



**We are
Called**

TO HEAL. TO UNITE. TO JUSTICE.

Team Reflection

No. 25 Persons with Disabilities and Health Inequities

Oscar-nominated film, *Crip Camp* documents a disability revolution spurred by the experience of teenagers with disabilities at Camp Jened in the early 1970s. The ramshackle camp in the Catskills provided a place of inclusion where the young people camped, danced, played baseball and swam. It stood in stark contrast to the experience of many persons with disabilities who commonly lived in institutions. At Camp Jened, they experienced for the first time, being with others who were like them. This empowered them. *Crip Camp* follows how friendships bonded, endured, and evolved into activism. Their work and political participation—including disruption—coalesced with others to grow the Disability Rights Movement.

The term disability encompasses a range of conditions impacting mobility, sensory, communication, mental health and cognitive functioning. The U.S. Census identifies at least 40.7 million Americans with disabilities, nearly 13% of the population. [25.1] Their collective voice has been important for the health of persons with disabilities. They are more likely to experience delays in getting health care they need, have high blood pressure, experience psychological distress, be overweight, and have not had an annual dental visit, a mammogram within 2 years, or a Pap test within 3 years. [25.2]

People may mistakenly presume individuals with disability to experience poor health, yet health status is separate from disability. Many of the health challenges that this population does encounter can be prevented with a multi-pronged approach. However, additional barriers faced by persons with disability involve access to medical care, social circumstances, and environmental conditions. For example, people with disabilities skip or delay medical treatment 2.5 times the rate compared to persons without disabilities. One key reason is costs. A person with a disability may pay for unreimbursed supplies, accessible transportation, specialized equipment, technologies and caregivers. [25.1] Other challenges include the clinical experience itself, such as physical and programmatic inaccessibility, prejudices and stereotypes, lack of provider training and cultural competency, and inadequate research and monitoring. For example, an exam table that does not lower becomes difficult, if not impossible to access for a person with a disability. A provider may presume the office visit is too burdensome, and therefore suggest less frequent visits than the standard of care. Research also shows some doctors may distance themselves from patients with disabilities because the patient represents a perceived failure to treat them when a cure is unavailable. [25.2]

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All throughout the biblical texts one finds stories of people experiencing deafness, blindness, impairment walking or talking or other conditions known today as disabilities. Some are cured. When curing does not occur, biblical stories might instead express God's abiding presence with the marginalized, reveal an act of inclusion, or challenge perceptions of beauty and normativity.

For example, in the little-known story of Mephibosheth (Me-FEE-bo-sheth), a man with impaired mobility due to childhood injury, confronts his relative King David. [25.3] The disability serves as a metaphor juxtaposed against the King who represents a beautiful, bodily ideal. Whereas, Mephibosheth represents those unfit for a royal house. The story explores themes of insiders and outsiders, possibilities and limitation, bodies and identity. In an unexpected plot twist, King David gives Mephibosheth a permanent place at the table! The story references this act of inclusion not once, but five times! David's action collapses the contrasts between the two individuals, and reimagines the social constructs of nobility, beauty, ability, and the bodies and people who are valued. Moreover, the story foretells a future of a greater reign that will emerge where those left out by differing abilities will be cherished members of the divine banquet.

The U.S. Bishops call for contemporary acts of inclusion for persons with disabilities. They state, "injustices must be eliminated and ignorance and apathy replaced by increased sensitivity and warm acceptance." [25.4]

Consider

- How does my hospital or system create an inclusive and affirming environment for people with disabilities?
- How might the prevalence of items in a clinical setting like wheelchairs, walkers or canes inhibit the ability to see and appreciate more deeply the lived experience of persons with permanent disabilities?

Let us pray together
Creator God,

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*Guide our hands to build access and welcome.
Guide our minds to understand the power and wisdom of human vulnerability.
Guide our actions to create openness to the gifts of each individual.
Give us courage to stand against a fear of disability or judgments about its “quality.”
Give us understanding that your body is incomplete if people are left behind.
Give us fervor for creating your reign of welcome, love, and belonging.*

Adapted from the National Catholic Partnership on Disability [5]

[25.1] Joan F. Peters, “Health Disparities and People with Disabilities,” *Health Progress*, Spring 2021.
<https://www.chausa.org/publications/health-progress/article/spring-2021/health-disparities-and-people-with-disabilities>

[25.2] The Advancing Equitable Care Cooperative supports healthcare organizations working to bridge health disparities experienced by patients with disabilities. Among their resources include, Health Disparity for People with Disabilities (DREDF), a guide that explains the difficulties these individuals face when encountering health care services.
<https://advancingequitablecare.org/resources/understanding-disability-healthcare-disparity/>

[25.3] The story of Mephibosheth is found in 2 Samuel 4, 9, 16, 19, 21. See also, Schipper, Jeremy. *Disability Studies and the Hebrew Bible: Figuring Mephibosheth in the David Story*. New York: T&T Clark, 2006.

[25.4] USCCB, Pastoral Statement on Persons with Disabilities. August, 1998.

[25.5] <https://ncpd.org/disabilities-ministries-spirituality/prayers>