

# Attitudes towards People with Disabilities in the Gospels

*Michael S. Donahou*\*

ABSTRACT: This paper studies the role of people with disabilities from a biblical perspective, specifically in the Gospels. Its purpose is to investigate the different attitudes expressed by people in the healing stories of the Gospels and to compare the attitudes expressed and uncovered there with modern approaches to disability studies.

THIS PAPER STUDIES THE ROLE of people with disabilities from a biblical perspective, specifically in the Gospels. Its purpose is to investigate various attitudes expressed by people in the healing stories of the Gospels and to compare the attitudes expressed there with modern approaches to disability studies. I have selected five healing stories as the focus of this paper, with at least one story from each Gospel.<sup>1</sup> Those healed in these stories represent a broad spectrum of people: Jews and Gentiles, males and females, children and adults. As Donald Senior noted regarding biblical stories about people with disabilities, “it is evident that disability is a pervasive and profound human experience, transcending categories of economic class, cultural background or gender.”<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this paper the definition of disability comes from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability, Article 1, which states: “Disability is a social issue. It results from the interaction between people with long term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments with various barriers may hinder their full

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\* *Michael S. Donahou* teaches in the Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy at Cardinal Stritch University in Milwaukee WI. He received his Ph.D. in Theology from Marquette University.

<sup>1</sup> This paper will reflect on the attitudes of the people in John 5; Mark 2; Luke 7 and Matthew 15; Mark 5 and Luke 22.

<sup>2</sup> Donald Senior, “Beware of the Canaanite Woman: Disability and the Bible” in *Religion and Disability: Essays in Scripture, Theology and Ethics*, ed. Marilyn E. Bishop (Kansas City MO: Sheed & Ward, 1995), p. 3.

and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.”<sup>3</sup> These stories about healings from the Gospels show people suffering with all of the aforementioned maladies.

Two words of caution are in order when looking at biblical texts produced almost two-thousand years ago before comparing the cultural values expressed in those texts to current ways of thinking in the twenty-first century. Edgar Kellenberger cautions researchers and readers about the risk of asking modern questions of texts representing ancient cultures because the “modern experience” is “not altogether identical with the ancients’ experience.”<sup>4</sup> What David F. Watson explains regarding Luke’s Gospel and modern ideas of disability can also be applied to other stories from other Gospels:

Luke does not have a modern concept of disability, nor should expect him to. Within the Greco-Roman context, what we think of as “disability” today would probably have been thought of in terms of “defect” or “inability.” The physiognomic assumptions of the day meant that persons with disabilities could be perceived as deficient in character. Likewise, people throughout the Greco-Roman world, including within Judaism, often assigned negative religious significance to the conditions of people with disabilities. For example, a disability might be seen as a divine punishment, or a child born with some type of visible physical deviation from a “normal” infant might be perceived as a divine portent.<sup>5</sup>

The “physiognomic assumptions” that Watson mentions are physical traits, like height – being short in the case of Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1-10). They were often interpreted as signs of character flaws or punishments from a Divine source, which led their bearers being treated as inferior in society. Being lame, blind,

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<sup>3</sup> United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability, Article 1, UNICEF website.

<sup>4</sup> Edgar Kellenberger, “Children and Adults with Intellectual Disability in Antiquity and Modernity: Toward A Biblical and Sociological Model,” *Crosscurrents* (2013): 449.

<sup>5</sup> David F. Watson, “Luke-Acts” in *The Bible and Disability: A Commentary*, ed. Sarah J. Melcher, Mikeal C. Parsons, and Amos Yong (Waco TX: Baylor Univ. Press, 2017), p. 304. In discussing Lk 13, the healing of a woman with a bent back, from a physiognomic perspective, Gregory Lamb explains that people in the first century would have seen her “outer physical ‘crookedness’ as a result of an inner, spiritual ‘crookedness’ – an evil disposition.” Gregory Lamb, “Sinfully Stereotyped: Jesus’s Desire to Correct Ancient Physiognomic Assumptions according to Luke,” *Word & World* 37/2 (2017): 180.

deaf or having any other disability that a person might be born with or acquire in life was sometimes seen as a reflection of that person's lack of integrity. While this kind of thinking may seem bizarre to modern people who have some insights into the genetic components of human development, it would seem that many decisions in life are still made by the appearance of things. For instance, when presidential candidates appear on stage for debates, some voters will make a decision about who is more or less "presidential" material based on the basis of their looks or the appearance of the candidates, not on an individual's policies and understanding of the issues of the day.

### John 5

There are only three healing stories in the Gospel of John.<sup>6</sup> In the second of these stories, there is a "feast of the Jews" that brings Jesus to Jerusalem. Instead of going to the Temple proper to offer a sacrifice or to teach those waiting in that area, Jesus goes to a pool with five porticoes near the Sheep Gate of the city where people with disabilities can be found. As John 5:3 says, "In these lay a large number of ill, blind, lame, and crippled" (NAB).<sup>7</sup> Jesus approaches a man who has been ill for thirty-eight years and asks him if he wants to be well. Verse 6 indicates that Jesus knew that the man had been there a long time.<sup>8</sup> The man explains that he has no one to help him get into the healing waters of the pool in a timely manner. Jesus commands him to rise, take up his mat and walk. "Immediately the man became well, took up his mat, and walked" (Jn 5:9). This healing takes place on the Sabbath when pious Jews refrained from work in order to honor/rest on the day. The man is soon discovered by "the Jews" (Jn 5:10) carrying his mat. Carrying is one of the thirty-nine types of work forbidden on the Sabbath.<sup>9</sup> The carrying of the mat,

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<sup>6</sup> Jn 4:46-54, the healing of the royal official's son; Jn 5:10-18, the healing of the man at the pool of Bethesda; and Jn 9:1-41, the healing of the man born blind.

<sup>7</sup> All biblical quotations in the paper, unless otherwise noted, will be from the New American Bible translation.

<sup>8</sup> Francis J. Moloney, S.D.B., connects this knowledge of Jesus about this man's condition to other encounters in the Gospel of John with Nathanael (1:47-48) and the Samaritan woman (4:18). *The Gospel of John*, Sacra Pagina Series, vol. 4, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, S.J. (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998), p. 168.

<sup>9</sup> For Orthodox Jews today, there is a direct connection between keeping the Sabbath and the forgiveness of sins and the promise of the Messiah as written in the Talmud: "Whoever is careful with the observance of Shabbat, will be forgiven for all

not the healing of the man's long-term illness, becomes the focus for the rest of the story and the burgeoning conflict between some of "the Jews" in Jerusalem and Jesus according to the Gospel of John.

First, some thoughts about the picture of Jesus that emerges from this chapter in the Gospel of John. Something must be said on behalf of Jesus going to the Pool at Bethesda where many people with disabilities could be found. As Candida R. Moss notes about life in the first century, "Far from being people whom one should include in one's community, regard as friends, and care for when in need, people with disabilities were often objects of scorn, shame, and absurd comedy. Moreover, this tendency, though not as overt as in the ancient world, still lurks in our own context."<sup>10</sup> As this location is near the Sheep Gate of the city, it could not have been a popular location for meeting people, given the agricultural nature of this particular gate and the accompanying stench associated with large groups of livestock present there. As this was a festival time, there might very well have been more sheep than normal being herded through this area of Jerusalem. Presumably, most in the city for a religious festival would have been concerned with obtaining a sheep that went through this gate to offer as a sacrifice at the Temple for their own forgiveness and spiritual health, as opposed to coming to Jerusalem and visiting and/or even attempting to heal or assist in the healing of those ill at the Pool. Perhaps it can be said of Jerusalem and the culture of the city in the first century that people liked to leave people with various disabilities in this location, hoping that healing would occur, but otherwise out of sight and perhaps even out of mind. Perhaps this, too, can be said of many people in the modern world as well. As

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his sins, even idolatry" (Masechet Shabbat 118b). "If the Children of Israel would observe one Shabbat properly, the Mashiach (the Messiah) would immediately come" (Yer. Taanit 1,1). As defined in Orthodox Judaism, the idea of not carrying anything in a public space is where the rules for the Sabbath observance begin. "Carrying is really the prototype of all other types of Sabbath work..., any act where man demonstrates his mastery over nature...by taking things from nature and carrying them where he needs them...if we are to relinquish our mastery over nature, the first requirement is that we not carry anything away.... It is G-d, not man, who owns all things." From the Orthodox Union website [www.ou.org/holidays/shabbat/the\\_thirty\\_nine\\_categories\\_of\\_sabbath\\_work\\_prohibited\\_by\\_law/#1](http://www.ou.org/holidays/shabbat/the_thirty_nine_categories_of_sabbath_work_prohibited_by_law/#1).

<sup>10</sup> Candida R. Moss, "Mark and Matthew" in *The Bible and Disability: A Commentary*, eds. Sarah J. Melcher, Mikeal C. Parsons, and Amos Yong (Waco TX: Baylor Univ. Press, 2017), p. 330.

an example of this kind of negative thoughts regarding people with disabilities are the comments that Raymond E. Brown offers about the man at the Pool of Bethesda: “His crotchety grumbling about the ‘whippersnappers’ who outrace him to the water betrays a chronic inability to seize opportunity.... The fact that he had let his benefactor slip away without even asking his name is another instance of real dullness.”<sup>11</sup>

Despite the presence of people with disabilities, or even because of the presence of people with disabilities, Jesus enters Jerusalem on this occasion and goes to this particular area of the city. While people are in Jerusalem for one of the festivals in order to keep the law for their own benefit, as well as the blessings it would ensure for the rest of the community/nation, the fifth chapter does not indicate that many others were in Jerusalem visiting the ill at the pool. Like today, people were interested in fulfilling their own religious duties, thinking about the good of the community in general and largely ignoring the plight of specific people with particular impairments.

In his first interaction with the man, Jesus only speaks to the man twice. He does so first to ascertain the man’s desire: “Do you want to be well?” (Jn 5:6). He then commands the man: “Rise, take up your mat, and walk” (Jn 5:8). With these few words, the man’s thirty-eight year journey with this illness comes to an end. The man is able to walk away from the Pool at Bethesda, carrying his mat. Perhaps this is an indication that he will not be returning or have need to return to the Pool area for any future healing. While the healing is certainly marvelous, and surely even unexpected for the man, the carrying of the mat becomes problematic for some of “the Jews” because in following his healer’s commands, the man’s lack of obedience to the Law could endanger them all with God. The Old Testament is replete with stories of individual or group sinfulness that leads to punishment for the entire community (see Joshua 7 and the story of Achan as an example).

In the other canonical Gospels, there are stories of Jesus healing everyone in a given geographic region: “A great crowd of his disciples and a large number of the people from all Judea and Jerusalem and the coastal region of Tyre and Sidon came to hear him and to be healed of their diseases.... Everyone in the crowd sought to touch him because power came forth from him and healed them all” (Lk 6:17-19). “Moving on from there Jesus walked by the Sea

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<sup>11</sup> Raymond E. Brown, S.S., *The Gospel According to John i-xiii*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966), p. 209.

of Galilee...Great crowds came to him, having with them the lame, the blind, the deformed, the mute, and many others. They placed them at his feet, and he cured them” (Mt 15: 29-31). And, “When it was evening..., they brought to him all who were ill or possessed by demons.... He cured many who were sick with various diseases, and he drove out many demons, not permitting them to speak because they knew him” (Mk 1:32-34). However, despite learning/seeing that there were many others who were ill, blind, lame and crippled at the Pool of Bethesda (Jn 5:3), Jesus only heals one man who had been ill for thirty-eight years. According to the narrative, Jesus only interacts with this one man and leaves the others to remain in their disabled conditions.

The reason for this man’s rather exclusive healing is not provided in the narrative. Perhaps it was because of the length of his illness that the man was singled out, or perhaps he was the only person with a mat to carry that could start the Sabbath controversy with some of “the Jews” that ensued following the healing. Anna Rebecca Solevag suggests that this man’s situation is especially harsh in the Gospel of John in comparison to the other two healing stories in this Gospel: “I suggest that this man is presented as the most destitute of the three people Jesus heals in John. The royal official has...multiple resources that he can use in his quest for healing his son. The man born blind...seems to have a family and is also part of a synagogue community, even though he is a beggar. The man by the pool says he has no one to help him, and after his healing, he seems to have nowhere to go.”<sup>12</sup> Whether Jesus has singled out this man from all of the other peoples with illness around the Pool during this festival is not explained in the text, however, this kind of limited treatment is evident today when some people with disabilities are able to pay for, find, or obtain treatment or services that others are not privy to. This observation is not meant to disparage those who receive needed treatment, but rather an admission that some seem to have it better than others in the first century at the Pool of Bethesda and in twenty-first-century America. The societal responsibility for treating people with impairments is noted by Jaime Clark-Soles: “A society disables people with impairments when it refuses to take steps to ensure that all members of society have equal access to the benefits of that society (including education, transportation, employment, architecture that can be navigated, political power, etc. – all entitlements that

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<sup>12</sup> Anna Rebecca Solevag, *Negotiating the Disabled Body: Representation of Disability in Early Christian Texts* (Atlanta GA: SBL Press, 2018), p. 62.

people with normate bodies usually take for granted).”<sup>13</sup>

One last problematic part of Jesus’s interaction with the man occurs in verse 14 when Jesus says to the man: “Look, you are well; do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse may happen to you.” This appears to be a warning from Jesus, if not indeed a threat to the man, perhaps for talking to “the Jews” who were upset about the Sabbath violation. On one level this statement from Jesus could be seen as a connection between the man’s spiritual condition and his health status. Are readers of the John 5 to understand that the man was ill for thirty-eight years because he was sinful? Other stories in this Gospel would seem to argue against any connection between one’s spiritual status and one’s health, specifically the woman caught in adultery in chapter 8, which indicates that everyone is sinful and in need of forgiveness, as well as, the story of the man born blind in chapter 9, which tells the reader that there was no connection between the sinfulness of the man or his parents that he was born blind. As Francis J. Moloney notes, “The man’s physical problems have been overcome, but Jesus’s warning hints that more is at stake. Sin will lead to a situation that is more damaging than physical illness.”<sup>14</sup> The idea of something “worse” than thirty-eight years of illness happening to the man could be referring to his place in the afterlife.

Second, the situation of the man who had been ill for thirty-eight years mirrors other people with long-term disabilities in the New Testament. A woman is described as being bent over because of the presence of an evil spirit for eighteen years in Lk 13:10-17. Another woman is described in all three of the Synoptic Gospels as hemorrhaging for twelve years (Mk 5:25-34, Mt 9:19-22, and Lk 8:43-48). Each of these individuals is pictured as alone in their suffering. The man in John 5 complains, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool.” While others are told by Jesus to return to their families after being healed, the man in John 5 is told merely to “walk” perhaps because he has no family or home to return to at this time. The woman who was bent over is “set free” (Lk 13:12,16), but not given a specific destination to go. While the woman with the hemorrhage is told in Mark 5 and Luke 8 to go “in peace.” Where she is to go remains open to interpretation for the woman, but there is

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<sup>13</sup> Jaime Clark-Soles, “John, First-Third John, and Revelation” in *The Bible and Disability: A Commentary*, ed. Sarah J. Melcher, Mikeal C. Parsons, and Amos Yong (Waco TX: Baylor Univ. Press, 2017), p. 334.

<sup>14</sup> Moloney, p. 169.

no indication that she has a particular home or family to which to return.

The solitary status of these long-suffering individuals is seen in the modern world where individuals are left to deal with the effects of their disabilities without a beneficial communal support system in place. As will be discussed below, those people who have advocates appear to suffer for shorter periods in the New Testament before being healed by Jesus at the request of their advocate. The man who is healed in John 5 has joined others at the Bethesda Pool where some have assistance, but he did not. This points to one of the societal temptations with disabling impairments: leave it to others (perhaps health care professionals, if there is enough money) or to the individual to deal with while getting on with life for oneself.

Unlike others who are healed after seeking out Jesus because of his reputation as a healer, the man in John 5 has no prior knowledge of Jesus. He is healed (verse 9) despite admitting to “the Jews” who questioned why he was carrying his mat on the Sabbath that he did not know the identity of his healer (verse 13). The man who is cured later told “the Jews” that it was Jesus who healed him. The one who is healed appears to have more allegiance to “the Jews” who question him than he does to following Jesus. He answers their question about violating the Sabbath by “throwing Jesus under the bus” and then, goes to tell them of Jesus’s identity when he learns who Jesus is.

When the man is first questioned by “the Jews,” he leaves out the command to “rise” – the key element in his miraculous healing. When he defends his actions to “the Jews” in carrying his mat on the Sabbath, he was just following the orders of the one who healed him. Jesus says, “Rise, take up your mat, and walk” (v.8); the man relates to “the Jews” that he was told: “Take up your mat and walk” (v.11). This allows “the Jews” to see Jesus as a violator of the Sabbath and a threat that needs to be dealt with, but without giving Jesus any credit for the healing. While the man is obedient to Jesus’s commands to rise, carry and walk; he never thanks Jesus for his healing or feels any obligation to follow or tell others about Jesus’s healing powers. Unlike other people who interact with Jesus and become disciples, the man in chapter 5 walks away from Jesus twice (vv. 9 and 15), but never expresses any desire to walk “with” Jesus. This response to healing is unique in the Gospel of John and shows a lack of thankfulness and gratitude on the part of the man. The man who is healed of blindness in chapter 9 believes in Jesus and argues with the Pharisees in favor of Jesus’s divine connection. The man whose son is healed in chapter 4 also believes in Jesus as does the rest of his household (4:53).

Finally, the attitude of some “the Jews” who prioritize the Sabbath laws in this pericope needs to be questioned. Perhaps the reason for their prioritization of the Sabbath rule over against celebrating the man’s healing is because they are unaware that the man carrying the mat has been healed at all. Besides the difference in quotations reported above regarding what Jesus told the man and what the man told “the Jews,” this could also indicate that “the Jews” who are questioning Jesus are unaware of the identities of the individuals in the crowd of people amassed at the Pool by the Sheep Gate. If “the Jews” had bothered to visit the people at the Pool and get to know those who were waiting for healing, then surely they would have been able to identify the man carrying the mat as one of those people with a long-term disability at the Pool. While it should be admitted that Sabbath controversies fill the chapters of the four canonical Gospels, there is also a problem with concentrating on institutional directives while ignoring those in need. Just as the man who is healed does not recognize or know Jesus, “the Jews” who point out the man’s Sabbath violation appear not to know him either. This is certainly not a “Jewish” problem because everyone in this story is Jewish: Jesus, the man, and “the Jews.” It is a question of priorities, which is often the case for people living with disabilities where people are more concerned with the bottom line than in helping the individual.

#### Mark 2

Without a miraculous birth story, the Gospel of Mark relies on Jesus’s actions as an adult to help convince readers of His Divinity. As Margaret Nutting Ralph explains, “Jesus did not consider his acts of power as ends in themselves but as part of his preaching. Sometimes Jesus found it difficult to preach after performing acts of power because the crowd was more interested in the healing than in Jesus’s preaching about the kingdom of God.”<sup>15</sup> One such story that interrupts Jesus’s teaching or offers an object lesson to Jesus’s preaching is the healing of a man with paralysis. This man is carried on a stretcher by four men to where Jesus was preaching and teaching in a house in Capernaum. However, the men with the stretcher are unable to gain access to Jesus because of the overflow crowd of people listening to Jesus preach: “Many gathered together so that there was no longer room for them, not even

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<sup>15</sup> Margaret Nutting Ralph, *And God Said What? An Introduction to Biblical Literary Forms* (New York NY: Paulist Press, 2003), p. 196.

around the door” (v.2). The men overcome this challenge by deciding to lower the man on the stretcher to Jesus through the roof. If they can’t get their friend *in* to see Jesus in person, then they will simply lower him *down* to meet Jesus by removing the roof of the home. Because of their perseverance with the stretcher, the man on the stretcher gets his audience with Jesus and the men carrying and lowering the mat are acknowledged for their work: “When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Child, your sins are forgiven’” (v.5). As others have pointed out, Jesus does not immediately choose to heal the man’s physical impairment, but rather chooses to focus on the man’s spiritual condition. This is curious in the Gospel of Mark because what has gained Jesus notoriety and popularity with the people, and caused the house in Capernaum to be filled and overflowing, are the healings and exorcisms he has performed earlier elsewhere starting in a synagogue (1:21-28), then Simon Peter’s mother-in-law (1:29-31), then others who were ill or demon possessed (1:32-34), by driving out one more demon (1:39) and finally, for curing a man with leprosy (1:40-45). In none of these interactions with others does Jesus mention or address the spiritual condition of the person or people seeking healing.

Perhaps Jesus’s focus on the man’s spiritual condition and not his physical limitations is an acknowledgment of the man’s humanity. As Rebecca Solevag comments, “The fact that the Markan Jesus gives priority to forgive the man his sins before he heals him may instead be interpreted as a sign that Jesus is not primarily interested in this person as a paralytic but sees him, to adopt the language of the twentieth-century disability activism, from a people-first perspective.”<sup>16</sup> As for the role of Jesus in the story, although he refers to the man on the mat as “the paralytic” (v.9), he also calls the man confined to the mat as “child” (v.5). Even before the man is healed, Jesus recognizes that he is more than just his disability. He is a man like every other man, and therefore in need of forgiveness. People with disabilities are always still people, not just disabilities.

The Scribes in attendance in Capernaum question Jesus’s ability to offer forgiveness by claiming that only God has the power to wipe away someone’s sins. This leaves the man on the stretcher hanging in the balance, if you will. While his soul has been restored, his limbs still do not work. Jesus decides to use this moment to convince people that he has authority to forgive others by commanding the paralytic to “rise, pick up your mat, and go home” (2:11). The

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<sup>16</sup> Solevag, p. 40.

man obeys Jesus's commands. This leads the crowd to glorify God as the man departs mat in hand.

Not unlike John 5, the healing story in Mark 2 has Jesus, a man with an impairment, and a group of people unhappy with the proceedings – not upset at the miracle of the healing, but over a theological point.<sup>17</sup> The big difference in the two stories is the role played by the four men who carried the stretcher. While the man in John 5 felt his illness was prolonged by his solitary lack of access to the Pool of Bethesda, when the men carrying the paralytic were stunted in their attempt to reach Jesus in the house. Rather than allow the man to lie on his mat for thirty-eight years (as in John 5), or even a day longer, the four men took it upon themselves to climb to the roof of the house with the man in tow and remove part of the rooftop. This action allows the man on the stretcher to have direct access to Jesus.<sup>18</sup> The support of an advocate, in this case physical support, helps to bring about the miraculous healing. This action should serve as a reminder to us about the importance of looking out for those in need who physically cannot care, or have difficulty caring for themselves.

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<sup>17</sup> Joel Marcus points out that answering the question about which is easier -- offering forgiveness or healing the man -- creates a difficult conundrum for the Scribes, as it is intended to do. "From the standpoint of systematic theology, it may be simpler to perform a miraculous cure than to forgive a person's sins, but in terms of external proof, which is what is at stake in our passage, it is easier to declare sins forgiven than to declare a person cured." Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible (New York NY: Doubleday, 2000), p. 217. John R. Donahue, S.J. and Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., describe the difficult position of the Scribes by saying, "They would not want to call the forgiveness of sin easier (which would be an 'insult' to God akin to the blasphemy charged to Jesus), nor would they wish to recognize the wonder-working activity of Jesus as a sign of divine approbation." John R. Donahue, S.J. and Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., *The Gospel of Mark*, Sacra Pagina Series, vol. 2, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, S.J. (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002), p. 97.

<sup>18</sup> All three Synoptic Gospels include versions of this story (Mk 2:1-12, Mt 9:1-8, and Lk 5:17-26). The Markan and Lukan versions of this story include the part about removing the roof to gain access to Jesus. In the Matthean version, people meet Jesus on the street with the man on a stretcher. In each version of the story the men carrying the man are acknowledged for their faith (Mk 2:5, Mt 9:2, and Lk 5:20). The man on the stretcher is referred to as a "child" in Mark and Matthew; and addressed as "you" in Luke. In all three versions the man is forgiven first, before being healed. However, Jesus is opposed by the Scribes in Mark and Matthew, and by the Scribes and Pharisees in Luke.

While certainly people could do more to design and build spaces that are equally accessible to all members of a given community, there is also great benefit to those living with disabilities to advocate for themselves and to have others who also support them.

In his commentary on Mark 1-8, Joel Marcus describes this passage as having a chiasmic structure: introduction (2:1-2), spiritual healing (2:3-5), controversy with scribes (2:6-10a), physical healing (2:10b-12a), and the conclusion (2:12b). Marcus notes: "In such a structure the middle element usually represents the point of greatest emphasis."<sup>19</sup> One could argue, in its present form, that this passage from Mark, which describes a life-changing miracle for one man, has had the focus shifted to the theological argument between Jesus and the Scribes. Like many other situations in the ancient world, and all too common in the twenty-first century, the story of the person living with a disability gets moved to the side (not unlike the group of ill, blind, and lame congregated together at the Pool of Bethesda in John 5) in order for more able-bodied people to continue arguing points of theology.

The question of John 5 was whether or not Jesus should work on the Sabbath and command others to do so. Here in Mark 2, the question concerns Jesus's desire to offer the man on the stretcher forgiveness. If only God can offer forgiveness to humanity, does this ability to offer forgiveness extend to Jesus or not? Is Jesus part of the Godhead, or just another healer in a line of healers like Elijah and Elisha? Clearly the story in Mark 2 indicates that the success in healing the man validates Jesus's claim to offer forgiveness. This offer of forgiveness and the disabled status of the man on the mat points to a schism between one's spiritual condition and one's physical well-being. For, as David F. Watson points out, "If there is a direct connection implied between sin and sickness, one wonders why the paralytic did not immediately get up after Jesus pronounced the forgiveness of his sins."<sup>20</sup>

Interestingly, Jesus shows his divine omniscience in discerning what the Scribes are thinking: "Now some of the scribes were sitting there asking themselves..., who but God alone can forgive sins? Jesus immediately knew in his mind what they were thinking to themselves" (vv.6-8). Jesus uses this divine attribute to challenge the Scribes and to put his divinity on display for all to see. However, he does not use this same gift of omniscience to tell the

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<sup>19</sup> Marcus, p. 219.

<sup>20</sup> Watson, p. 311.

crowd blocking the door to part so that the man on the mat and his four advocates can enter the house. Instead, the five men (the four carriers and the one on the stretcher) must struggle and find their own way to Jesus or else presumably, they will be left out.

The crowd in this story wants to maintain the status quo. Even the Scribes, who are no followers of Jesus, seem unwilling to give up their seats for other, perhaps more sincere and open-minded seekers in the area. Instead, those in the room and those filling the doorway maintain their relative spaces despite the struggles of the five men with the mat. Surely people heard their commotion as they approached the door and made their plans to remove the roof. When the roof was being removed and opened, those inside the space noticed them. The necessity of this kind of work in overcoming the limits of typically designed physical spaces and the needs of those living with disabilities is still problematic today, Donald Senior explains that there are not just physical obstacles that “exclude one from participation in the community – the steps, the narrow doors, the absence of braille or interpreters, the insufficiency of public transportation – but attitudinal ones: the fear, the ignorance, the patronization, the prejudice that block many people with disabilities from their rightful place within the community.”<sup>21</sup> Overcoming impairments involves more than just architectural considerations, although those are a good start to creating a more inclusive society.

And when the man on the mat was lowered in front of Jesus, all eyes were on him and his four friends. The intrusion into the space was disruptive to the preaching/teaching of Jesus. This kind of rigorous work by the four friends seems unnecessary if the crowd inside had merely made room for them and shared the space in some more organized fashion. This kind of advocacy and work for people with disabilities happens in this century as well. People who want to maintain the status quo, or perhaps better, their own privileged positions, only give up or share their positions of power when challenged by hard-working advocates and people who feel that they left out on the margins. Mark 2 reminds us of the words from the musical *Hamilton*: we all want, or should be, need to be, “in the room where it happens.”

Luke 7<sup>22</sup> and Matthew 15<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Senior, p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> The story recounted in Luke 7 has parallels to healing stories in Matthew 8 and

An interesting comparison can be made between the attitudes towards the centurion in Luke 7 and the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15. Both are dealing with disabilities. The centurion and Canaanite have definite similarities: they are both Gentiles and they are both advocating for another person, not themselves. They offer Jesus signs of humility and respect. The centurion calls Jesus “Lord” and states, “I am not worthy to have you enter under my roof” (Lk 7:6). The Canaanite woman also calls Jesus “Lord” and when she is finally granted an audience with Jesus, she “did him homage” (Mt 15:25). In both stories there are multiple attempts to communicate with Jesus. The centurion sends messages to Jesus through the Jewish elders and his own friends. The Canaanite woman pleads for Jesus’s attention three times. Obviously, they both trust that Jesus is the answer to their problems and are praised for their faith in each story. Jesus lauds the centurion: “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith” (Lk 7:9). While the Canaanite woman is told, “O woman, great is your faith!” (Mt 15:28).

However, there are major differences to be noted. The centurion is male, the Canaanite female. The centurion is asking for Jesus to heal his servant who was near death. The Canaanite is interceding for a family member, her daughter, who is being “tormented by a demon” (Mt 15:22). The centurion is a person of power and military authority. The Canaanite woman has neither power nor authority. The centurion has members of the Jewish community hierarchy and his own friends personally advocate for him to Jesus instead of

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surprisingly, John 4 but not in Mark. Each illness takes place in Capernaum. In Luke 7 a centurion appeals to Jesus for the health of his valuable slave (*doulos*), while in Matthew 8 a centurion appeals to Jesus for the health of his servant (*pais*) who is paralyzed. The story in John involves a royal official (*basilikos*), whose son ill and near death. The requests for Jesus intervention are made directly in Matthew and John, but made through intermediaries in Luke. In all three stories, the healing is successful, but only in Luke and Matthew is the centurion praised for his faith.

<sup>23</sup> The story in Matthew 15 of the Canaanite woman is very similar to the story in Mark 7 of the Syro-Phoenician woman. Both stories occur in the Gentile area of Tyre. The women directly request assistance from Jesus for their possessed daughters. The women both give signs of respect to Jesus in begging for his aid (Mt 15: homage; Mk 7: falling at his feet). In both stories the women are rebuffed and told that the “children” of Israel are to hear Jesus’s message, while non-Israelites are compared to dogs. Both women appeal to Jesus using the dog analogy and talking about dogs at least eating the scraps from the table. Both women are successful in convincing Jesus because of their persistence.

making a direct appeal. The Canaanite woman appears before Jesus alone and in person to make her appeal. Upon hearing of the centurion's request through the elders of the Jewish community, Jesus "went with them" towards the centurion's home (Lk 7:6). When the Canaanite woman first cried out to Jesus for help, he surprisingly gave her the silent treatment: "But he did not say a word in answer to her" (Mt 15:23). Even the disciples want Jesus to quiet the Canaanite woman by sending her away. Jesus even goes further in insulting the woman after she finally gains an audience with him by comparing her and her daughter's position in society to dogs.<sup>24</sup> This seems especially harsh and out of character for the Jesus who gave his life for the world. As Anna Rebecca Solevag has noted, "Both disability and ethnicity are animalized and used to other the girl and her mother. The daughter's doglike demon possession is seen as a characteristic of the mother and daughter's ethnic group."<sup>25</sup>

Many others have pointed to the Jewish focus of Matthew's Gospel, where the Canaanite woman's story is found, and the more universal, ethnically open-minded nature of Luke's Gospel, where the Roman centurion's story is located. While the comparison of these two stories helps to illuminate the differences in attitude towards Gentiles, or outsiders, in those Gospels, it should be noted that Matthew 8 also recounts a version of the Roman centurion story. In Matthew's account of the centurion's interaction with Jesus, the centurion approaches Jesus directly to intercede on behalf of his servant instead of appealing to Jewish elders or his friends. In Matthew's version of the story, Jesus immediately offers to "come and cure him" (Mt 8:7) and later publicly celebrates the faith of the Roman in contrast to what he has experienced with his own Jewish people: "Amen, I say to you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith" (Mt 8:10). This makes the treatment of the Canaanite woman and her request for the healing of her daughter in Matthew 15 all the more puzzling.

The different attitudes towards those advocating for healing effects the person suffering with a disabling condition, either the illness for the centurion's slave (Lk ch. 7) or the demon-possession of the Canaanite's daughter (Mt ch. 15). As has been mentioned above, those living with disabilities are healed more quickly in the New Testament if they have an advocate acting on their

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<sup>24</sup> "Using terminology that was as insulting in ancient times as it is today, Jesus says in effect that his ministry is limited to God's children, the Jews, and does not extend to Gentile 'dogs'." Marcus, p. 468.

<sup>25</sup> Solevag, p. 49.

behalf. If the advocate is granted an audience with Jesus, then the illness or disability is cured all the more quickly. According to passages like Mt 13:54-58 and Mk 6:1-6, Jesus's healing ability is only frustrated in his return to Nazareth by the people's lack of faith. It is the people's lack of faith that inhibits Jesus's healing power in those stories. However, in Matthew's Gospel and only with the Canaanite woman, it is Jesus who frustrates or inhibits the potential healing of another. Other women are healed in Matthew's Gospel beginning with Peter's mother-in-law (Mt 8:14-15) and including the woman with a hemorrhage (Mt 9:19-22). This leads to the conclusion that it is the woman's status as a Canaanite that Jesus finds problematic. Ethnicity should never be a limiting factor in providing care for those in need. These stories remind the reader that people outside of one's own cultural group or ethnicity have needs, have faith, and should be able to find assistance. The barrier of ethnicity is just another factor that must be overcome in providing services to people living with disabilities, whether in the first century or in the twenty-first century.

As Donald Senior has pointed out, the Canaanite woman's "fierce determination to find healing for her daughter and her persistent assault of Jesus's own boundaries finally break through. While the woman's daughter is healed, the story also dares to suggest that Jesus himself is transformed: once he has given way to the tenacious demand for healing on the part of the Canaanite woman, no longer is his mission only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel!"<sup>26</sup> It is the quick wit and clever response to Jesus that wins the day for the Canaanite woman and her daughter when she uses Jesus's own animal analogy in her favor by saying, "Please, Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters" (Mt 15:27). While Jesus implies that his healing ministry is not open to Canaanites (outsiders), "The mother's answer shifts Jesus's zero-sum argument. She accepts the invective, but she also turns it around."<sup>27</sup> It seems embarrassing to the Christian faith that any advocate would have to work that hard for the well-intentioned benefit of another.

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<sup>26</sup> Senior, p. 15.

<sup>27</sup> Solevag, p. 47. Joel Marcus in his commentary on the parallel Markan passages says, "The woman's response transforms the dog of Jesus' metaphor, which is presumably a street dog that lives outside the house, into a domestic dog that resides inside the house. The dog, therefore, admittedly in a position inferior to that of the children, is still part of the 'household of faith,'" p. 470.

Mark 5<sup>28</sup>

In many healing stories in the Gospels, Jesus's interventions to assist others are seen as beneficial not only to the individual living with an impairment, but even for the entire community. However, Mark 5 presents a different reaction and attitude from the people. In the Gentile territory of the Gerasenes, Jesus encounters a man possessed by many demons who go by the name "Legion" (Mk 5:9). The people have tried to restrain the man with "shackles and chains" (v. 4), but to no avail. Simply put, the people were unable to control the man. He lived outside of the community in the graveyard and often tormented himself by inflicting self-harm in the form of bruising (v.5).<sup>29</sup> Holly Joan Toensing sees these details regarding the man's condition outside the community as historically accurate:

Given the fact that throughout most of Western history people believed that behaviors associated with what we call mental illness today were caused literally by demon possession, the demoniac story of Mark 5 and others like it certainly contributed to the stigmatization and ill treatment of the mentally ill. Mentally ill persons were perceived as weak-willed or flawed in some way to have given the demon – even Satan himself – a foothold in their lives, even welcoming it. Moreover, what was associated with the demonic or Satan was often perceived to be violent and so the mentally ill were feared, segregated, restrained, and even executed.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> The healing of the Gerasene demoniac can also be found in Luke 8 and Matthew 8. In Mark 5 and Luke 8 there is one demoniac living among the tombs, while in Matthew 8 there are two demoniacs. In Mark 5 and Luke 8, the demoniac is safely outside the city, but in Matthew 8, the two demoniacs caused the local road impassable. In all three stories Jesus exorcises the demons into a herd of swine which is reported to the people of the town, whereupon Jesus is asked to leave the area. In Luke 8 and Mark 5, the man who was healed is told tell others in the Gerasene area about what God has done for him. The story in Matthew 8 ends without offering such a hopeful conclusion.

<sup>29</sup> As to the "unclean" status and mental condition of the man described in this story from an Orthodox Jewish perspective, C.S. Mann offers these intriguing thoughts, "Talmudic prescriptions provide four tests of madness: spending the night in a grave, tearing one's clothes, walking around at night, and destroying anything given. All such signs are present in this case." C.S. Mann, *Mark: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1986), p. 278.

<sup>30</sup> Holly Joan Toensing, "'Living Among the Tombs': Society, Mental Illness and Self-Destruction in Mark 5:1-20" in *This Able Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper (Atlanta

Upon seeing Jesus, the man fell at Jesus's feet, while the demons inside him began to bargain with Jesus. The demons wanted to stay in the area and asked Jesus to send them into a local herd of swine (v. 12). Jesus permitted the exorcised demons to enter the pigs who quickly proceeded to drown themselves in the sea (v. 13).<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, Toensing points out: "The demon with the man – not the man himself – responded to Jesus's question and commands (5:7-12)."<sup>32</sup> Reading the story again with this in mind, one realizes that it is the man who approaches Jesus in the first place and prostrates himself at Jesus's feet before the demon(s) begin speaking to Jesus. The man seems to be working hard to overcome the demon(s) inside and sees Jesus as the answer to his problem.

The people herding the swine told others in the city of what had transpired with Jesus, the man, the demons, and the pigs. As opposed to other communities that celebrated Jesus's healing ministry, the people of the Gerasenes "began to beg him to leave their district" (v. 17). As Walter T. Wilson says, "The reader might be forgiven for thinking at this point that the townspeople intend to greet him as a hero or benefactor, leading him into the city with honor, much as the Judeans had done for King David. But in contrast to other stories in the Gospel, where people respond to Jesus's miracles with awe and acclamation (e.g., Mt 9:8), here the response is one of repudiation. While the demons had implored Jesus so that they might leave, the townspeople implore Jesus so that he might leave."<sup>33</sup> Jesus instructed the man who had formerly been possessed to remain in the area with his family and to

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GA: SBL, 2007), p. 133.

<sup>31</sup> Joel Marcus sees this passage as having many similarities to the death of Egyptians at the crossing of the Red/Reed Sea in Exodus 14-15. Marcus says: "Both are stories in which God displays his mercy on his people and his incomparable power over his enemies, and both climax in a scene in which a multitude is drowned" (Marcus, p. 348).

<sup>32</sup> Toensing, p. 136. She points to the benefit of including this passage in the Bible, "This story may help others understand the enormity of the battle within that the mentally ill are forced to take up, oftentimes with strength of will and courage that goes unacknowledged," p. 141.

<sup>33</sup> Walter T. Wilson, *Healing in the Gospel of Matthew: Reflections on Method and Ministry* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2014), p. 132. Joel Marcus says in his commentary, "Though the demons have been bested in their direct encounter with Jesus, they, or their relatives, seem to have succeeded in a subtle counterattack," p. 353.

“announce to them all that the Lord in his pity has done for you” (v.19). The man became Jesus’s lone representative in the area. The man is able to accomplish what Jesus was not, spreading the Good News in this Gentile territory.

The community wants Jesus to leave the area perhaps because he has upset the status quo in healing the man living by the tombs. The exorcism also ended up costing the swineherders and the 2,000 pigs, which surely would have been eaten and/or purchased by members of the community and outsiders. The healing of the man possessed by “Legion,” while beneficial to the individual and his family, proved costly to herders and their families. Others in the area are willing to listen positively to the man’s story of being possessed by demons, then healed by Jesus, “the man went off and began to proclaim in the Decapolis what Jesus had done for him; and all were amazed” (Mk 5:20). People in the other communities were willing to listen to the man and even were amazed at his healing story. So, it appears it is not the idea of exorcism or even the man himself that has offended people in Mark 5. This would lend credence to the idea of the loss of income from the demise of the pigs that negatively prejudiced the community against Jesus remaining in the territory. This attitude about a concern for income or “the bottom line” is often used today as an explanation for a lack of services offered to people living with impairments, whether it be retro-fitting buildings with proper ramps and elevators, or providing public transportation that is available to all, these economic concerns frustrate the completion of needed changes in communal infrastructure.

#### Luke 22

The last pericope discussed in this paper about different attitudes towards those with disabilities is the story of the arrest of Jesus. This event is recounted in all four canonical Gospels. In all four accounts, Jesus is in the Garden of Gethsemane and approached by Judas who is accompanied by other people in order to arrest Jesus. In Matthew 26 and Mark 14 these people are described as being armed “with swords and clubs” (Mt 26:47, Mk 14:43); while in John the group is made up of soldiers and guards who have “lanterns, torches and weapons” (Jn 18:3). Luke reports only that a crowd approached Jesus, no weapons are mentioned (Lk 22:47). In the Synoptic Gospels, Judas approaches Jesus (Lk 22:47, Mt 26:49, Mk 14:45). In John’s Gospel, Jesus asks the group who they are looking for and the group responds, “Jesus the Nazorean” (Jn

18:5).

An impairment is caused in the next part of the arrest by one of the people with Jesus in the Garden. When the disciples realize Jesus is being arrested, one of the people with Jesus draws a sword and chops off the ear of one of the arresting group. This is seen as an ill-guided attempt to defend Jesus. In Lk 22:50 the sword is drawn by one of Jesus's disciples; in Mt 26:51 the sword is used by "one of those who accompanied Jesus"; and in Mk 14:47 it is one of the bystanders who uses the weapon. Jn 18:10 identifies the attacker as Peter himself. In all four accounts, the injured party is identified as the high priest's slave. The Gospel of John goes even farther in identifying the injured slave as Malchus. Jesus immediately orders his "people" to desist in their attempt to stop the proceedings. Jesus explains in one way or another that what is happening is the will of God and should not be stopped.

Only in Luke's version of events does Jesus bother to heal the injured servant: "'Stop, no more of this!' Then he touched the servant's ear and healed him" (Lk 22:51). No request has been made for Jesus's healing touch by the slave or one of the others present; no one praises God for the ear's restoration nor does anyone ask Jesus to leave the area. Instead, the arrest proceeds as planned and Jesus's disciples leave him with the crowd. The healing appears to be unique in the Gospels because the restored party was an active opponent of Jesus, not a sympathetic Gentile; and not even a Jewish person who has become convinced of Jesus's Messiahship. While Jesus's efforts at healing are frustrated in Nazareth because of the people's lack of faith, why does Luke report Jesus healing someone who thinks he should be arrested as a blasphemer? If the miraculous healings are meant to serve as evidence or signs of Jesus's divinity, then why aren't more of Jesus's opponents blessed with this kind of "healing touch"? Instead, Jesus generally refuses to offer any signs of his divinity to opponents who specifically ask (Mt 12:38; Mk 8:11; Lk 11:16; Jn 6:30).

Interestingly, in Luke's Gospel there are twenty-six occurrences of the Greek word for "servant" or "slave," as is used in this passage (*doulos*) regarding Jesus's arrest. Six of those occurrences in Luke refer to historical people, while the other twenty occurrences are used in parables and as examples. Five of the six occurrences related to historical people are about healing the individual – the servant of the centurion in Luke 7 and the servant of the high priest in this story. The other use of *doulos* in reference to an historical person was to Simeon, who met the baby Jesus in the Jerusalem

Temple in which he describes himself a God's servant. For a word and position that has such negative connotations in our modern culture, Luke shows his desire to look out for the least in society by using the word in such positive ways in the Gospel. Like other people with disabilities, servants and slaves are people first who need healing and the attention of the community.

### Conclusion

While many passages have been reviewed and analyzed in the pages above with an eye toward the treatment of people living with impairments in the Gospels, two points from these stories seem worth remembering. First, despite the obvious differences between the authors of the Gospels in the first century and the community of faith in the twenty-first century, Jesus had a reputation for helping people in need regardless of the impairment with which they were living, their ethnicity, their gender, or even their age. This seems like a great reputation for any person to aspire to in life.

Second, people with disabilities need advocates in their families and in the community. Just as in the Gospel stories, people heal more quickly when they have someone looking out for them and a place to go. Third, religious groups and other well-meaning people often focus on maintaining the status quo instead of celebrating victories with people that help to bring about healing and ministering to people living with disabilities on a daily basis.