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You Are Designed

Jeremiah 1:5 (NLT)
I knew you before I formed you in your mother's womb. Before you were born I set you apart and appointed you as my prophet to the nations.

You are no accident, no freak, no result of a chance genetic combination. Your being gay, lesbian, bisexual is neither an accident nor a calamity. Like the prophet, God personally made you in the womb, forming each part of you. Then you were appointed to a task. You cannot discover that divine task, that divine purpose inside the closet. Fly your flag with dignity and pride and a sense of divine direction will come to you. The joy is in searching and discovering what you feel destined to do.



Shut Up, Jesus is Here!

by Gary Simpson

Mark 10:46-52 (KJV) And they came to Jericho: and as he went out of Jericho with his disciples and a great number of people, blind Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus, sat by the highway side begging.

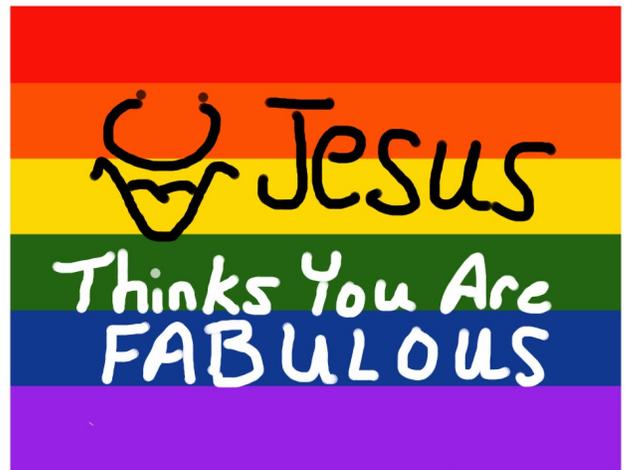
And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out, and say, Jesus, thou Son of David, have mercy on me. And many charged him that he should hold his peace: but he cried the more a great deal, Thou Son of David, have mercy on me.

And Jesus stood still, and commanded him to be called. And they call the blind man, saying unto him, Be of good comfort, rise; he calleth thee.

And he, casting away his garment, rose, and came to Jesus. And Jesus answered and said unto him, What wilt thou that I should do unto thee? The blind man said unto him, Lord, that I might receive my sight. And Jesus said unto him,

Go thy way; thy faith hath made thee whole. And immediately he received his sight, and followed Jesus in the way.

The healing of Bartimaeus is generally seen as a proof that Jesus is the Messiah and helps set the stage for Calvary and for Jesus' crucifixion. For all of the right reasons, Christians may be focused so clearly on Jesus as the Messiah and focused so clearly on Good Friday and Easter Sunday that we miss the theological implications and importance of the interaction between Jesus and Bartimaeus, the blind man. Today, we can slow the pace and reflect



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Movie Review

Title: *Matt Shepard is a Friend of Mine*

Year: 2015

Length: 89 minutes

Available: Amazon.Com and Amazon.Ca

Matthew Shepard's murder caused me to be an activist, focusing my efforts on highlighting the evils of hate and on reducing homophobia in organized religion, so when I learned that there was a new documentary about Matthew Shepard I immediately wanted to watch the video. Because I know how the Matthew Shepard story ends - with Matthew's brutal murder and with Matthew's murder being a major factor in the eventual passing of a Federal law that included gay people in hate crimes provisions - I knew watching the documentary would be difficult.

What makes *Matt Shepard is a Friend of Mine* different from a typical documentary is the personal approach used in the documentary. We hear the story of Matthew from Matt's family and friends. Parts of the documentary are powerful and moving.

This documentary is important, because it helps keep the Matthew Shepard story alive, helps us clearly see the evils of hate and homophobia. In a civilized world, we sanitize evil, but hate and homophobia cannot be sanitized. For the sake of thousands of sexual minority people around the world, we dare not allow the frightening evil of homophobia to be whitewashed, to be dismissed as of no consequence or to be justified.

more on the story.

This passage focuses our attention on the intersections of disability and faith. We need to accept the challenge of developing personal theologies about disability, because at one time or another in life everyone either has been or will be less abled, less capable than most people in society.

Pauline A. Otieno, a Kenyan who published an article in the *Disability Studies Quarterly* about Bible and theological perspectives on people with disabilities observes, "The Bible is intermingled with texts that have been interpreted in oppressive ways" and in ways that "reinforce the marginalization" of people with disabilities.¹ There is a tendency for disability to be seen as a disease in the Bible.² With the exception of people who became blind due to natural causes and aging, the Bible tends to see God as somehow being responsible for disability.³ Old Testament authors tend to see disability is punishment for sin, as a curse and as a result of unbelief and ignorance.⁴ Those people in the crowd reflect that theology in how they treat Bartimaeus. The way the people lived out a theology of disability is rather problematic. In the Gospel story, they told the blind man to shut up. There is a sense in the Greek that might not translate easily in English. In Greek, we get the sense of an "involuntary . . . inability to speak."⁵ People in the crowd were "deriding" Bartimaeus when he was blind.⁶

Before we criticize the people in the crowd too much

¹ Pauline A. Otieno. "Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Disability: Implications on the Rights of Persons with Disability in Kenya." *Disability Studies Quarterly*. Vol 29, No 4 (2009), 09 October 2015. <<http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/988/1164#top>>.

² *The Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*: 1962; *Encyclopaedia Judaica*: 1972, cited in Otieno (2009).

³ Otieno (2009).

⁴ *Jewish Encyclopaedia* (1920), *The Talmud of Jerusalem* (1956) and *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (1972), cited in Otieno (2009).

⁵ "Strong's Greek Definition for # 4623." *The KJV Bible With Strong's References*. n.d. 09 October 2015. <<http://www.apostolic-churches.net/bible/strongs/ref/?stgh=greek&stnm=4623>>.

⁶ Earl Radmacher, Ronald Allen and Wayne House. *The Nelson Study Bible*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Pub., 1997), 1665.

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for telling the blind man to shut up, we may want to think about some common beliefs in contemporary Christian circles.

When we say, "It is God's will," people living with disabilities may hear,

"Shut up. You are not good enough for God."

When we say, "God is teaching you something," people living with disabilities may hear,

"Shut up. You are not good enough for God."

When we say, "There is sin in your life," people living with disabilities may hear,

"Shut up. You are not good enough for God."

When we say, "You do not have enough faith," people living with disabilities may hear,

"Shut up. You are not good enough for God."

When we say, "This is God's judgment," people living with disabilities may hear,

"Shut up. You are not good enough for God."

After Jesus called Bartimaeus, the people seemed to change their tune and appear to have encouraged him.⁷ In the Gospels, we see a tendency for people with disabilities to be celebrated only

after they are healed and fully abled people. And God is celebrated after disabled people are healed. The fact that disabled people are celebrated as they become able bodied is more of a statement about humanity that it is a statement about God. We celebrate the human spirit and the relentless drive to succeed that allows a handicapped person to do more than most abled people could dream of doing, but we tend to ignore disabled people who are not superstars. Performance does not establish one's value to God or to humanity. Making human worth dependent on achievement and productivity shows a graceless theology and I suspect the people around Jesus struggled to express a grace filled theology to people with disabilities. Unfortunately, ability-dependent theologies diminish the inherent worth and dignity of people.

The result of some Christian theologies of disability are harming less abled members of society. Without getting into any specifics, it is easy to see how some members of society will not feel as comfortable around people with disabilities, will not be as welcoming of people with disabilities and will not be as open to providing support for people with disabilities, if they believe that people with disabilities somehow deserve to be disabled.

There is a very affirming theology regarding Jesus' actions in this week's Gospel story in Mark. Jesus did not ignore the blind man. Jesus did not shy away from contact with the blind man. Instead of avoiding a

Christmas

Traditional Christian theology holds that Jesus is God the Son. Many LGBT people are excluded by family, friends and churches around Christmas time. The Trinity understands. The Son was excluded at Christmas and spent the first Christmas in a barn.

Part of the story is in the first verses of Luke 2.

Luke 2:1-6 (KJV) And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.

⁷ Radmacher, Allen and House. *The Nelson Study Bible*, 1665.

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Spiritual Identity Theft

Gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, trans, gender fluid or gender queer people who were kicked out of church or left due to more subtle pressure, lost the following:

- A church community.
- An extended church family.
- Friends.
- A support system.
- An identity.

What is lost strikes at the core to the essence of who you are. Religion is an important part of our identity and is considered by some people to be a core part of an individual's identity.

Some people are died in the wool members of a denomination. They might be able to trace their roots in Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian, Anglican (Episcopalian) or Baptist circles for generations. I've met people who were part of church families that could trace their spiritual heritage in the same denomination for over 400 years. Their world view was centered around the church denomination.

Those who find themselves robbed of a spiritual identity, an extended church family, a church-based support system and church friends face significant levels of painful loss - all at the same time. Loss is not something we quickly bounce back from. We may find we are dealing with different elements of our loss for months, even years.

In some cases, a new identity and a new world view can come from finding the deeper core identities to our lives. Queer people of faith might find an identity that is rooted only in God, not in a specific church denomination, friends that share a common set of humanitarian or social justice values and people who share our sexual orientation or gender identity.

As we walk through the shadow of the valley of spiritual and identity loss, God is with us. God understands the realities of toxic spiritual abuse and bullying. After all, God incarnate, the one we call Jesus Christ (God the Son), was put to death at the request of spiritual leaders. There is no way God is going to walk away from us, if we find it too painful or too dangerous to ever go back to church again. God is going to be with us to the very end, because what we rejected is the pain, the trauma, the church, not the God of love.

person with a disability, Jesus called Bartimaeus. As an able-bodied man, Jesus did not assume he knew exactly what Bartimaeus wanted and needed. The solution of an able-bodied man was not imposed on Bartimaeus. Asking what disabled people need is a very empowering and affirming act. Then Jesus did what Bartimaeus requested, by giving Bartimaeus the ability to see again.

I wonder how surprised the people were to see Jesus heal a blind man. Even those who heard of Jesus' miracles and who believed Jesus had some special powers may have doubted that Jesus would heal Bartimaeus. They may have deeply believed that Bartimaeus deserved to be blind. And Bartimaeus' name may have reinforced that opinion. Names were important in the ancient world. The name Bartimaeus can mean son of "the unclean."⁸

In the Gospels, we see clearly how much Jesus values those who have disabilities. Matthew Chapter 12 relates the story of Jesus healing a man with a paralyzed arm on the Sabbath. This action placed Jesus in direct conflict with those who were deeply devoted to the Sabbath. Evidently, some Jewish people were so devoted to the Sabbath that they were prepared to die before they would break the Sabbath law. William Barclay points to a time when Antiochus sent troops to attack a group of Jewish people who were hiding in caves. Because it was Sabbath, the group of Jewish people did not defend themselves and they were killed.⁹ Contributors to the NIV Zondervan Study Bible observe, "Legalists of all eras put obedience to

⁸"Strong's Hebrew and Greek Dictionary." e-Sword. (Franklin, TN: Equipping Ministries Foundation, 2000), e-book.

⁹ William Barclay. *The Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew Vol. 2.* (Edinburgh: St. Andrew Press, 2001), ebook.

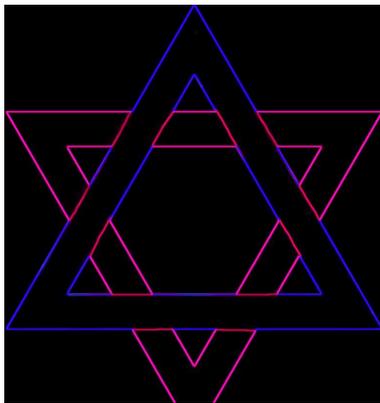
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rules above love for people. In extreme instances, this misguided passion leads to murderous rage."¹⁰ According to the Biblical story in Chapter 12 of Matthew, after Jesus healed the man on the Sabbath, the Jewish religious leaders went to plot to kill Jesus.¹¹

Jesus probably knew a lot more about the anger of highly legalistic people, when they believe somebody has compromised a cherished rule, than we do. Jesus probably had a sense that healing a man on the Sabbath was potentially dangerous. Jesus chose to make meeting the needs of a man with a disability more important than his personal safety.

Christianity holds that Jesus Christ is the ultimate revelation of God to humanity. The ultimate revelation of God to humanity includes the news that God values and loves disabled people more than we can comprehend.



Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas believed what is good has more to do with what is unique about people than it has to do with what is common among people. He called the unique aspects of people traces of God.¹² An individual's disabilities are the traces of God and need to be respected as traces of God. On a spiritual level, God is present in human disabilities.

I have two triangles. The first triangle represents me. The second triangle represents you. Picture yourself as the right-side-up triangle. Because there are times when I do things a little different, you can picture me as the upside-down triangle. When we put the triangles together, we discover something symbolic of the sacred, the Star of David. Today, I invite you to find something sacred in the lives of people with disabilities in your family, in your church and in your community.

And today, I invite you to find something sacred in your personal limitations and disabilities.

¹⁰ D.A. Carson, et. al., eds. *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Pub., 2015), 1954.

¹¹ Matthew 12:14 (NLT) Then the Pharisees called a meeting to plot how to kill Jesus.

¹² *In Search of the Good: A Catholic Understanding of Moral Living*. (Ottawa, Ontario: Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, n.d.), 19.