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## *This is What God's Works Look Like*

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### **A sermon by the Rev. Canon George M. Maxwell, Jr. The Fourth Sunday in Lent - Year A**

"Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

It's a natural question. Something is wrong. Someone must be at fault? Who is it? Who is it that did what they shouldn't have done, or left undone what they should have done?

Jesus doesn't answer the question.

"Neither this man nor his parents sinned," Jesus says. "He was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."

Jesus casts the question in a new light, I think, so that he can expose the dark assumption lurking behind it.

The Methodist theologian, Frances Young, describes this movement from darkness into the light in a book titled *Face to Face*. The book tells the story of Young's life with her son, Arthur.

It's a familiar story in many ways. She describes the common activities of daily life - eating, sleeping, bathing, getting dressed, playing games, and going to school.

But, if the activities are common, the situation is not.

Arthur is mentally disabled. His brain was damaged at birth. So, the common activities of Young's daily life also include the uncommon need to strap leg splints on her son before putting him down at night, to suffer through his repeated fits of anger, and to get up the next day and do it all over again.

Life changes so little that Young describes it as "a kind of slow motion in which all track of time gets lost." (9)

Arthur is sixteen years old before he can stand unsupported for even a few seconds.

Young's story could be described as learning how to see in a new light. Arthur is different in a different way. She must learn to see him in a way that allows her to cope with these differences.

Her first thought is to make them go away.

Young acknowledges that, at one point, death seemed to be her only way out. She realized that Arthur would not grow away from her the way other children will leave their parents. She couldn't imagine a healthy future. You can hear her despair when she protests against the success of the antibiotics that keep children like Arthur alive.

The next time Arthur has a chest infection, she asks, could I simply refuse treatment? (42)

Even well-intended promises of healing lose their meaning.

Young realizes at one point that a miraculous healing of all of Arthur's damaged brain cells would allow not him

to live a conventional life. Brains gradually develop over the years through learning. He has missed out on those years of learning. He has not learned those things that his peers now know. His personality is a function of who he is, with all of his limitations.

"Healed," Arthur would still be different. (65)

Yet, when Young steps back from trying to make the differences go away, she falls into the trap of trying to overcome them.

She calls this the "I will do anything" syndrome. It's an obsessive need to make the best of things. And, it holds the potential to destroy the rest of the family. Young notes that "armies of friends and relatives are needed who will devote their whole lives to getting the maximum development out of the handicapped child, twelve hours a day." (36)

Finally, she learns to accept Arthur's differences -- even when others won't.

Young is told at one point that you could see the soul peeping out through Arthur's eyes. But, the soul is not separate from the body. There is no ideal Arthur trapped in his damaged body waiting on the afterlife to spring into being. He is a psychosomatic whole. That is what it means to believe in the resurrection of the body. (61)

Jesus said, "I came into the world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind."

Young learns to see Arthur in a new light. She realizes that people like Arthur are not failed versions of somebody else. They are something that no one else can be. "The basic truthfulness, lack of inhibitions, and that indefinable virtue - simplicity - often seen in the mentally handicapped, may be the very qualities that it would be criminal to educate out of them. This could be their potential - and an area where the rest of us fail desperately." (191)

And then everything begins to change.

Arthur is no longer a problem to be cured. He is a person to be embraced.

The sin, if you will, lies not in the one excluded, but in the act of exclusion.

The desire to exclude, Young says, may be an inevitable reaction, but it is not an effective answer. The desire to deny that any anomaly exists may be the other way out, but that is a delusion. Somehow the reality of difference must be accepted so that something new and creative may emerge." (172)

"There is this intractable "'crookedness' in humanity," Young says, "and you cannot make it straight simply by re-definition." (176)

As Young learns to embrace Arthur, she begins to recognize the profound similarities that we share with the mentally disabled. It is not just about helping the marginalized. It is not just about gaining wisdom through suffering. It's about need - common, shared need.

The mentally disabled simply mirror our fundamental need for God and one another.

Young begins to see Arthur as a gift - not in the cheap understanding that comes to those of us who have never been in the darkness, but in the deep knowing that is earned by those who have emerged from the darkness into the light.

Young describes coming to this felt sense of gift at a fellowship gathering one night.

"I began by confessing that every now and again things happened which revealed that I still had not resolved my deepest questioning. , When I had finished my long confession, one member of the group commented that it sounded like a tragedy, and yet what a rich life I had had. It still felt like a tragedy, living with meaninglessness. , The tragedy was not so much Arthur as my sense of abandonment, my inability to accept the existence and love of God at those deeper levels where it makes a real difference to one's life. , I had no hope for the future. Despair was lodged deep down inside. , It felt like tragedy. Yet my friend's comment on the richness of my life came across as a healthy rebuke. It is since that evening that I have been enabled to climb

out of my black hole and find complete release from the doubts and fears and self-concern that had imprisoned me." (53-54)

Learning to see in a new light is the recognition, not that we are doing good for the mentally disabled, but that they are doing something for us. It is not just that we are accepting them. It is that we are rejoicing in them and receiving from them. (179)

Ultimately, Young casts this learning to see in theological terms. "There is a sense," she says, "in which we are all handicapped, and it's not the handicapped who need community care - it's US. To learn from the handicapped requires a new heart and a new spirit within us, but, it will be our salvation." (183)

Later she says, "our judgment comes in the way we respond to the challenge of the handicapped, they provide us with an opportunity for repentance, and so we depend on them for our redemption." (195)

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"Neither this man nor his parents sinned," Jesus says. "He was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."

So, when we find ourselves asking a question like "How should the church treat the mentally disabled?" we might pause a moment before trying to answer it.

If we pause, and stay still, we will recognize the dark assumption lurking there. This question assumes that disability has a moral character - that the person bearing it should be defined by what they aren't. It assumes a deficiency that leads inevitably to an exclusion of one sort or another.

But, the question can be cast in a new light. It can be asked in a way that puts the moral focus in a different place. The question can be recast as "What kind of community is required for us to welcome and care for the mentally disabled?" Asking the question this way takes for granted that the mentally disabled are part of the community, that they too are children of God, and that our task is to recognize them as the gifts they are - rejoicing in them and eagerly receiving from them.

Frances Young has shown us, by her courage, that asking the question this way helps us to see what might otherwise go unnoticed -- what God's works really look like.

Amen.

You might be interested to know:

- Frances Young's book, *Face to Face* (London: Epworth, 1985) was reissued as *Face to Face: A Narrative Essay in the Theology of Suffering* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990). Page references are to the second edition.
- In selecting passages from the book, I have relied heavily on an analysis by Samuel Wells in his book, *Improvisation and the Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos and London: SPCK 2004). In Chapter 12, "A Threatening Offer: Flawed Creation," Wells uses the strategies of improvisational theater to analyze Young's story, and the ethical questions it presents.
- Hans S. Reinders uses the story of the man born blind to reflect on parenting the mentally disabled in "Being Thankful: Parenting the Mentally Disabled," chapter 32 of *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, Hauerwas and Wells, eds. (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 2004).