resides in affective relationships, by listening to each other’s pains, and helping each other to talk about them. In Christ, and in sacramental communities embodying divine


\(^{42}\)See Brock, *Journeys by Heart*, 76.

\(^{43}\)See Scarry, *Body in Pain*, e.g., 4-17, 282-91.
hospitality, God graciously incorporates human pains, and calls us to integrate each other’s hurts in like manner.

For instance, describing the import of lament for practical theodicy, John Swinton retells Nelle Morton’s account of a woman who felt that her pain was heard into speech in a story-circle. The woman told her story of abuse, and the other women listened silently and with empathy. This is the empathic, eschatological listening that I referred to earlier when I outlined the connection between compassion and care; all Christians ought to listen to each other in this way. This is why I have argued that believers of all abilities must accept their own pain(s). [Ubuntu: I am because we are. To love others, we must first recognize our own needs.

The God who alleviates human and creaturely pains through sacramental community invites people with disabilities to accept our pains and to patiently meditate on our loneliness. Thus, it is fitting that Vanier begins his explorations of human ontology with loneliness: he contends that loneliness is an inescapable, and essential, aspect of human life. He calls loneliness a “disease” and an absence of creativity; that said, he also claims that love can move people from deep, enervating loneliness to healing and belonging. Furthermore, Vanier states that people of all abilities can grow into healthy relationships by accepting their limitations.

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46 For these meditations on loneliness, see Vanier, *Becoming Human* (Toronto: Paulist, 1998), 12-13, 8.
While I agree with Vanier that love can move people who experience loneliness to relational spaces of healing and belonging, I am not stating that human beings ought to experience the loneliness before they feel the love! For more than twenty years, until I came to Toronto, I myself knew loneliness as a constant companion. Instead, I use Vanier’s words to encourage the building of loving and just communities for and by people of all abilities in the Church. Building on this dissertation, I want to create the conditions for the emergence of vital and radically-generous groups of people that herald God’s abundant and joyous Reign. Indeed, when people of all abilities understand their loneliness and need for love, and when they accept that self-knowledge, they can increase the Church’s unity and catholicity by accepting other people as they are, and by transforming isolating ecclesial and social structures.

Vanier’s claims about loneliness testify to the heavenly hope of Christians of varied abilities because his words focus readers on Jesus Christ, the One who brings human beings out of isolation into rich communal life. This Christocentric focus can also contextualize Black’s and Brock’s arguments about disease: again, when Jesus heals people, he both cures their diseases and redresses the deep wounds of their social and personal alienation.\(^{47}\) The woman with the flow of blood exemplifies this integrative healing, because—knowing the depth of her own need—she reaches out to touch Jesus and to grasp the power of the community that can restore her life (Mark 5:25-34).\(^{48}\) The woman grasps her own erotic power, or human *eros*, in order to seek personal and social healing.\(^{49}\)

\(^{47}\)See Black, *Healing Homiletic*, 51-3.

\(^{48}\)See *ibid*, 151-56; see also another interpretation of this same passage in Brock, *Journeys by Heart*, 83-4.

\(^{49}\)For thorough definitions of *eros*, see again Brock, *Journeys by Heart*, 35-42, and Pamela Dickey Young, *Re-Creating the Church: Creating Communities of Eros* (Harrisburg: Trinity, 2000), 1-18, 30.
restores the woman to agency and joy; through her conversation with Jesus (5:33-34), she experiences an astounding social resurrection. Jesus Christ, the world’s liberator, can metaphorically and socially free people of diverse abilities from loneliness, and create the conditions for multifaceted access to equality and justice in God’s present, eternal, and joyous shalom. The Lord Jesus is our strength for the journey.

Nonetheless, as asserted previously, people who are excluded from ableist societies experience fatigue in our struggles for justice, and fatigue hinders our desires to actualize shalom, the divine dignity, well-being, healing, and liberation that Jesus offers. Nancy Eiesland asserts that for people with disabilities, fatigue disrupts the “political action” of “holding our bodies together.”\(^{50}\) Despite our passionate efforts, there are still not enough wheelchair ramps; many people with hearing impairments do not hear the words of love and grace spoken from lectern and pulpit; our friends with schizophrenia and issues of addiction still feel fear, guilt, isolation and shame. Who can save us from these b/Bodies of death—both from the Church captive to ableist norms, and from our pained, tired, and impaired bodies (Romans 7:24)?

There is no easy fix for our ills. In the face of illness, violence, neglect, and death, the most affirmative statement is that Jesus Christ is present to us in the immersive water, broken bread, and poured-out wine of the Christ-centred community. Church-communities founded on empathy and empowering service can correct the exclusion and burnout that Christians with disabilities often experience in our constant engagement with the hegemony of ableism.

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\(^{50}\)See Eiesland, Disabled God, 94-96.
Intentional, covenantal relationships among people of diverse abilities help build ecclesial access to God’s equality and justice, such that everyone can flourish.\textsuperscript{51} These intimate relationships of promise demand a perception of the larger Whole that includes all believers. In order to offer everyone compassion, joy, and tender empathy, Christians of diverse abilities need to engage in what historical theologian Stephen Bevans calls “prophetic dialogue,” a churchly conversation that involves contemplative listening and seeing in our context, and then acting on the Spirit’s initiative for social, political, and ecological liberation.\textsuperscript{52} When God’s friends of diverse abilities encounter each other in personal and sacramental relationship, their pain can become a sign of God’s Reign, because it points them towards interdependence.

This section has explored the import of illness for the heavenly hope of Christians with disabilities and examined illness’ fluidity as a category of knowledge. Illness and pain indicate the limits of human bodies, and ask people to slow down in order to experience joy and harmony. Moreover, the section has affirmed Betcher’s argument that illness allows people with disabilities to relate to the world anew. It also connects some of my own experiences of pain to my paradigm of eschatological hope, and links social healing to the removal of personal or social isolation. In the final section of this chapter, and of this project, I will examine what James Charlton calls “raised consciousness” and “empowered consciousness” in light of a celebratory and embodied eschatology of disability. This section will complete the analysis of a realized eschatology of disability by joining the “catholic personality” to explicit political action. Disability pride reduces the alienation of Christians

\textsuperscript{51}For a thorough description of spiritual friendship, see again Wadell, \textit{Becoming Friends}, 107-11.

with disabilities by reminding us of our innate value, connecting us to each other, and strengthening our resistance to ableism.

3. Raised and Rooted Consciousness in Charlton

“Raised consciousness,” one facet of a hermeneutic of suspicion, is integral to the heavenly hope of Christians with disabilities. It signifies the moment when we learn to affirm our unique episteme. Like Allan Boesak’s paradigm of Blackness—a concept he expands into an ontology using Black-consciousness theory—disability pride emerges in connective community, and represents “a discovery, a state of mind, a conversion, an affirmation of being (which is power). It is an insight that has to do with wisdom.”53 This project has illustrated several ways in which disability pride engages the wisdom of people with disabilities, empowering us for life.

The embodied connection of people with disabilities to political transformation equips us for the work of liberation. Rather than continually internalizing our differences from people of able body, we strive for the multifaceted access that this dissertation advocates. Charlton’s assertions, reproduced in full below, reinforce the significance of our communal empowerment:

Most often, raised consciousness involves a change in consciousness whereby the (false) notion of disability as a pitiful, medical condition has been replaced by the (true) awareness of disability as a social condition. This new consciousness is profoundly liberating. It allows individuals to recognize themselves in the context of something bigger than themselves and enables them to appreciate the commonalities they have with others. Isolation and estrangement are replaced by association and connection.54


54For this significant quotation, see Charlton, Nothing About Us Without Us, 118.
Charlton means that disability is not an individual’s tragic status, a simple or absolute marker of stigma. Instead, representing the social model of disability, Charlton sees disability as a social condition, an engagement with a physical and ecclesial environment whereby people are told that their bodies do not matter and that their physical or intellectual ambiguities place limits on their lives. For Charlton, and for me, raised consciousness entails the freeing recognition of one’s value as a person with a disability. The sacraments can encourage the eschatological hope of consciousness-raising: they invite Christians with disabilities to free our human *eros*, and to counter ableist paternalism by acknowledging and appropriating the power that emerges in our communal, sacramental connection. In turn, this augmented, positive self-perception empowers us to know our place within the larger movement towards liberation for all vulnerable people. In this joyful attainment of dignity, the resurrection-life that disability pride conveys, powerlessness becomes solidarity, and apathy becomes community. Moreover, I would add that, for Christians with disabilities, our raised consciousness emerges from our liberating self-knowledge as God’s children, and God’s co-workers bringing about God’s fruitful Reign of dignity and joy. Disability pride empowers Christians with disabilities to glimpse God’s Reign.

Disability-studies scholarship emphatically connects raised consciousness (in all its eschatological poignancy) to political action. For instance, Joseph Shapiro describes the political contours of the American disability-rights movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s lyrically and with passion. Shapiro documents the significant friendship and partnership between C. Boyden Gray, George H. W. Bush’s legal counsel, and Evan Kemp, a disability-rights lawyer who later became the chairperson of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission; he also writes concisely of the protests by radical disability-equity
group ADAPT (Americans Disabled for Accessible Public Transit) before the 1991 passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act.\textsuperscript{55} For instance, during one hearing, ADAPT leader Mike Aubinger responded brusquely to a judge who sympathized with the movement’s “frustration”: “We’re not frustrated, we’re pissed off!”\textsuperscript{56}

That feeling of being “pissed off”—that righteous indignation at the ubiquity of ableist culture—is one of the pivotal points of this dissertation. I have written about the impact of Christians with disabilities on the Church as a sacramental community based in the empowering release of connective and \textit{eros}-filled energies precisely because the sacraments confirm our perceptions of the world. As stated in Chapter Three, baptism and Holy Communion invite Christians of varied abilities to confront ableist systems as they are, to imagine alternative and open forms of sociality, and to implement those systems through our generous episteme.

Moreover, because they coax people of diverse abilities towards divine and human communion, the sacraments enable us to name and acknowledge places where communion is not present. These rituals help us to recognize our pain and shame at our isolation from transformative, just, and loving communities. Reading through the lens of Matthew 25:31-46, the parable of the sheep and the goats, Amos Yong indirectly addresses that sense of isolation, and affirms the eschatological hope of people with disabilities. He inquires into the identity of “the nations” and “the least of these” in the parable. Given the missional drive of


\textsuperscript{56}For Shapiro’s exciting coverage of the ADAPT protests concerning the ADA, see Shapiro, \textit{No Pity}, 129-134; for the quotation, see 134-5. Significantly, since the passage of the ADA promoted accessible transit to all Americans, the organization changed its title and its focus to Americans Disabled for Attendant Programs Today. See “ADAPT: Free our People!”, ADAPT, accessed November 25, 2015, \url{http://www.adapt.org/}; see also “4.2: Americans Disabled for Attendant Programs Today,” United Spinal Resource Centre, accessed November 25, 2015, \url{http://www.spinalcord.org/resource-center/askus/index.php?pg=kb.page&id=590}. 
the book of Matthew, ending with the “Great Commission” in 28:20, Yong argues for a universalistic reading of “the nations,” saying that that group includes all Christians and vulnerable people. Also, Yong uses the word *asthenes*—“the sick” in 25:36, 39, a cognate to Paul’s “weakness” described in 2 Corinthians 12—to argue that Christ’s love dwells in “the lives of the needy in general, and in the bodies of those who are sick, diseased, blemished, defective, and impaired in particular.” Yong’s love dwells in people with disabilities, and others who are vulnerable!

I affirm Yong’s reading of this parable. More often than not, Christians with disabilities are the vulnerable persons it describes. We need access because we have been excluded by the Church that embraces outdated ideals of able bodies, not because we have “something wrong” with our bodies. We are the weak ones who shame the strong (1 Cor. 1:27), because of social prejudices that valorize ability in narrow, ableist ways, not because of deficits. Christians with disabilities need creative agency; we need “less charity and more justice.”

Other scholars also see the need for our renewed agency. For instance, Charlton outlines the moment in Singapore in 1981 when many people with disabilities in the global South organized with respect to disability rights; responses included the creation of Centres of Independent Living in Rio de Janeiro and São Paolo, accessible supermarkets in Harare, and even a wheelchair “production and distribution system” by socialists in Nicaragua.

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57 For this interpretation, see Yong, *Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 137-42, esp. 137 and 139.

58 For both quotations, see *ibid*, 139.

North American churches need a similar lightning-bolt moment now. Moreover, in light of this project’s orientation towards transformation, I assert that believers with disabilities can be the lightning-rod. Christians of diverse abilities can demand an end to ecclesial ableism, and accept the sacraments’ invitation to inclusion. We cannot simply wait for changes in perception to occur in order to act out divine equality and justice. In our empowered consciousness, we need to exercise the imaginative freedom realized in sacramental communities: we ought to use our knowledge of our limitations to create cultures of ecclesial hospitality. People with disabilities are not second-class citizens; we are the last ones who have become first (e.g., Matthew 20:16).  

In light of these claims, I would extend Yong’s analysis of the parable of the sheep and goats. As Yong asserts, Christians with disabilities are the “least of these.” However, so too are Christians of able body. Through our interdependence, all Christians depend on each other to create what Eiesland rightly calls the Church as a “communion of struggle.” All believers form one Body; all stand in need of God’s grace. The Body’s marginal or weak parts can offer gifts as profound as the strong and central ones. The one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church becomes itself only when Christians of all abilities can trust each other. We can experience Christ’s radical healing and liberating life only when we can accept each other as we are in our bodies.

Again, Eiesland calls the Church a “communion of struggle” because, as she asserts, the Church needs new symbols in order to fully incorporate people with disabilities into its

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60 John Swinton states that Christ calls his friends to care for the stranger—often in the form of refugees or asylum seekers—because Christ himself is the stranger. See Swinton, Raging with Compassion, 224-37, esp. 224-27; see also John Swinton, Resurrecting the Person: Friendship and the Care of People with Mental Health Problems (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 145-63.

61 For this felicitous phrase, see Eiesland, Disabled God, 108.
This dissertation has continued the work of perceptual transformation that Eiesland, Betcher, Vanier, Volf, and others have begun, by exploring the unique episteme of disability, and revealing the ways that the sacraments can reinforce that generous mode of knowledge. Nonetheless, in order to complete that work, believers with disabilities ought to assume control over what Charlton calls “intermediate institutions”—schools, community-groups, charities, and churches. Charlton argues that, once people with disabilities have claimed those institutions, we can access others too. We can exercise our agency in political protests, like those of gay-rights activists in Daniel France’s heart-rending documentary, *How to Survive a Plague*.

By promoting multifaceted access to equality and justice, Christians and others with disabilities can begin to transform our ableist society. While sociopolitical transformation can only ever partly fulfill God’s *shalom*, the raised consciousness that helps believers of diverse abilities to create that change still manifests eschatological hope because the sacraments invite us to realize divine integrity, dignity, and joy. God’s gracious love, mediated through the sacraments, can help us to rearrange ecclesial and societal space for freedom of motion, create new and invigorating symbols to ignite peoples’ hearts, and engage with each other in intimate relationships of covenantal love. These rituals aid that process by reuniting us to our bodies, each other, and the Earth, and by symbolizing our invitation to God’s promised equity. While not all of our allies will share our convictions about Jesus or the sacraments, we can certainly share our love for each other and the earth, in order to build a just society.

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Christians with disabilities in sacramental communities can display the reality of Jesus’ love to humanity and creation.

C. Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the contours of an embodied eschatology of disability, in several interrelated steps, in light of the ecclesiology explored in this dissertation. In its first part, this chapter offered glimpses of the dignity and joy of the Last Days by explaining the impact of celebration and embrace on believers of all abilities, investigated the meaning of the warning-sign of pain for the manifestation of God’s *shalom*, and explored the eschatological contours of forgiveness for believers of diverse abilities. In its second part, the chapter has shown how all the glimpses of God’s harmony, integrity and joy are only partial: Amos Yong’s reflections on resurrected bodies and the length of the *eschaton* through the Holy Spirit’s work, Betcher’s discussions of illness, and the examination of raised and empowered consciousness in the previous section have clarified the necessity of the continued struggle of believers with disabilities for sustained access to God’s equality and justice in ecclesial communities.

Despite its only partial fulfillment, this chapter has illustrated the meaning of *shalom*: for Christians with varied abilities and our allies, the joyous and abundant Reign of God looks like global change in the direction of equity, and strongly resembles physical and social inclusion. As Michael Stipe, lead singer of R.E.M., asserts in a different context, the hope of Heaven embodied by Christians with disabilities is “the end of the world as we know it, and I feel fine.”64 Indeed, in the Last Days, all of God’s creatures will feel fine, because all people of all abilities will live out the dignity and holistic well-being that God promises throughout

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the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. In the Last Days, all people will engage one another and the earth mutually and with empathy. These assertions need further elaboration, especially the eschatological ones; thus, my Conclusions section will outline the direction of future research for myself and others.
Conclusion: Walking (Limping, Trundling, Crawling) On: a Deutero-Isaian Postscript

Walk on, walk on
What you’ve got, they can’t deny it,
Can’t sell it or buy it
Walk on, walk on
Stay safe tonight

(U2, “Walk On,” lines 21-25.)

In U2’s hit song “Walk On,” Bono bids Burmese activist and politician Aung San Suu Kyi “walk on” past the hindrance of her aspirations, and her house-arrest by the junta that rules Myanmar. The quotation above embodies his desire that she continue, grounded in her inner strength; Bono addresses concerns like those of this project. Suu Kyi’s convictions, and her fervent belief in the human rights of Burma’s people, can only emerge from a worldview, and a way of relating to others, that opens into generosity. By working for peace, Suu Kyi and others like her testify to an eschatological hope, and reveal human and divine dignity and joy.

Moreover, I expand Bono’s challenge: in this dissertation, I call on the ableist global Church to include, welcome, and love Christians with disabilities. By virtue of Jesus’ erotic and embodied love, which can be actualized in sacramental communities, believers of varied abilities can “walk on” past hurt, shame, and exclusion, in order to embrace God’s desire for total and holistic dignity. By God’s grace, in communities that include physical and intellectual difference, we can walk, limp, trundle, and go on to embody the new world that God promises us. Indeed, in that spirit, Christians of all abilities can gain eagles’ wings (Isaiah 40:31): in communities of sacramental love and inclusion, Christians with disabilities

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1For the first citation in this paragraph, see again U2, “Walk On,” All That You Can’t Leave Behind (Dublin: Interscope, 2000), 11, 14, 21, 25, 29, 36. Incidentally, the author was present at a U2 concert in Toronto, on the evening of July 11th, 2011, when Bono ecstatically proclaimed Suu Kyi’s release from house-arrest. The band then broke into the rousing chorus of their 1981 song “Rejoice.”
can discover individual and communal reserves of embodied, *eros*-filled, and eschatological healing and strength. That strength can empower us to transform and redeem ableist ecclesial paradigms.

This dissertation has responded to that challenge by outlining a transformative and sacramental ecclesiology of disability. Chapters One and Two have illustrated my hermeneutics of suspicion and retrieval: these chapters articulated the sense of critical distance that ableist norms within the Church create for Christians with disabilities. They also described the shame, fear, and exclusion that people with disabilities feel in terms of ecclesial spaces, artifacts, and activities. Thereafter, turning around methodologically by examining Jesus’ person and work, and defining the sacraments as vehicles of the energies of God’s desire, they examined the connection, communion, and joy of the self-acceptance of Christians of varied abilities.

The first chapter explored biblical descriptions of shame in Genesis 3 and hope in Isaiah 40. This chapter enunciated a renewed Christology of disability: the section about Jesus named him as the world’s liberator, and claimed that his sacramental love allowed him to offer *Erkenntnis* (recognition, welcome, and affirmation) to everyone he met. Moreover, this chapter proposed that the sacraments empower Christians of varied abilities to offer Jesus’ embodied and erotic love to each other by affirming each other’s moral vulnerability, dignity, and worth.

The second chapter delved further into the experiences of shame, fear, and exclusion that Christians with disabilities feel in ableist environments. After articulating the contours of embodied shame, and describing the philosophical tenets against which Christians with disabilities contend, this chapter formulated a spirituality of friendship for us, examining the
explicit connections between compassion and care, and recounting the dance of difference in which we participate. The chapter closed by connecting our embodied experiences of ecclesial inclusion to the theological import of access to equality and justice for Christians with disabilities. Affirmation through the sacraments aids our quest for mutual, shared power.

The third chapter built on the turn from critical appraisal (suspicion) to the retrieval of human bodily goodness in Chapter Two by pointing out the appearance of divine equity. The third chapter explored the theological significance of physical, intellectual, affective, and spiritual access to God’s equality and justice for people with disabilities through the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion. In this chapter, I asserted that, while many people with disabilities do not experience the joyful communion to which baptism and Holy Communion invite Christians of all abilities, they can redress the shame of Christians with disabilities by raising our consciousness, reminding us of our dignity, and re-membering us. The sacraments save us by reminding us of our innate value, and helping us to recall our connections to God, the earth, and each other; thus, they restore our erotic energies, the dynamism of passionate, intimate knowledge and imagination. Affective access to God’s equality and justice grounds this project, because true, lasting, covenantal relationships can sustain the struggles of people with disabilities for mutual equity. This chapter carefully illustrated the ways in which the sacraments help people with disabilities to live out the four marks of the Church—unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity—and linked Jesus’ gift of abundant life to our embodied lives and missions.

Furthermore, building on the theological argument of the third chapter, the fourth chapter explored the practical significance of our access to equality and justice. This chapter
explained my assertions that Christians of varied abilities can help each other, can cooperate without dominating, and can form bonds of intimacy and trust in deeply-relational communities of what Volf calls “catholic personalities”—people open to all other people. In our primal openness to the Holy Spirit’s work, Christians of all abilities can manifest the Church, and Christ’s Body can “walk through walls,” enacting God’s equity on earth through our diverse gifts. The Church inclusive of disability can emulate the triune God’s self-communion of love and justice.

Lastly, the fifth chapter used this paradigm of the Church to describe the partial fulfillment of the heavenly hope of Christians with disabilities, and to define Jesus’ resurrection-life. In particular, it connected Volf’s concept of embrace, and Vanier’s idea of celebration, to an embodied eschatology of disability; it also examined the implications of forgiveness for that eschatology, reframed the heavenly hope of Christians with disabilities using some of my personal athletic experiences, contextualized Amos Yong’s portraits of the resurrection for us, and discussed the ways in which illness and pain can contribute to our eschatological hope. Significantly, this last chapter also discussed James Charlton’s notion of raised consciousness, in order to advocate for stringent ecclesial change by people with disabilities. Only ecclesial transformation can allow resurrection-life to occur for people with disabilities.

To illustrate this necessary transformation, the last pages of this project will summarize and highlight its implications. In these Conclusions, I will connect a theology of embodiment to an ecclesiology of disability, show how people across the ability-spectrum need each other, concretely exemplify true access, discuss a shared episteme of
accompaniment, and explore the transformative and redemptive aspects of celebration, while also pointing to future research.

A. Revisiting Embodiment

The human body is one focal point of a transformative and sacramental ecclesiology of disability. Human bodies say, “Yes,” and “No,” to their inhabitants, and are implicated in matters of sexuality, spirituality, and poverty. Thus, throughout this dissertation, I have examined a liberative theology of embodiment through the interpretive lenses of suspicion and retrieval.

Suspicion, the first hermeneutical device, engages the critical distance that emerges from the hidden dynamics of texts and artefacts; while the whole project exercised this hermeneutic, my analysis of Adam and Eve’s shame in Eden in the first chapter, the explorations of shame in the second chapter, and the portion of the fourth chapter about “helping without taking over” all particularly employed this stringent mode of critique. Using suspicion, I explored both the biblical origins of bodily shame, and negative perceptions of embodied difference, addressing the exclusion, shame, and fear of Christians with disabilities. I acknowledge my inclination to prioritize the retrieval of human bodily goodness over suspicion and shame, particularly in inclusive, sacramental churches; that said, not all Christians with disabilities experience the joy that I have found there. The Church has yet to fully accept God’s invitation to access!

This device of distrust has some present and future implications. In this project, it has meant that I cannot simply overlook the subtle forms of patronization and exclusion of people with disabilities, from the statement, “I don’t see you as a person with a disability” (a claim I sometimes hear, and to which I am tempted to respond with gentle sarcasm, “That
makes one of us!”), to the deeply-troubling phenomenon of faith-healing, to which I have only briefly alluded in a footnote (p. 120). Moreover, this study of suspicion invites further discussion: suspicion allows me and other scholars to use our understanding of sacrament and embodiment to critique the marginalization of other people-groups. Just as baptism and Holy Communion allow scholars like me to discern the gaps in ecclesial architecture, attitudes, and ideologies, so they will also allow us to probe racist and homophobic discourses in Canadian media, and to question our government’s treatment of refugees. Canada’s limited response to the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015-16, and the recent spate of hate-crimes throughout North America in response to the 2016 American presidential election, both motivate future studies into the negative and sometimes violent effects that religious discourse has on vulnerable human bodies of varied abilities.

Suspicion comprises only one part of the balance that is necessary to foster ecclesial and societal transformation in terms of inclusion. The other half of that balance is retrieval. When I wrote “retrieval” in this dissertation, I meant an extended exploration of the human body’s goodness as created by God, and a thoroughgoing reclamation of that goodness through the sacraments. My arguments about the theological and practical avenues towards access to God’s equality and justice addressed this lens of retrieval. Communities of catholic personalities, people who display God’s Image by giving and receiving God’s generous love, can embody God’s joy and playful compassion with all people. Moreover, the fifth chapter explored bodily transformation from fragile ambiguity into risen rejuvenation. My athletic experiences, and Yong’s arguments about the statuses of disabled bodies in the Last Days, reveal the culmination of a lens of retrieval: God promises people embodied companionship. Jesus’ sacramental love gives Christians of all abilities the wings of eagles. Our physical,
affective, and political connections sustain us as we work for equality and justice for all human and creaturely bodies.

Retrieval also seriously impacts future research. As suspicion allows people of varied abilities to work for political transformation, so retrieval allows Christians with and without disabilities to promote the well-being of all human bodies. Jay Johnson’s argument that the Eucharist enables people to surrender bodily shame and to embrace God’s desire for human companionship can (and does) influence me, and other scholars. It suggests the replacement of advertisements glorifying beautiful, healthy, young bodies in various media with discourses that elevate bodies as they actually are.² Christians of diverse abilities, and others, can meet each other where they are, regardless of normative, unrealistic cultural standards of beauty.

Moreover—and significantly—both of these lenses, suspicion and retrieval, have sacramental overtones that allow theologians of disability and others to ask probing questions about cultural narratives about bodies. Hauerwas and Webb-Mitchell independently argue that human beings need to enact “gestures,” bodily stories that remind us who we are and where we belong.³ The sacraments are gestures that allow human beings to affirm bodies in their ambiguity, and to create safe spaces for all bodies to exist. Baptism and Holy Communion celebrate human unity-in-diversity, and ideally allow people to lament the


segregation of humanity’s diverse groups, and of God’s creation, while also striving for their full reconciliation.

The sacraments are gestures of chesed, the covenant-love that celebrates every human body. Thus, in future studies they will allow scholars to protest the mistreatment of all human bodies. Since baptism welcomes people into life-giving ministry like that of Jesus, and Holy Communion invites them to share his life-giving and self-giving death at the hands of imperial powers, generous sacramental communities can hold accountable people who enact punitive fiscal and social policies. Moreover, in the future, scholars can shout loudly to drown out the din of the machinery of war, of militarization that destroys human bodies and scars human souls.

Interpretively, this dissertation also opens the way for future studies of human sexuality. Let me put that more strongly: while I agree with Vanier that not everyone’s longing for partnership can be satisfied, I contend that sacramental communities that include all people imply the need for a deeper study of the sexuality of Christians of varied abilities.  

The erotic energies liberated by the sacraments allow all of God’s friends to love their bodies; part of the expression of healthy, secure love of our bodies, for people with disabilities, is sexual intimacy.

Many scientists, sociologists, and theologians interested in disability have observed that people with disabilities are thought to be asexual; that said, many emerging scholarly resources rebut that misperception. In light of that rebuttal, I argue that part of the dignity

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4 For Vanier’s ideas about the sexual needs of men and women, see Jean Vanier, Community and Growth, rev. Ed. (New York: Paulist, 1989), 256-59.

5 Many researchers into sexuality education emphasize the need for people with intellectual disabilities, in particular, to participate in comprehensive programs of sexuality education with instructions in interpersonal-relationship building, as well as biological and sexual knowledge, because many people with intellectual disabilities possess knowledge gaps in those areas. See, e.g. Marita P. McCabe and Robert A. Cummins,
and multifaceted access promised to people with disabilities in the *eschaton* consists in church-supported sexual education in the present. If people with varied abilities know God’s *eros*-filled and embodied desires for us and creation, then we can embrace God’s joy and live out the divine ecstasy in our bodies. As we learn about our embodiment of a good, loved, and welcomed mode of sexuality, we can feel divine ecstasy lifting us on the eagles’ wings of joy. Positive sexual knowledge can offer tastes of what Bono tellingly calls “jubilation” in a live 2001 version of U2’s song “Elevation.”6 A proper valuation of human bodies creates the space for shared experiences of deep celebration. Moreover, Christians of all abilities can communally support people who have been abused. Part of earthly *shalom* is the end of oppressive, shameful, and hurtful actions, so Christians of varied abilities ought to act to end the suffering that Shapiro, Vanier, and others have documented. Socially and ecclesiologically, people of all abilities ought to affirm each other’s sexualities in order to offer each other embodied glimpses of *shalom*.

Baptism and Holy Communion make clear both human beings’ unity, in terms of our relational capacities, and our diversity in the expression of that unifying capability of erotic connection. The sacraments clarify that, as Bono has stated, human beings are indeed one, but are not the same. Because the sacraments can help human beings to create clear affective boundaries, my spiritual formation in sacramental community allows me to distinguish myself from the old man who haunts the Tim Horton’s franchise at Bloor and Bedford Road

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in Toronto—and reminds me that I cannot know all of his pain—but still invites me to ask him if he wants a cup of coffee. The meeting of eyes, hands, or voices can foster *chesed*, the divine love that lifts up all people who are wearied, wounded, or oppressed on the wings of eagles.

A final clear task for Christian scholars of varied abilities in the future, in terms of embodiment, is the communal search for an end to extreme material poverty. All human beings need food. Because we all need food, it is both wasteful and sinful that, in 2012, 32% of adult Torontonian food-bank clients gave up a meal in order to pay a month’s rent. In a cosmopolitan city with plentiful places to eat, this must not be! An embodied, transformative, and sacramental ecclesiology of disability cries out against poverty, as it does against war and abuse, because all human beings are equal, and—in simple, concrete ways—all need physical and spiritual food.

These meditations about embodiment and ecclesiology point out the necessity of further intersectional research into the connections between disability and war, sexuality, and poverty (among other things). When people of varied abilities can share their bodily gifts, they can feel the joy of God’s healing and strength, and the ecstasy of (relational) flight on magnificent pinions. The reflections in this section also complement the next one, where I affirm embodied relationship as the meaning of interdependence. In order to flourish, people

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8 For instance, pastoral theologian Nancy Ramsay claims at length that theories of intersectionality—the linkage of varied experiences of oppression, including disability—can aid pastoral and practical theologians as they strive to do justice in the world. See Nancy J. Ramsay, “Intersectionality: a Model for Addressing the Complexity of Oppression and Privilege,” *Pastoral Psychology* 63 (2014): 453-69.
need to relate, and to eat together. Human bodies empower us to share our joys, pains, limits, and gifts.

**B. Head and Feet Need Each Other**

I have examined, at length, Paul’s claim that the Spirit offers “greater honour to the inferior member” of Christ’s Body (1 Corinthians 12:21, NRSV). By sharp contrast with modes of human adulation, rather than creating a hierarchy of humans’ spiritual gifts, God offers the “weaker” parts of the Body greater spiritual gifts than those who are “stronger.” As this project indicates, those varied gifts include empathy, touch, mechanical and mnemonic skills, and the ability to sing and dance. In an ideal sense, all believers have access to these embodied gifts.

As a believer with spastic cerebral palsy, I affirm Paul’s assertion. I know that I am physically awkward, and that I easily manifest psychological and emotional intensity. That said, precisely in my ambiguities I know the gift of God’s extravagant grace. Although it sometimes takes me hours to do my finances, and although I cannot bench-press more than forty-five pounds safely, I can dance to a four-and-a-half minute song with a partner, perform chin-ups, and synthesize complex theological arguments about ecclesiology and disability in meaningful ways.

More generally, humans’ affective gifts testify to our unity-in-diversity, and bear witness to the ways that our acceptance of our bodies aids human liberation. For instance, Vanier states that people with disabilities, especially children, “unfold” and “relax” when they are loved; Ghadir, a young Palestinian with cerebral palsy who has “beautiful eyes,” and Antonio, the Italian with a trusting heart, exemplify this tendency.9 Whenever people of

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9For the gentle power of love that relaxes people, see again Vanier, *Becoming Human* (Toronto: Paulist), 19-27; for his reminiscences of Ghadir, see *ibid*, 37; for Antonio, see again *ibid*, 88-100.
varied abilities embrace their bodies as *good*, they can experience divine joy and dignity. The love of others can elevate people of all abilities on the Spirit’s ecstatic wings, and offer us healing and strength.

Human unity-in-diversity, as described here, has practical future implications. In Chapters Two and Three (pp. 129, 189), I observed that Christians with disabilities want to hear Jesus’ question to Bartimaeus, “What do you want me to do for you?” (Mark 10:51, NRSV).10 People with mobility issues, and those who are blind or deaf, should be consulted on ecclesial architecture; moreover, churches ought to have “rules of order” that include people with intellectual disabilities. Also, as I have suggested in terms of welcoming people with intellectual disabilities, inclusive churches ought to practice open Communion (p. 212). Christians with able bodies can invest in disability culture in order to welcome Christians with disabilities into inclusive church-communities; conversely, Christians with disabilities can use artifacts of disability culture to facilitate inclusive ecclesial community.11 Thus, Christ, the Church’s Head, can help it to place its empathetic heart with those who are vulnerable. Equitable praxes like these can help Christians of all abilities to appreciate the gift of the spiritual sibling.12


12 For Luther’s views on the ways that people offer each other God’s grace, see Martin Luther, “Sermon on the Man Born Blind” (17 March 1518), trans. J.W. Doberstein, WA 1:267-73, in Disability in the Christian Tradition: a Reader, eds. Brian Brock and John Swinton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 201-2. For Bonhoeffer’s ideas on the significance of the other person for our personhood, see also Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993), 116-21, 138-44.
The focus of Christ’s Body for people with disabilities is interdependent access. A funny and poignant video based on the classic video-game *Super Mario Bros.* illustrates the needs of Christians with disabilities for interdependence and access: Mario, the red-suited plumber, jumps onto a pipe wrongly, is partly paralyzed, and becomes a wheelchair-user. Luigi, his green-clad brother, graciously sets up a series of ramps to help Mario navigate the world. Without his brother’s help, Mario cannot reach the castle at the end of the level. Later, much to the chagrin of the audience, Mario dies by falling down another pipe. In response to Mario’s death, the creators of the video assert, “It’s not the ’80s anymore. Enable access for everyone. NOW.”13 While not everyone has access to Nintendo’s power-ups, or even to wheelchairs, people of all abilities require access to true equality and justice in order to flourish. Communal access to equality and justice, the entryways to the mutual and symmetrical exercise of power, enables human interdependence. Thus, with little fanfare, I return to the implications of equality and justice.

**C. Relationship as Access to True Equality and Justice**

In light of human interdependence, this project has continually described multifaceted access to God’s radical equality and justice. Access to equity appears in the form of loving relationship. Diane DeVries demonstrates her embodied knowledge of her self-worth by teaching her sister Debbie to dance; Jim exits the institution that houses him in Faribault, Minnesota, through the aid of his siblings and his friend Joseph Shapiro; Mario becomes a (reasonably) adept wheelchair-user, in a video-game world, because Luigi helps him. True love is access: since Christ’s Body flourishes through empathy, it is called to perform

gestures like the covenantal friendships outlined in Chapters Two, Three, and Four in sacramental communities.

Because God’s love enables Christians of all abilities to share power and to recognize the validity of each other’s perceptions, it empowers us to embody and experience God’s shalom. If Tanya Titchkosky’s claim that access is perception is true, as I have asserted in the Introduction and in Chapter Three, then its converse must also be true.14 Perception is also access: the way that people see the world allows them to flourish in it. Molly C. Haslam’s generous theological anthropology clarifies the way that genuine relational perception transforms people. When people of varied abilities perceive and welcome each other in their uniqueness, they have already cleared the space for affectionate relationship, and for the transformation of ableist social and ecclesial structures. For instance, writing of her fictive patient Chan, Haslam asserts that “both the I and the Thou come to be on account of the Other.”15 A moral and relational orientation towards vulnerability allows people into open relationships where they can change each other, and increase their mutual quality of life through genuine and generous encounter.

Theologians have definitely acknowledged the reality of access-as-perception and its converse. Vanier claims that his friends Raphael and Philippe, in the first L’Arche community at Trosly, helped him to understand himself, and to come to terms with his drive to succeed; Haslam also notes that the two men with intellectual disabilities kept Vanier


constantly aware of his own pain. Life in inclusive sacramental community traverses this delicate dialectic for people of diverse abilities. If we want to stay in tune with the song that God is singing in all of our hearts—if we would truly gain our wings, and soar like eagles, as the angels do—then we must accept ourselves and others, in all our joy and all our pain.

The truth of access as perception, and its converse, resonates very strongly with me. In both the Jeremiah Community and Wine Before Breakfast, I have encountered new friends in all their uniqueness and fragility, and they have truly encountered me. Because we have chosen to welcome each other, we have all been changed. With my friends’ help, I have learned to take short amounts of time in silence every day, without fearing that hurtful feelings, such as isolation and self-loathing, will overwhelm me. Moreover, because others have taught me to relax, I have learned to dance, to play board-games, and to sing Taize songs in good company. In these diverse and unique worshipping-communities, I have made a healthy space for others in conversation, in song, and in C/communion. These experiences of sacramental community have shown me glimpses of God’s gracious love, and made me gentler, happier, and more whole.

This brief reflection leads to one clear implication for future study: In the future, scholars of theology and disability, amongst other disciplines, would benefit from further rigorous examination of empathetic relationships. Studies of relationship, the key to access to divine and human equity, would enable the creation of clear criteria for healthy ecclesial and social communities. Indeed, knowledge of empathy would benefit people of all abilities, and would facilitate the creation of spaces that are safe for human and creaturely flourishing as a whole.

16See again Jean Vanier, From Brokenness to Community (New York: Paulist, 1992), 24; see also Haslam, Constructive Theology, 85.
These assertions about access, equality, justice, and perception can lead gently and inexorably to an epistemology of accompaniment. In inclusive churches, mutual and consistent vulnerability and solidarity can be a mode of knowledge. As a well-known hymn states, “We are pilgrims on the journey, and companions on the road; / We are here to help each other walk the mile and bear the load.”\textsuperscript{17} This mutual pilgrimage grounds an ecclesiology of disability.

D. An Epistemology of Accompaniment

In his seminal text \textit{Becoming Human}, the transcript of his 1998 Massey Lectures, Jean Vanier outlines seven steps towards individual and collective freedom. Significantly, Vanier asks his audience to “seek wisdom . . . from unexpected events,” because tragic circumstances (unfortunately, he mentions the birth of a child with disabilities as a possible tragedy) can open people to the blessings hidden in life’s challenges. In light of this, he states that freedom comes about when people are accompanied. By accompaniment, Vanier refers to a mentor, someone with whom people can share their deepest feelings. He observes that our mentors, who have already walked the road to liberation before us, can particularly teach us to forgive.\textsuperscript{18}

Vanier’s emphasis on the desire for accompaniment deeply impacts a transformative and sacramental ecclesiology of disability. An accompanier, an empathic person, “can stand beside us on the road to freedom, [as] someone who loves us and understands our life.” The accompanier recognizes God’s call, affirms one’s mission and identity, and reveals the import of deep passions. Accompaniment embodies the sacramental ecclesiology outlined in


\textsuperscript{18}For his poignant and profound outline of the seven spiritual steps to freedom, see Vanier, \textit{Becoming Human}, 125-30.
this project. For instance, Vanier discusses his friendship with Father Thomas Philippe, a friend and Catholic priest. He claims, “Accompaniment is necessary at every stage of our lives, but particularly in moments of crisis when we feel lost, engulfed in grief or in feelings of inadequacy.”

Other theologians’ insights bolster Vanier’s argument, and underline its present and future import for a transformative ecclesiology of disability. For instance, Brett Webb-Mitchell’s corpus is a meditation on the value of accompaniment. Similarly, Hauerwas’ claims about narratives mean little unless one lives in a community where people share each other’s lives. Significantly, Vanier and William Cavanaugh independently discuss the importance of Holy Communion for empathy and connection in a social body, a B/body whose diverse parts resonate with each other. The Body lives into both love and limitation in profound and revelatory ways, and forbids human beings reborn by God’s love to forget the relevance of mutual empathy. Even in loving sacramental communities, walking together on the way of Jesus’ radical love is costly, and can be painful; nonetheless, it is also an essential ingredient to human being.

I have had many accompaniers on my own journey. One series of encounters has been intensely significant, and germane to these discussions. My friend Naomi, the academic and writer at a Canadian university (pp. 218-19), loves to write letters. Since we met nearly fifteen years ago, Naomi and I have exchanged letters, poems (mostly mine), short stories (mostly hers), and emails, and had wonderfully wide-ranging conversations about life, literature, and work. Naomi listens deeply, and is profoundly sensitive to life’s emotional and personal ambiguities. Thus, she gives gentle relational advice, and affirms my creative and 19For the traits of an accompanier, exemplified by Father Philippe, see ibid, 128-29.
social gifts. Naomi reminds me that mutual valuation is deeply significant; a letter from her is an experience of affirmation. In all the ways that Vanier has described, Naomi and I accompany each other.

Thus, one extension of the future study of affective relationships proposed above is an academic examination of the missiological impact of accompaniment: how can people of varied abilities walk alongside each other, and so grow into fruitful and faithful discipleship? Intimate friendships can provide all human beings with access to God’s equality and justice; mutuality is a cornerstone of God’s shalom, because relationship grounds embodied life. Celebration is another vital facet of life, because it both reaffirms the value of human bodies, and attests to the embodied practice of justice. Thus, this last section will reiterate, and make concrete, the ways that celebration increases believers’ mutual dignity and vulnerability in God’s service.

E. Celebration, Transformation, and Redemption

Celebration is a significant part of the heavenly hope of Christians of all abilities; meanwhile, transformation, a central tenet of this project, refers to physical and perceptual changes that facilitate access to divine equity. This whole project aims to redeem the Church from ableist norms, and to reclaim diverse Christian bodies from ill-fitting categories of knowledge and practice. Vanier writes that celebration is “nourishment and resource” for the collective journey towards God’s grace and love.  

In the previous chapter, I defined celebration as the simple and sacramental act of taking joy in life through specific encounters and rituals meant to foster growth and well-being (p. 238). As a component of human society, celebration can take different forms for diverse people; this dissertation has noted many unique examples!

20See again Vanier, Community and Growth, 315.
Nonetheless, celebration is part of the struggle of believers of diverse abilities to transform social symbols and structures. As Eiesland, Block, and others have attested, Christians with disabilities cannot yet celebrate our embodied lives fully within the Church. I have already explored parts of Block’s image of the totally-inclusive Catholic Mass, where the priest and other congregants possess various disabilities. One may ask what other image one could use to express the need of Christians with disabilities for celebration, transformation, and redemption.

Allow me to help my readers envision an eschatological moment that illustrates the implications of my dissertation. I would invite you to look away from the page. Close your eyes; imagine a small church building of one storey on a hilltop, painted in earth tones, in a small Canadian town. Emerge slowly from your vehicle, and walk towards the doors. Glimpse the setting sun glimmering faintly off the stained-glass windows. Inside the glass doors that one accesses via a short ramp on a slight incline—doors that let in much natural light—see, and hear, an intimate worship-concert played for a small group of active adolescents. The drummer has cerebral palsy, and so cannot keep precise time, but that does not bother the children at all; the young man with Asperger’s syndrome in the front row knows every song by heart, and gesticulates happily in time with the music. The minister, who is blind, acts as MC.

Meanwhile, in a different room down a panelled-wood hallway there is a quieter space for other children, some of whom have autism. One young man makes himself a cup of tea and reads, while others play word-games. Other young church-members care for them;

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21For this striking vignette, see again Jennie Weiss Block, *Copious Hosting: a Theology of Access for People with Disabilities* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 123-25.
their sensitivity makes the autistic children’s eyes light up with joy. The youth minister, a man in a wheelchair, checks in briefly. Everything is all right, of course. Satisfied, he ducks back into a third room, where he is part of a Bible study on Philippians 4 led by an older woman who experiences anxiety. Although not everyone agrees with her interpretation of verse thirteen, everyone follows the ground-rules for respectful discussion, listens, and learns something.

I owe much of the vision described above to Jennie Weiss Block, Joseph Shapiro, and Brett Webb-Mitchell, whose persuasive accounts of disability-advocacy emphasize the perceptual change called for in this project. I contend that physical and perceptual change within the Church is possible: people of all abilities can transform and redeem the Church through our celebration of different bodies. Our augmentation of the Church’s unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity would be aided significantly by future studies of epistemology. How do Christians of varied abilities experience and embody knowledge? Moreover, how can caring Christians of varied abilities share knowledge(s) equitably within the Church? These studies into communal empathy can elevate Christians of diverse abilities on the eagles’ wings of hope.

Significantly, the Kingdom of Heaven is like the image described above. God’s abundant Reign displays unfettered joy. Christians of varied abilities need not fear each other, because we can care for and know each other intimately. Similarly, people with disabilities need fear neither oppressive, exclusive actions, nor the language of exclusion, because our able-bodied siblings know our needs, and—as true and faithful friends—have our best interests at heart. For Christians of diverse abilities, God’s Reign is the realized and full embodiment of joy.
Our worship in God’s Reign is, and will be, the end of our exile, and our ecstatic homecoming. As a meaningful Anglican hymn states, “The Kingdom of God is justice and joy.” God’s Reign embodies divine integrity and harmony; the role of human beings in God’s Reign is the living incarnation of God’s passionate and affective perception. Through the sacraments, in loving community with others, Christians with disabilities can experience the living God’s love, grace, mercy, and power. Moreover, as we accept and return God’s desires for us in the ways articulated in this dissertation, we can be freed to offer that grace to others. In God’s joyful Reign, we will all fly like eagles, for God will give us healing, strength, and joy.

These Conclusions have outlined several implications of my research, and noted some possible future directions for my own and others’ study. Briefly, I have asserted that the hermeneutics of suspicion and retrieval, and my overall focus on embodiment, make possible further explorations of disability and sexuality, war, and poverty; I have also stated that human unity-in-diversity leads to interdependence, and that that mutual empathy requires future investigation. Significantly, I have claimed that that same empathy, born of interdependence can allow the Church to invest significantly in disability culture, and to consult Christians with disabilities on ecclesial change. I have also reaffirmed the impact of embodied accompaniment on the Way of Jesus for Christians of all abilities, arguing for a corresponding study of the missiology of accompaniment. Finally, in order to reveal celebration as simple joy in human life through encounter and ritual, I have offered an image of that same patient accompaniment.

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Thus, this document points to new, important, and imperative avenues for others’ research and my own. For now, I assert that a transformative and sacramental ecclesiology of disability is the inverse of Sharon Betcher’s starting point: we, Christians with disabilities, need not feel excluded from the capitalist and consumerist culture of productivity and autonomy. Rather, we can evaluate our own worth by measuring ourselves against God’s relational Image; we can learn to be ourselves by relating to others. Thereafter, having found our feet planted firmly in God’s garden of desire, we can assume eagles’ wings, rising to the dizzying and delightful heights of full humanity, together with our good and loving God. Through the life, death, mission, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ in sacramental communities, we—people with disabilities, who portend and prove the love possible within human limitation—can beckon other people, and all creation, towards God’s holistic fulfillment and ultimate bliss.

May it be so, in the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen!
Theologies of Disability: 
Primary Sources:


Secondary Sources:


**Liturical Theologies:**

**Primary Sources:**


*Baptism:*

*Primary Sources:*


*Secondary Sources:*


*Holy Communion:*

*Primary Sources:*


**Secondary Sources:**


**Ecclesiology:**

**Primary Sources:**


Secondary Sources:


**Theologies of Liberation:**

**Primary Sources:**


**Secondary Sources:**


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*Primary Sources:*


**Old Testament Scholarship:**

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**Postmodern Philosophies:**

*Primary Sources:*


**Political Philosophies:**

**Primary Sources:**


**Cognitive Science:**

**Primary Sources:**


**Studies of Sexuality and Education:**
Primary Sources:


Epistemologies:

Primary Sources:


Films and Documentaries:


Popular Music:


*Church Hymns and Songs:*


*Websites, Videos, and Online Articles:*


Other Sources:
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