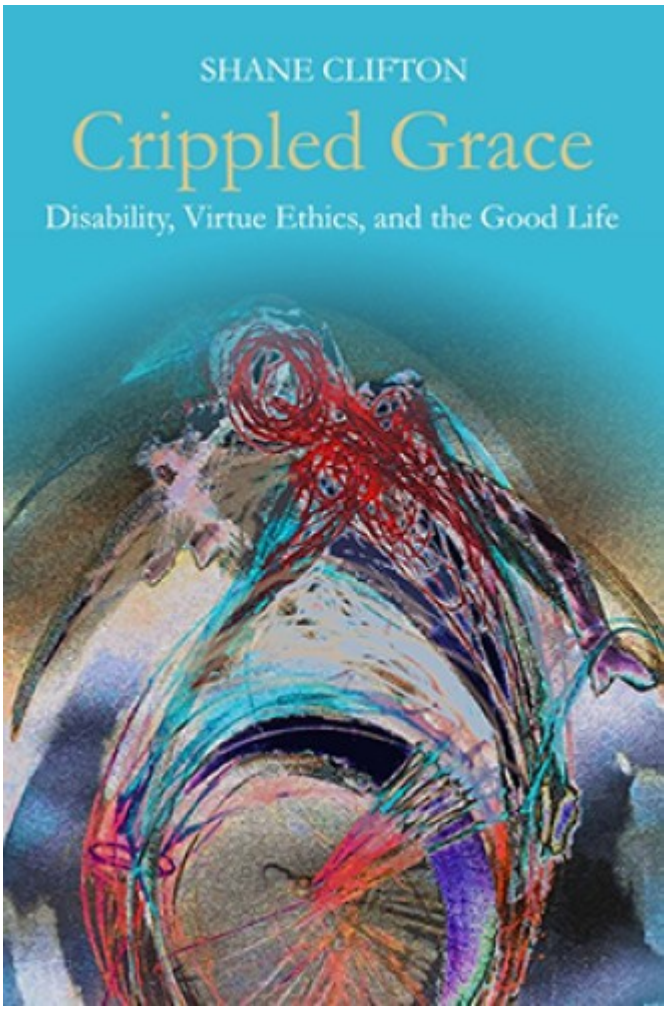
Disability and the good life

Theologian Shane Clifton rethinks virtue ethics from his wheelchair.

by Jason Micheli in the March 27, 2019 issue

In Review



Crippled Grace

Disability, Virtue Ethics and the Good Life

By Shane Clifton
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On a summer Sunday, after the last few worshipers trickled through my line, their hands outstretched like beggars, I carried the body and blood of Christ to Mary. In the early stages of multiple sclerosis, she sat behind the back pew in her wheelchair next to her husband, James.

I broke off a piece of bread and placed it between her clenched fingers. “The body of Christ broken for you, Mary,” I whispered. She chewed slowly, as though she knew better than us that her life depended upon what lay within it. James waited calmly. I watched the clock nervously. When she finally swallowed, James and I guided the cup to her lips. “The blood of Christ poured out for you, honey.” He’d stolen my line. When some wine dribbled out of her mouth and onto her blouse, James unwrapped the cloth from the stem of the chalice, wiped her face clean, and blotted the stain on her shirt.

Later I told the couple how much I admired their patience and perseverance. After looking puzzled for a moment, James replied that he wouldn’t have it any other way. “Our marriage has never been better,” Mary slurred with a smile.

It reveals my own handicapped Christianity that I assumed Mary’s illness and consequent disability was a hardship to bear rather than the labor pains through which she and James were becoming new creations. “There but for the grace of God go I,” we say in stubborn denial that one day we may indeed find ourselves as someone like Mary—and oblivious to the possibility that, finding ourselves like her, we might discover it’s not the tragedy we suppose but is instead an occasion for grace.

My particular surprise at Mary and James’s experience of grace stems, Shane Clifton argues in *Crippled Grace*, from our general reluctance to come out of the closet and live openly—vulnerably—as finite, contingent creatures. The author of *Husbands Should Not Break*, Clifton teaches theology at Alphacrucis College in Australia. Having taught the church’s virtue ethics tradition, from Thomas Aquinas to Alasdair MacIntyre, Clifton became a student of it after he suffered an injury while jumping a bicycle. It rendered him a complete (C5) quadriplegic.

Depression and despair followed seven months in the hospital for Clifton, but eventually his dark night of the soul yielded to happiness. Or rather, his injury and

resulting disability led him to find happiness under the new conditions of his life. The good life is discoverable, Clifton shows, not in spite of his struggles with sexual function as “a crip” nor in spite of his daily “dealings with the messiness of piss and poo.” The good life opens up to him in the midst of them—*because* of them.

To be disabled, Clifton observes, is to be in a near constant state of dependency upon others. Such dependency usually strikes us as an ordeal to be avoided at all costs. Says Clifton: “We hear of a person rendered a quadriplegic, and we think to ourselves ‘They’d be better off dead.’ So we say to our loved ones, ‘If that ever happens to me, turn off the machine.’” As common as such assumptions may be, Christianly speaking they are incoherent. *If that ever happens to me* is unintelligible as Christian grammar since the content of Christian revelation discloses that we are dependent, contingent creatures. Those who are disabled cannot help but make visible the truth that the rest of us, crippled by fear or pride, prefer to hide: we are not in control of our lives.

The *imago Dei*, we too often forget, is firstly not a resemblance to the Creator; it’s the confession that we are created. As creatures, we are dependent upon our Creator, contingent in the fragile world God has wrought. In contrast to Descartes, who posited the human as primarily a thinking thing, Clifton asserts that “to be human is to be subject to the vulnerabilities of finite life.” This view offers a fresh perspective on what constitutes the human creature, since dependence and vulnerability are largely absent categories in moral philosophy. It also allows Clifton to conceive of disability in terms contrary to the prevailing notions about it. For Clifton, spinal cord injury doesn’t mark the impoverishment of his life as a human creature. Quadriplegia proves instead to be the crucible through which he becomes more human. Spinal cord injury becomes the occasion for Clifton to discover the truth of Christian speech: weakness is not the opposite of strength.

Nor are disability, happiness, and faith contradictory terms. Clifton uses his own experience as well as the testimonies of others with disabilities to bring virtue philosophy and disability studies into conversation with Christian theology. The layered approach, marrying first-person memoir with multiple disciplines, recalls the work of another virtue ethicist, Stanley Hauerwas. Like Hauerwas’s own work, *Crippled Grace* has wide-ranging implications beyond the specificity of its topic. This is not a book about disability. It’s a book about mortality—about how those of us who came from the dust conceive of happiness before we return to it.

If what constitutes us as human creatures is contingency amidst the vulnerabilities of finite life, then disability is not a specific subset of human life. It is, as Clifton writes, “symbolic of the human condition.” Disability is a lens through which all of us can understand the good life.

The way the church engages people with disabilities is often analogous to the way the church engages people living in poverty through short-term mission projects. They become the means by which we or our children learn to count our blessings and to be grateful for our lives. Frequently people with disabilities are considered problems for the church to solve in terms of facilities and accommodations. Or they’re occasions for self-congratulation when we successfully welcome and include them. Or people with disabilities become our source material for lessons about dealing with adversity, what Clifton calls “inspiration porn.”

Crippled Grace thrusts a very different conversation upon the church. It argues for the possibility that disabled people possess a happiness, hewed by hardship, that the abled, in their avoidance of vulnerability, have yet to countenance, much less attain.

Clifton begins the book in the same way his experience of disability began: with an attempt to make sense of suffering and the problem of pain. His experience as a sufferer thrusts him into a community of sufferers where the traditional theodicy question takes on surprising qualifications. “Why is there suffering in the world?” becomes a more ambivalent question when you discover, as Clifton did both personally and in his reading about disability, that many quadriplegics report that they would not trade their crippled life for another. The experience of disability, Clifton found, has enriched many people’s lives as “the catalyst for self-discovery.” That good can come from an experience of suffering like quadriplegia does not justify or excuse God, Clifton rightly concedes. However, that good can and does come from an experience of suffering—even from an experience of suffering like quadriplegia—should give us pause before we posture ourselves like Job to rage against the mysteries of existence. The questions of theodicy we ask out of empathy with disabled people may inadvertently do sufferers great harm, tacitly dismissing the happiness they have found through the harrowing of their suffering. What for many of us is an imponderable privation in God’s good creation is simultaneously the means by which some of God’s impaired creatures discover the good life.

Clifton understands his own accident matter-of-factly as “a contingent event that is part and parcel for what it means to be a creature of the earth.” Following MacIntyre, Clifton assumes that vulnerability, affliction, and dependency are not so much mysteries to be plumbed as they are facts of the human condition. Precisely because they are facts of the human condition, they are corollaries for any account of human flourishing. The givenness of vulnerability, affliction, and dependency in a world of contingency is the necessary condition for the balance Clifton achieves as he explores the virtues in light of disability.

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Virtue especially arises, he suggests, as a response to hardship. Therefore, the very vulnerability we lament and avoid as contingent creatures is ironically the ground necessary for us to find happiness. Those who are disabled cannot avoid the kind of dependency that the abled so skillfully avoid. This reality gives disabled people a particular and acute perspective on what the virtue tradition teaches about the good life.

Friendships, for example, are central to human flourishing. People who are severely disabled, Clifton notes, literally cannot negotiate their day-to-day lives without relying upon the care and compassion of friends. Moreover, intimacy and mutual vulnerability constitute the fruitful friendships we call marriage. The struggles and shame, acceptance and eroticism that many disabled people experience under the covers with their partners gives them a particular wisdom about intimacy and mutual vulnerability.

If nothing else, Clifton convinces me that people who are disabled have much to teach the church. If humility and patience are virtues, then there is no catechesis quite like the daily letting go that comes with relying on others to move you, feed you, and clean you. Luther said that the Christian life is a constant return to one’s baptism in the sense that it involves a daily dying to self. Clifton’s account of the daily dependency of disability puts skin on Luther’s claim. The dependency of those who are disabled, counterintuitively, can be empowering—for grace is the power of God that perfects our broken nature.

Happiness, Clifton shows, is not achieved so much as discovered. Happiness is the reward happened upon by those who do not avoid our human fragility but embrace it, daring to live as vulnerably as “those who need a push” in the wheelchair.

Hauerwas jokes that “a God who doesn’t tell us what to do with our pots, pans, and genitals isn’t a God worthy of our worship.” Clifton ups the ante by demonstrating that those who live vulnerably—requiring others’ help with the doing of their pots, pans, genitals, and more—just may be the *most human* of God’s creatures.

The dependency that is the day-to-day given of disabled people is also grist for the making of happiness. The good life that emerges from disability is necessarily a shared life. A disabled person’s stories necessarily include others, notably those on whom the person depends.

Although I am not disabled, I live with an incurable cancer. I know firsthand as a patient what I’ve learned secondhand as a pastor: the partners of the afflicted are afflicted too. Caregivers bear a unique burden, and it’s one that is often harder to suffer. Opportunities to grieve can be spare amid the daily demands of care. It’s one thing to lament your own lot in life. It’s quite another more complicated, guilt-inducing thing to mourn the life you’ll no longer have because of the affliction that comes to your contingent spouse. *Crippled Grace* would be a fuller book, I think, if it included more testimony from the partners with whom disabled people are discovering the good life. I’ve got a vested interest, I suppose, but I’d like to hear the spouses of disabled people echo that they too would not trade their life for another.

This is a minor critique that should not distract from how upending Clifton’s work is. My takeaways were greater than I anticipated when I first cracked open the cover. I expected to close the book with a better understanding of how I should serve people like Mary, the disabled woman in my congregation. Instead I walked away convinced that my congregation might be more fully Christ’s own broken body were we to listen to Mary about life as it is lived in her dependent body. By highlighting the vantage point disabled people have on the virtues, *Crippled Grace* imbues people with disabilities with an agency and a (nonpatronizing) spiritual wisdom that is not only unique to them but is largely absent from how they are typically regarded.

Those who are disabled make visible this uncomfortable truth: we are not in control.

By examining the good life through the lens of disability, Clifton exposes just how fraught are terms like *disability* and *handicapped*. Both terms betray the extent to which we are captured by goods that are not the Christian virtues. They designate that certain people cannot perform certain skills—namely, doing and producing things for the marketplace—as well as other people can.

But Christianly speaking, how is this a disadvantage, much less one that should determine how we understand a person? People who are disabled are not impaired from—and may be especially equipped for—extending forgiveness, expressing gratitude, offering hospitality to a stranger, showing kindness, giving grace, absolving sins, and loving. Words make worlds, Christians believe, and words can also undo the world as God has disclosed it to us. The way we typically speak about disability shows that we've forgotten a Sunday school lesson Clifton ably teaches: weakness and vulnerability are God's way of pouring out power.

I didn't finish Clifton's book with Mary on my mind. I closed *Crippled Grace* thinking instead of my two sons. They're both active, able-bodied, teenage boys. As an aside in his conclusion, Clifton confesses his worry that he failed in the book to use disability as a particular metaphor for the fragility of life in general. It's a striking moment of authorial vulnerability in a book about the importance of vulnerability. But he's wrong. It's a testament to the success of his endeavor that I came to the end of his work not thinking about the disabled people in my life but worrying about my boys, the world in which they're about to make their way, and the church that will or will not be there for them.

If Clifton is correct, if to be human is to suffer the vulnerabilities of life in a contingent world and if happiness and all its composite virtues comes by how we handle those vulnerabilities, then the culture my sons are entering appears designed to make them unhappy and less than human. Seemingly at every turn, their world tempts them to filter all their imperfections through a social media sheen and to posture a public self that, in its premeditated artificiality, is the opposite of vulnerability. Increasingly, theirs is a world where relationships are virtual rather than vulnerable, online instead of incarnate. Such a world is not prepared to train my boys for the burden of being dependent on another; in fact, it expects them to have become "self-sufficient" by the time they bind their life to another by vows and rings. Worse perhaps, it's a world where they're encouraged to maximize every moment of their schedule to raise their score and perfect their permanent record. Such a world does not well form them to be ready with care when another becomes dependent upon them.

While Clifton's account of authentic humanity left me uneasy about the world that surrounds my children, it also lent me a clearer picture of the church needed in such a world. Clifton has convinced me that what my congregation needs is not wheelchair ramps and ADA-approved restrooms so much as a wrecking ball taken to

its Sunday-best pretenses. This book has convinced me that the church in the digital age needs to become more like AA. It's not that "Hi, my name is Jason and I'm . . ." is the means to a more inclusive church. It's that such a hospitality for vulnerability may be the only means to a more fully alive congregation. Early iterations of the Book of Common Prayer used to invite worshipers to confess that "there is no health in us." *Crippled Grace* helps us see, regardless of ability, that this sort of frank admission of brokenness—and a candid willingness to be dependent upon God or others—is the path to happiness.

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