

Everyone is Beautiful

Richard O. Stimson

I perceive there is one primary concern among people with mental retardation that neither professionals nor ministries deal with or discuss. This is the perception that persons defined as having mental retardation have of themselves and the way in which this community is viewed by the population at large. First, it has been apparent to those of us who live and work within the disability community that we have much for which we should thank the African American community. Most of the disability laws and court cases are built on the laws and court cases that resulted from their civil rights struggles.

I also believe that those who are responsible for the spiritual care of persons with mental retardation are in a perfect position to help teach another lesson taught by the African American community. I call it the "Black is Beautiful" lesson. Part of the civil rights movement, of course, was the declaration "Black is Beautiful." What was that all about? Was it an assertion for a preference for the color *black*? Probably not. In saying "Black is Beautiful" was the Black community saying that White is ugly? No.

The issue was the Black community's self-image. There had been a feeling of shame with regard to being Black. The lighter the color of a Black person, the better. Historically, the Black community had been enslaved. They had been considered as a percentage of a person when it came to congressional representation. Once freed, they were assigned to economic poverty. Movies such as *An Imitation of Life* or *Roots* showed Black people trying to pass as White. Even more recent film makers such as Spike Lee have dealt with this issue.

None of these movies has affected me as much as *An Imitation of Life*. The movie is about two single mothers who share an apartment. One is Black and one is White. The Black mother has a daughter that looks as though she were White. Most of the movie shows this daughter trying to pass as being White.

We have all heard stories of Black children who tried to wash the black off so they could be White. The leadership in the Black community knew that no law or court case could give true equality or empowerment. The Black community's self-image had to be validated. It was more impor-

tant for the Black community to say that they were equal than for some *law* to declare it. It was more important for a Black person to believe that there was nothing wrong with being Black than for a White person to believe that there was nothing wrong with being Black. Hence, the "Black is Beautiful" movement was conceived.

Problem of Self-Perception

As a pastor serving persons with mental retardation, I have learned that self-perception is an issue for us as well. The people we work with are ashamed of who they are, and rightly so. Their whole experience tells them to be. Either they have been segregated and isolated and treated like forever-children, or they have been behaviorally modified and "normalized" so they can fit in with "normal" people. Let there be no mistake. If they need to be normalized, we are processing them from something that is less acceptable into something that is more acceptable because we are not satisfied with the way they are.

Coming from a family with a member who has mental retardation, it surprises me that as I think back to our childhood how little we talked about my brother Bill having mental retardation. I never remember talking to Bill about it. Can you imagine what it is like to be different, treated differently, but no one ever talks about it? As a pastor, I am learning this is not an unusual family scenario.

Within the Disability Community

Even in the disability community, having a mental disability places one at the bottom of the pecking order. I was watching a disability awareness skit about a blind man and a seeing man in a restaurant. A waiter came up to take their order. Instead of asking the blind man what he wanted, the waiter asked the seeing man. After making the point that the waiter should have asked the blind man, the blind man said, "Yeah, just because I am blind, doesn't mean I'm retarded."

Recently, I was watching a well-known evangelist

who has a physical disability. More than once he played off not having mental retardation in a way that I found offensive. A colleague of mine was asked to speak at a disability conference this year. She was told that a primary concern among the organizers was that the individuals with physical disabilities and especially the deaf community did not want people with mental retardation at the conference.

Within other disability communities, persons are taught to confront and deal with their disability. In fact, any group that I know of who is dealing with a problem (e.g., cancer, problem teenagers, alcoholic mates) is taught to honestly confront the problem. It is part of their habilitation.

How often do we honestly speak with persons who have mental retardation? Or do we try to pacify them? My brother wanted to drive a car. I listened for years to our family give Bill excuses. We told him everything except the truth: "Bill, you are mentally handicapped and unable to drive." If Bill's disability had been blindness instead, we would have had no problem addressing how the disability affected his ability to drive. Not only did we handle driving that way, but I am sure we dealt with 105 other things that Bill wanted to do that we thought he should not attempt. Many, if not most, of the issues were not as clear cut as driving.

Think about the things we do not talk about or act as if they have not happened in a family: infidelity, breaking the law, and having mental retardation. Try saying the words "Black is beautiful." That is not too hard to express. Try it again, but this time say, "Retarded is Beautiful." Oh, I know, I used the politically incorrect word. Let's try, "Developmentally Disabled is Beautiful," or "Mentally Handicapped is Beautiful," or "Mental Retardation is Beautiful." These words are difficult to articulate. Most people do not believe that mental retardation is beautiful. Even as it is more important for the Black community to believe that Black is beautiful than the White community to believe that Black is beautiful, it is more important for the people with the disorder to believe that "Mental Retardation is Beautiful" than for the rest of the community to believe it.

Theological Perspective

Created in God's Image

As a Christian pastor, I believe that the only true place for someone to receive value and self-worth is from the knowledge that we are created in God's image. As a person who ministers within the

disability community, I am in an ideal position to emphasize this truth, but I must believe "Mental Retardation is Beautiful." In order to truly believe this statement, there must be an examination of theology. There are two belief systems that can affect how disabilities are seen:

Calvinism. Oversimplified, this theology connotes that God is in control. Nothing happens by accident. If someone has a disability, it is by God's design. This is often interpreted to mean that the disability is a "cross to bear." For some reason we cannot understand; it is part of God's plan.

Divine healing. Oversimplified, in this interpretation disabilities are not from God. It is part of the role of the devil, and we should come against it. With enough faith, disabilities can be healed.

Whichever view one holds, typically the assumption has been that disability is not good. We accept it as something God put on us for some reason or that it is the result of the devil, and we must rally against it.

Part of God's Creation

Holy Scripture teaches that God created disabilities. "Then the Lord said to him [Moses], 'Who made a person's mouth? And who makes someone deaf or not able to speak? Or who give the person sight or blindness? It is I, the Lord'" (Exodus 4:11).

This comment by God was given in response to Moses' excuse for not speaking to Pharaoh. Moses was a stutterer. The version of scripture most commonly quoted, says "slow of speech," but that means he stuttered. Moses was stating, "God, I can't do it because I have a disability. God, I stuttered in the past; and even now I stutter." God's answer to Moses was that He created the disability. The disability was part of the creative work of God. Doesn't this scripture say that the disability was not part of the fall of man but part of the creative work of God? If it is from God, if God created it, then it is good. Until we understand this, accept this, and believe this, we will be unable to communicate it to our members and to our churches.

The professional community is starting to understand this perspective. In the past, they looked at individuals with mental retardation and determined what was wrong with them. There was a constant search for what needed to be fixed. The new definition of mental retardation calls for the professional community to look at a person's

strengths and to build on those strengths instead of trying to find what is wrong.

Knowing our Limitations is Important Also

On the other hand, I hope we do not buy the idea that we can do whatever we want to do. We love making movies about persons with disabilities doing remarkable things, such as the movie about a one-armed professional baseball player. Most boys with two arms will never play professional ball, but we desire to make the exception the norm.

Paul told Timothy "to fan to a fire" the gift that was within him. People should build on the gifts God has given them. Capitalizing on our gifts could be one of the ways God gives us direction. It does not matter how much I wanted to play football in high school, I was too skinny. Another gift I do not have is singing. I love to sing. I sing in the shower, but not in public. Each of us learns through our successes and failures what our gifts are.

What we need to do for all people is to help develop the gifts that God has given them. That is hard to do when you are not okay with who and what you are. NO—it is not possible to draw from your strengths when you do not believe that the way God made you is beautiful.

Persons with mental retardation have to deal with the fallen state as do all of us. The issue of their fallen state, however, is not primarily mental retardation. That is part of the creative act of God. For those readers who have a problem with that conclusion, here are a few undeniable observations. None of us are very smart. Experts tell us that the Einsteins of the world use less than 10% of their brains. I am convinced that we are fallen beings. We fell spiritually, physically, and mentally. Adam was a lot smarter than we are. He walked and talked with God. In the resurrection, we get a new body and new mind. Part of the redemption work is renewing our minds daily.

We are all Retarded

Most people who know me have heard about Crystal. When I was studying for the ministry, I dated her. She was a genius. Her IQ was as far above mine as my IQ is above those to whom we minister. Most of us struggled with Greek, but she could read fluently in Greek. Because she was so much smarter than I, did that make me have mental retardation? Maybe so;

she broke up with me. What I am saying is that we all have mental retardation because of the fall. What we are really talking about is the degree.

For those with a strong belief in healing, I am not challenging that belief. I believe that God heals. However, I think it is wrong to view mental retardation as a sickness. If it is not a sickness, it does not need to be healed.

Conclusion

Once we believe that mental retardation is beautiful, we will be able to serve the people we are called to support. We will be able to help our population to be proud of who and what they are, while recognizing their limitations.

As an example, let me tell you about my son. My son is extremely intelligent, but his athletic skills are not well-defined. I know that the self-image of little boys is greatly affected by their athletic ability. To never address the fact that he is not as athletic as many boys his age would not help him. When he brings it up, or when it is bothering him, I will tell him that usually God gives some people strong brains, and He gives others strong muscles. I remind him that God gave him a strong brain, but not strong muscles.

One day we were sitting in my car outside of a store. A huge man who was a mass of bulging muscle walked in front of us. My son said, "Wow, look at him! Boy, he is strong." The man had obviously been working hard all day outside in the hot sun. "Yeah," I answered my son. "God gave him strong muscles, and he makes his living working hard in the hot sun. I'm glad God gave me a strong mind so I could work hard with my mind in the air-conditioning."

My concern is for my son to have a good self-image. I desire to build on his strengths and not to have him focus on his weaknesses. I want to tell you, "My son is beautiful." I know it and I believe it, but it is more important for my son, Daniel, to believe he is beautiful than it is for me to believe he is beautiful. One of my jobs as his father is to help him to know and believe that Daniel is beautiful. One of my jobs with my members is to help them know and believe that they are beautiful—that mental retardation is beautiful.

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