

## God on Wheels

(Based on Loving Our Own Bones by Julia Watts Belser)

Jeremiah 31:8-9, Ezekiel 10:9-13 by Patty Friesen (June 23/24)

From poet Rainer Rilke, “God, you are a wheel whose dark spokes sometimes catch me up, revolve me nearer to the centre. Then all the work I put my hand to widens from turn to turn.  
(I.45)

Slide of Julia - Julia Watts Belser is a rabbi and professor at Georgetown University and longtime activist for disability, LGBTQ2 and gender justice. Her work widens from turn to turn on her wheelchair. She recounts, “After synagogue one Sabbath, a visitor popped the question. “What’s wrong with you?” She asked, as her eyes flicked from my face to my wheelchair. I’ve been asked this question in an astounding array of inappropriate venues so I didn’t flinch. “I have a disability,” I said, though it was plain she’d already noticed. I’m more than willing to talk about disability, but I’m disinclined to do so while waiting in the buffet line for my salad. What’s wrong has less to do with me and more to do with what’s wrong with exclusion, objectification, pity and disdain. I wanted to tell her that what’s wrong is social attitudes, architectural barriers and cultural notions of normalcy that value certain models of being over others. What’s wrong is the thousand ways our cultures mark certain bodies and minds as *normal*, while designating others as deviant and defective. What’s wrong is harm that cuts against body and spirit.” (p. 1)

I’ve been inspired by Watts Belser’s work which is why I’m enthusiastically sharing about her story today. On a personal level, I’ve had my blind eyes opened to the extent of inaccessibility in businesses in the city having a mother with a walker that we have to navigate together through heavy non-automatic doors with me holding open doors while she tries to

scrunch past me and these are for doctors' offices, optometrists and dentists who are serving a large elderly population. After 2 years of this kind of stretching and straining and accepting things the way they are, I've begun complaining to businesses to spend the money to serve their clientele better. Our experience makes us activists.

Watts Belser uses the term "disability" to include physical and sensory disabilities, including autism, cognitive and intellectual disabilities, mental health disabilities, and long-term health conditions like chronic pain and chronic fatigue. Diabetes, depression, hearing loss, arthritis, dyslexia - all these experiences fall within the category of disability. Suddenly, what defines disabled becomes increasingly wide and starts to include more and more of us. What defines *normal* becomes increasingly narrow and starts to exclude more and more of us.

Sociologist Erving Goffman wryly defines *normal* as a young married heterosexual male parent with clear skin and perfect weight and height with a college education who is employed full-time and excels in every sport. (P. 40 Belser) Suddenly, we realize that what defines *normal* is a fantasy. Even though *normal* is a fantasy, it has enormous social power to define others.

In Watt-Belser's words, Disabilities affect bodies and minds in a thousand different ways. Some are present at birth, while others are acquired over the course of a life. Some disabilities change over time, while others are fairly static. Some disabilities are obvious at first glance, but many more are not immediately apparent. I'm a wheelchair user, so my own disability is hyper-visible but the majority of disability experiences aren't apparent at first glance. In disability circles, folks often distinguish between visible and invisible disabilities. People with invisible disabilities often face dismissive attitudes toward their disabilities, while those of us with visible disabilities often contend with the consequences as being immediately marked. (P. 24)

We live in a world that generally assumes everyone is non-disabled unless otherwise marked, a posture that means disabled people have to do the work and invest the energy to disrupt those expectations. **Ableism** is the complex system that stigmatizes, denies access and self-determination. (P. 38). Every time I travel, I disclose the details of my wheel measurements and particulars of my bathroom needs. These are not private matters but public facts. In a world that treats my presence as a perennial surprise, I'm always negotiating the terms of my passage. The story of my body gets told and retold, part of the price I pay for a chance at access and accommodation. (P.28).

Watts Belser helps religious communities; churches and synagogues understand Hebrew and New Testament scripture through a powerful disability lens. Religious communities have more often tended to treat disability as a problem to be solved than a perspective to be embraced. Reading the Bible through the lens of disability experience can transform the way we think about text and theology (p. 2).

There are many passages within the Bible that affirm the dignity and vitality of people with disabilities. Stirring words in Genesis' creation of the world call us to recognize all people as created in the image of God as we presently are. The biblical command in Leviticus 19:14 to "not insult the deaf or place a stumbling-block before the blind," lays out an explicit obligation to treat people with disabilities with dignity and respect. The biblical call to care for the orphan, widow and stranger has long been a touchstone for Jews and Christians alike, anchoring a commitment to ensure the well-being of people who are vulnerable and at risk, those who might easily end up on the social margins.

And yet there are other scriptures that are a challenge. When the prophet Isaiah envisions a better world, he places disability at the centre of his vision: Then the eyes of the blind will be

opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped. The lame will leap like a deer, and the mute tongue will sing with joy. It's a promise of a world made new built on the backs of disabled folk. In Isaiah's vision, disability is part and parcel of the world that is to be left behind. Until they are healed, the disabled languish. Joy comes with disability transformed. For Isaiah, liberation happens through the erasure of disability. But for Jeremiah, there is a different vision of transformation.

Slide - See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor together; a great company, they shall return here. With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back; **on a level road where they shall not stumble.** - Jeremiah 31:8-9

Jeremiah's vision transforms architectures of exclusion. His future makes room for wheelchairs and walkers. Athletes of all types all travel a road laid out in intentional accessible design. The promise of a level road on which no one stumbles is God's gift of access: a long, smooth ramp that cuts through once-inhospitable terrain, one that offers all of us a way back home. This is a promise that God will not restore disability of individuals but will bring marginalized peoples into the centre of a restored and renewed community. Disability communities have honed a critical body of knowledge about what it means to practice interdependence, mutuality, love and care. Disability is a source of expertise, of prophetic insight to change accessibility systems that are messed up. A restored community is one that integrates accessibility in buildings and attitudes.

In the words of Watts Belser...During the holiday of Shavuout, Jewish communities around the world chant from the first chapter of the book of Ezekial, reciting the striking image of God by Ezekial who saw a vision of a vast chariot with great wheels. The wheels, Ezekiel says there were wheels within wheels and the Spirit of God was in the wheels. As I was reading that description of God's divine chariot, I felt a jolt of recognition, an intimate familiarity, a sense of

kin-ship. I thought: God has wheels. When I think of God on Wheels, I think of the delight I take in my own wheelchair, the satisfaction I take from a life lived on wheels. My wheels set me free and open up my spirit. I draw a powerful, sensual joy in tandem with my chair. This is how the Holy Spirit moves through me, in the intricate interplay of muscle and spin, the exhilarating physicality of body and wheel.

What brings me joy has been the disability community who has brought together many who live brilliantly unconventional lives for activism, artistry and passionate community. In these circles, disability isn't a medical diagnosis but a cultural movement that recognizes human diversity. The recognition of God on Wheels is the ground of a powerful theological claim: that God knows disability experience from the inside out. It's an affirmation that God knows and shares the pleasures of disability life and that God also knows the shape of its pain, its loneliness, its frustrations and loss. (P. 216). God calls us to investigate the particularity of our own life experiences, to treat our distinctiveness as the ground of spiritual insight. (P. 223). For those of us whose bodies are persistently devalued, for those of us who have been told in a thousand subtle and not so subtle ways that we fail to measure up, finding God in the mirror of our flesh is a powerful reorientation and God has an accessibility problem. P. 228.

If God rolls along the sidewalks of our city, then God knows the sharp frustration of wheelchair life: the building with no elevator, the bus with the broken lift, the curb without a cut, the church with no accessible bathroom. To think of God on Wheels asks us to orient our attention to the architecture, to all the norms and habits we've allowed to shape our physical spaces. Recognizing God on Wheels puts accessibility at the very centre of our spiritual prophetic work, at the heart of our efforts to build spiritual community and I'm so thankful for our paved parking out front when I bring Mom and her walker to church. Are there other things

we might be thinking about – like more pew cut-outs for parking walkers or one more accessible bathroom as our accessibility needs grow? Our building's accessibility is just the beginning of all kinds of accessibility work that needs to happen in our towns and cities. God on Wheels doesn't sit high in the sky. God on Wheels is intimate with the ground and all creatures that live there.

Let us pray...

Holy and Righteous God, you have created us in your image and made us to seek in hope that restored community that you have promised in scripture. Help us continue to roll our way towards you. Amen.