

Too deep for words

Learning about prayer from people with developmental disabilities

Paula Snyder Belousek

My first meetings with Jerry were jarring. This Paul Bunyan of a man, made strong by many hours of farm work, would forcefully place his hand on my head for several seconds and then touch my forehead. I resisted what I experienced as an intrusive gesture, and complained that he was pushing too hard and messing up my hair. Jerry smiled indulgently at my protests and continued to insist on completing this ritual each time we met.

After several unsettling encounters, it became clear to me that Jerry's intention is not to rearrange my hair but to give me a blessing. Placing those powerful, well-worn hands on my head and forming the sign of the cross on my forehead, he wordlessly prays God's benediction on me. In Jerry's iron grip I identify with Jacob

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wrestling with God. I sense that God's love rests upon me and is unwilling to let me go. Like Jacob, I cannot wriggle out of the grasp of this bearer of blessing; instead I eagerly anticipate receiving this gift of grace through Jerry's hands whenever we meet.

Jerry has a developmental disability.¹ He will probably never write a book about prayer, nor is he able to clearly articulate what his prayer life means to him. Nonetheless, Jerry and many other friends with developmental disabilities have been important

spiritual mentors for me, expanding my understanding of prayer and life shared in Christian community.

In *Soul Feast*, Marjorie Thompson writes that the spiritual life is first about God's desire to relate to us. Our relationship with God is always a result of God's initiative toward us. Prayer happens because of the "hidden response to the hidden workings of the Spirit within."² People with developmental disabilities, particu-

larly those with the most severe cognitive disabilities, have much to teach us about the way God takes initiative with us; their experience challenges the assumption that prayer requires certain abilities or levels of intelligence. Instead, each of us is beloved of God; God's imprint is indelibly placed within us, marking us for relationship and communion with God.

The apostle Paul points to this reality when he writes that the Spirit "helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26). Each person, regardless of other abilities, has a capacity to be in relationship with God and is created for a life of prayer. What follows are some reflections about the gifts of prayer that people with developmental disabilities bring to the community of faith, and some suggestions about ways to assist in deepening and enriching the prayer lives of this population.

Prayer as multifaceted language

Prayer at its most basic is communication with God.³ Often we think about communication—whether with God or between humans—in terms of language-based forms of conversation. But for many people with developmental disabilities, verbal expression may not be the dominant way of communicating. For many, communication happens with few if any words, through utterances or noises, a single spoken word or phrase, sign language or gestures, eye contact, touch, or body movement. In the same way that people with developmental disabilities use diverse modalities in their communication with other people, communication with God may also take a variety of forms. If a life of prayer flows out of God's initiative in the "hidden workings of the Spirit within," then to honor God's movement in the life of a person with a developmental disability is to honor that individual's style of communication.

Laurent is ten years old. He has a severe disability, and his only form of unaided communication is to use his right hand to stroke the face of whoever happens to be sitting beside him—his way of saying "I love you." Laurent's mother writes, "Lately it has been more difficult to go to the chapel with Laurent because he would not lie in my arms and look at the icon of Jesus ... a few feet away. In the end, I realized that Laurent wanted to go up to the icon

and stroke it. And I realized that Jesus ... [was] truly present to him through the wood of the icon. Stroking and loving and praying were all one.”⁴ Prayer aided by icons may be foreign to many in the Anabaptist tradition, but this story makes abundantly clear that this tangible image enables Laurent to show his loving response to God’s loving initiative in seeking him.

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Prayer in corporate worship sometimes inhibits participation by people with developmental disabilities. In Mennonite settings, prayers are often carefully constructed to include rich images and important theological truths. While it is important to rehearse and enact the reality of who God is and who we are in relationship with God, prayers that rely

exclusively on the spoken word can be barriers to full participation in their worshiping communities by individuals with disabilities.

For people with limited vocabulary and short attention spans, prayers that use complicated syntax and abstract ideas can be difficult to follow. The presence of worshipers with developmental disabilities can give us impetus to expand our ways of praying to include them as well as those whose primary learning styles are visual or movement oriented. We can shape prayers that rely on simple language and short phrases that draw us back to what is essential in our faith and worship. Our prayers can be enriched through use of repeated sung or signed responses, body movement, or visual images that accompany the spoken words. Those of us who tend to worship with our minds may find our hearts and bodies engaged as well.

The use of ritual in prayer

Paul slowly and purposefully recited, “Our Father who art in heaven ...” Many gathered that morning for worship listened with surprise and awe as this shy senior citizen with Down’s syndrome confidently prayed the Lord’s Prayer. Paul has slowed down over the years and often struggles to answer questions people address to him, and he seldom speaks unless prompted. However, the Lord’s Prayer, learned long ago, still lives in his memory and provides structure for his spoken prayers.

Forms of ritual such as recitation of the Lord's Prayer⁵ are particularly effective for praying with many people with developmental disabilities; using familiar prayer patterns allows all of us to anticipate the structure of the prayer and participate freely. Patterned prayer also provides opportunity for one with disabilities to lead others in prayer.

A favorite prayer ritual used by the Faith and Light Communities⁶ in the Washington, DC, area is a repetitive response after someone shares a thanksgiving or intercession. The gathered community responds by singing and signing "Father of Jesus, hear our prayer."⁷ This prayer is prayed with eyes open so all can "hear" petitions offered through sign language, gestures, and eye movements. Those who are easily distracted are called back to prayer each time the repeated phrase returns. Regardless of how unconventional the form of prayer—joyful laughter, a hug offered to one who is grieving, labored speech, acting out a concern—the group responds with the ritual refrain.

One evening during a prayer time of this kind, J. P., an articulate man with Down's syndrome, dramatically walked to the center of the prayer circle and knelt, boldly praying for God's blessing and in turn offering his life in service to God. As I listened, I longed for J. P.'s boldness and courage; I was struggling with my own growing sense of call to pastoral ministry. As he gave voice to the prayer that I was struggling to form, J. P.'s response was a gift not only to God but to me.

Prayers of lament

People with developmental disabilities have many spiritual gifts to offer the church, but we dare not view them as angels. To do so is dehumanizing, and it fails to recognize the reality of the sin, brokenness, and pain that all people, including those with developmental disabilities, experience.

As I have prayed with people with developmental disabilities, I have come to recognize the importance of lament as a form of prayer. Often adults with developmental disabilities have limited social and support networks: many experience cultural marginalization, their paid caregivers come and go, their parents die. In addition to these losses, people may feel grief related to their own limitations or the recognition that they are not likely to experi-

ence significant life-stage events such as marriage, childbirth, and meaningful work. Still, other people often assume that people with developmental disabilities are unaware of painful events or will quickly rebound from their losses.⁸

An important form of pastoral care for people with developmental disabilities is honoring their feelings of sadness, depression, and pain. Instead of using a simplistic theology to try to help others understand their losses, we can create spaces in which they can direct their feelings and questions to God. The Psalms and Lamentations can provide words and images to be spoken or enacted as prayer. We may not always know or clearly understand the source of an individual's pain, but we can offer assurance that God hears their prayers, comprehends, and cares. This affirmation should not be used to avoid the time-consuming work of understanding difficult speech, but it is a reminder that the person's

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prayer is not directed to the one providing spiritual care but to God.

Honoring prayers of lament may also require listening to the prayer behind the prayer. Lane, a long-time member of a congregation I attended, would frequently say during sharing time, "Pray for Daddy." The worship leader often politely acknowledged Lane's request but consistently excluded her petition in the congregational prayer—perhaps because Lane's father had been dead for many years. One Sunday, a sensitive and

astute worship leader heard Lane's request for prayer and said, "You really miss your dad, don't you? Can we pray for you today?" Instead of dismissing Lane's prayer request, the leader responded in a way that communicated to the congregation the validity of Lane's petition and the reality of her pain. This response has enabled others to hear Lane's request for prayer in a new way and to connect her loss with their own ongoing need to grieve.

Our church communities are enriched by the active prayer lives of many people with developmental disabilities. The joy, genuine care, and spontaneity of these friends as they respond to the Spirit's prompting is a gift that can free us to experience God's love and presence in new ways. As we seek to make our congrega-

tions places of welcome and spiritual nurture for people with developmental disabilities, we in turn strengthen and care for the life of prayer of the whole community. “Just as one member suffers, all suffer together ...; if one member is honored, all rejoice together” (1 Cor. 12:26).

Notes

¹I am using *developmental disabilities* to refer to primarily cognitive disabilities that occur before the age of twenty-one; these include mental retardation, autism spectrum disorders, and cerebral palsy.

²Marjorie Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 31.

³*Ibid.*, 32.

⁴“Deepening Our Spirituality in Faith and Light,” *Faith and Light* booklet, September 1991, 22.

⁵Roy Oswald describes ritual as patterned activities that create and express meaning, often with symbols or gestures. See Roy M. Oswald with Jean Morris Trumbauer, *Transforming Rituals: Daily Practices for Changing Lives* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1999), 11.

⁶Faith and Light is an ecumenical worship movement present in seventy-seven countries. These communities of faith consist of people with developmental disabilities and their families and friends. For more information visit <http://www.foietlumiere.org/site/english/>.

⁷Dolores Wilson, Office of Persons with Disabilities, [Catholic] Archdiocese of Washington, taught me this form of prayer and a great deal about the spiritual lives of people with developmental disabilities.

⁸For more information about grief and developmental disability, see Charlene Luchterhand and Nancy Murphy, *Helping Adults with Mental Retardation Grieve a Death Loss* (Philadelphia: Accelerated Development, 1998).

About the author

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