Disability Theology 101 Curriculum

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[www.DisabilityBelongs.org](http://www.DisabilityBelongs.org)

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## Foreword from Shelly Christensen

Disability Belongs™ is a diverse, disability-led nonprofit that works to create systemic change in how society views and values people with disabilities, and that advances policies and practices that empower people with disabilities to have a better future. Our mission is to fight stigmas and advance opportunities so people with disabilities can fully participate in all aspects of community.

Disability Belongs™ understands and believes in the importance of inclusion in faith-based organizations, which is why it is one of the four main pillars of our organizational work. Given the significant role that faith and faith-based organizations play in American life, we work for full inclusion of disabled people and disabled identity across all spiritual traditions.

The Disability Theology 101 Curriculum equips congregations and other faith-based organizations with an educational foundation in disability theology and inclusion. In the 4-part training, participants will engage with theology and disability, ableism, and other obstacles to belonging. Congregations will grow in understanding and learn practices that nurture a community of belonging.

Angela Molloy, MDiv, joined the Disability Belongs™ National Leadership Program for the Spring 2024 cohort as a Fellow on the Faith Inclusion and Belonging team. The Disability Theology 101 Curriculum is based on Angela’s lived experiences as a queer and congenitally disabled scholar, activist, and accessibility consultant. We are grateful for Angela’s contributions to Disability Belongs™.

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## Introduction

The purpose of this curriculum is to make the emerging work of Disability Theology accessible to local church communities. Christian congregations are generally becoming more receptive to critical **anti-ableism** work and are learning that inclusion of disabled beloveds needs to be a core component of who we are, rather than a segmented ministry area. In seeking to love like Jesus, Christians must move away from the charity model of disability ministry to instead minister *with* disabled folx who are integral parts of God’s Kin-dom. Following in the way of Jesus requires Christians to center the lived disability experience of our communities, noticing how attitudes and practices are harmful and imagining more life-giving alternative interpretations together.

This curriculum can be used as an Adult Spiritual Formation course, a training for members of congregational governing teams, or as background training for clergy and other leaders in preparing for worship. Clergy facilitating this training must take time to familiarize themselves with the curriculum first. Spiritual formation curriculum for adults must be relevant to the lives of the community and must recall that individuals remember knowledge best when it is connected to their emotions. Everything we do is a form of education – it is about instruction, socialization, development, and transformation of our world. Therefore, this curriculum is broken down into four hour-long lessons. Facilitators should be flexible to the needs of the group, so should follow the flow of the conversation and be open to extending the sessions to 75 or 90 minutes when necessary.

Each lesson begins with a body-centered practice to draw participants into the shared space and the inherent goodness of their **body-mind-spirits**. Participants will then engage the work of leading disability theologians and disability justice activists through readings, videos, and conversation before connecting the dots with a tangible practice to spur on their thinking throughout the week. Sessions will close with a blessing to propel the community towards intentional action. You are invited to approach the curriculum with flexibility, allowing conversation to freely flow even if that means extending meeting length and being sure to meet any access needs participants may have.

## General Notes

### Sample Description to Use When Advertising Disability Theology Spiritual Formation Class

Join in on a study of Disability Theology, the emerging **liberationist** discipline that encourages deep listening to body wisdom and challenges ableist theology to instead nurture true belonging for disabled and not-yet-disabled children of God alike. Together we will learn and fully begin to embody the reality that each body-mind-spirit is holy and whole in all its complexity regardless of our production-driven society’s claims to the contrary.

### A Note on Accessibility

When using this curriculum facilitators must be intentional about meeting the access needs of all participants. If using a registration form, be sure to include a question such as “Do you have any access needs that we can assist with to help you fully participate?” Always follow the lead of the person requesting an accommodation – they know their bodies best and are the only ones who know what accommodations will enable them to participate in this study.

### Language On Disability

Language surrounding disability is complex and multifaceted. This aspect of identity is still overtly stigmatized by society, so many people with diverse embodiments do not consider the changes in their body-mind-spirit with age or the bodily challenges they have experienced throughout their lifetime as a “disability.” The way we each identify is entirely up to us, so in discussing disability in faith communities the most general guideline is to ask disabled people about their language practices and follow their lead, in the same way that it is a common sign of respect to ask people their pronouns.

There are two commonly referred to types of language that people in the disability community tend to use: person-first language and identity-first language.

**Person-first language** emphasizes the person before their disability, such as “person with a disability” or “person using a mobility aid.” Some people prefer this language because they feel it helps to demonstrate that people with disabilities are also family members, talented artists, employees, worshippers, friends, and more. It is often, but not always, a preference of nondisabled parents of disabled children. It can unfortunately place a negative connotation on the diagnosis, however, which can overmedicalize the individual and problematize their existence in a body-mind-spirit which diverges from what society deems “normal.”

**Identity-first language** puts disability first in the description, like when saying “disabled person” or “They are autistic.” This type of language recognizes disability as another expected marker of identity, just like race, gender, age, or sexual orientation. Many disabled people see disability as a core part of who they are. It is critical to understand that, as much as the stigma remains in our society, disability is not a dirty word and it is not something to be avoided at all costs.

As a congenitally disabled faith leader I intentionally use identity-first language to push back against ingrained stereotypes. My disabled body is all I’ve ever known –it is holy, messy, complicated, and good. Disability teaches us to relate to ourselves, one another, and the Divine in creative and interconnected ways which improve sustainability, invite us to slow down, and remind us that we are valuable because of who and whose we are, not because of what we accomplish or produce. As you move through this curriculum, I encourage you to be open to a new perspective, seeing disability as another beautiful facet of God’s abundantly diverse Creation and noticing how you, and I, and everyone we meet are created in the image of the Divine.

## Lesson 1: Introduction to Body Wisdom and Implicit Bias

### Overview

In this lesson participants will learn about ableism and think about the ways that they have seen it show up in both the church and wider society. Participants will spend time thinking about the early messages they learned about their bodies, will engage with body wisdom by speaking to themselves in a loving embodied way, and will take an implicit bias test to help them to begin noticing the unconscious beliefs they may be carrying about disabled people. By the end of this lesson participants will begin noticing ableism in its many previously overlooked forms and will feel better equipped to challenge harmful attitudes, behaviors, and attitudinal barriers.

### Room Set-Up and Materials Needed

If meeting in person, plan to gather in a room with enough space to move around when needed for gathering in smaller groups. Set up seating in a circle, rather than in rows facing the front of the room, so that everyone can be seen and heard without assumptions of hierarchy. You are there to learn together in community and each person has valuable wisdom to share. Have physical copies of the Self-Love Sentence Stems (included at the end of this curriculum) available for the embodied activity and, if using the concluding activity in class, ensure that each participant has an electronic device available.

If meeting online with a platform such as Zoom, ensure that you have the ability to place participants in smaller breakout rooms. During class be conscious of who may be dominating the conversation and be intentionally invitational so that all perspectives can be shared. Consider sending the Self-Love Sentence Stems handout to participants ahead of time and also plan to share the questions during the meeting by writing them in the chat and by reading them aloud. Activate the automatic captioning in Settings/Accessibility. Participants can then use this accessibility feature.

### Outline of Class

**Introductions:** In this first meeting, spend 5-8 minutes sharing name/pronouns/why taking class.

**Opening Body-Based Check-In:**

Begin by spending five minutes inviting participants to check in with their body-mind-spirits, centering themselves in the space with intentional breath and speaking whatever concerns/distractions are present into your shared community.

**Overview of Ableism:**

Spend 10-15 minutes discussing a broad view of ableism, including what participants already know about it. Here are three different definitions to spur on discussion:

* From TL Lewis underscoring the interlocking relationship between ableism and other forms of domination: “A system that places value on people’s bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normalcy, intelligence, excellence, desirability, and productivity. These constructed ideas are deeply rooted in anti-Blackness, eugenics, misogyny, colonialism, imperialism and capitalism. This form of systemic oppression leads to people and society determining who is valuable and worthy based on a person’s language, appearance, religion and/or their ability to satisfactorily [re]produce, excel and ‘behave.’ You do not have to be disabled to experience ableism.”
* From Amy Kenny in *My Body is Not a Prayer Request:* Ableism “claims that some bodies are better than others. It values people only for what they produce. It suggests our resumes and our GPAs are more important than our humanity. It withholds belonging until we prove we are worthy of it. Ableism is not a character trait, an identity, or an illness. It is a system that starts with a philosophy. The Western philosophy of Aristotle, to be precise. Aristotle claimed that disabled people lacked reason and therefore were subhuman. His hierarchy of humanity has been used as the basis for racist, sexist, and ableist philosophies that are still pervasive today.”

From Lamar Hardwick in *How Ableism Fuels Racism:* Ableism is “the practice of discriminating against people with disabilities based on the belief that ‘normal’ bodies are superior to those that are not… Ableism also perpetuates the view that disabled bodies need repair or supervision. It assumes incompetence, regardless of the type or scope of disability. Ableism is the ranking of bodies, but it isn’t merely the ranking of which bodies matter most; it is also the ranking of bodies with the intention of holding the power to interpret the behavior and intentions of bodies deemed deficient or disabled. Ableism assumes the power to define which bodies are best and which behaviors are normal or dangerous.”

**Small Group Discussion on Body Wisdom:**

Talk about these questions in small groups for ten minutes before coming back to discuss with the larger group for about five minutes.

* What early messages did you learn about your body? (for instance: cultural understandings of body as good/wise or not, of mind as more important than body or at least as separate entity)
* What are some cultural messages that shape how you experience your body today?

Consider this question from Hillary McBride: If you could go back and tell your younger self something loving about your body, what age would you go back to and what would you say?

**Embodied Activity:**

Spend about 10 minutes individually completing the Self-Love Sentence Stems (see end of this document). When participants seem ready, return to the large group and spend a few minutes discussing how it felt to speak in this loving way to your messy, beautiful, ordinary body-mind-spirit.

**Concluding Activity or Homework:**

Take the Harvard Implicit Association Test for disability: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/selectatest.html>. Reflect personally on your result or talk about it as a group, using the result as an opportunity for growth rather than a place to get stuck in guilt or shame.

**Closing blessing from Cole Arthur Riley of *Black Liturgies*:**

God of every ache, help us to befriend our bodies. We confess that it is easy to turn against them as the source of our struggle. Awaken a compassion, a tenderness toward the parts of us that are changing, hurting --remembering that our bodies are doing everything they can to protect us. That our bodies are fighting, are trying their best to hold back the pain and exhaustion. And with every ailing and unseen thing, guide us toward those capable of listening and perceiving when we are not okay, that we wouldn't feel pressure to pretend or apologize or explain but can exist in the truth of what we need. Remind us that we are not a burden but a beacon to those who are so poorly attuned to their own bodies and needs, that they have forgotten what self-compassion looks like. Hold us in love, as we resist the demands of this world. Now I invite you to inhale: I am not a burden and exhale: this body is good. I am not a burden. This body is good. May it be so, amen.

## Lesson 2: Embracing Disability Theology by Exploring the Difference Between Healing and Curing

### Overview

In this lesson participants will center themselves with a guided breath meditation before diving into the history of Disability Theology and engaging in an embodied art practice to help them think about the differences between healing and curing. By the end of the lesson participants will understand that Jesus healed by restoring people to their communities and by asking them what they wanted him to do for them, rather than problematizing the goodness of disabled bodies or ignoring their personhood.

### Room Set-Up and Materials Needed

If meeting in person, plan to gather in a room with enough space to move around when needed for gathering in smaller groups. Set up seating in a circle, rather than in rows facing the front of the room, so that everyone can be seen and heard without assumptions of hierarchy. You are there to learn together in community and each person has valuable wisdom to share. Have pieces of blank paper and some form of coloring implements available for the embodied kintsugi practice. It will be helpful to have table space or clipboards available for participants to use when engaging in this practice. Ensure that you are able to play the recommended YouTube video or other sacred music from your context.

If meeting online with a platform such as Zoom, tell participants ahead of time that they will need a piece of paper and some kind of coloring implements so that they can have these materials available when you meet. During class be conscious of who may be dominating the conversation and be intentionally invitational so that all perspectives can be shared.

### Outline of Class

**Opening Breath Practice:** Open the session with about twelve minutes of breath-centered practice. You may use the one provided here or one that is familiar to your congregation.

Speak aloud: “I invite you to be comfortable where you are, with your feet on the ground, your back supported. Allow your eyes to close or keep them open with a softened gaze. Sometimes it helps to shake the body a little, maybe move your hands or circle your neck a bit, just to relax the tension and help you to settle into your body. (pause 5 seconds)

When you are ready, take a few slow deep breaths in a manner that is comfortable for you. Perhaps place your hand on your chest or belly to feel the air moving through your lungs and to bring your full attention to the flow of your breath. (pause 10 seconds)

I invite you to continue this deep breathing as we listen to this hymn of healing, understanding that every breath is a prayer and knowing that you are whole and holy, beyond all categories, just as you are.”

(Play hymn of healing <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2VLz2sBLbB0> (8:20) or another sacred song your community knows well. When the song concludes, allow the gathered body to sit in silence for two minutes.)

Speak aloud: “As we move out of this time of contemplation, I invite you to open your eyes if they have been closed and to again move your body with some small motions. Perhaps have a drink of water as you redirect your attention to the moment and to the holiness of our time together. As we move through this time, let us notice the Sacred in ourselves and in each other.”

**Overview of History of Disability Theology:** Spend ten minutes reading the following information aloud to the group, addressing questions or insights as they come up in a way that makes sense for the theological roots of your tradition.

* Theology is broadly defined as the study of the ways we seek to connect with something greater, the various lenses through which we understand Mystery/God given our embodied reality in this world. There are many different types of theology – systematic theology, practical theology, process theology, liberation theology, and others, because each is formed from our lived experience.
	+ Liberation theology emerged in Latin America in the late 1960s and its foundation is generally attributed to a Peruvian priest named Gustavo Gutierrez. Liberation theology tries to apply actionable change for the poor and oppressed because it understands that God is always on the side of the most marginalized and asserts that because God gives preferential treatment to the oppressed, we ought to as well.
	+ Too often traditional theological disciplines claim that there is an “objective truth” which really centers whiteness, patriarchy, and heteronormativity. Resisting this, liberation theology centers personal narratives to speak out against systemic injustice. This relatively new format informed much of the civil rights movement through the work of Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and many others.
* Embodiment and healing have been core interests of Christianity since the beginning of our history. The body has been a contested site from the start as people tried to understand Jesus’ nature, what it meant that God took on flesh, and if the body was good or evil. People with disabilities have of course been participants in religious communities all along, but as much as Christianity can be described as a religion of the body, e.g. Paul’s body of Christ metaphors, Jesus’ body literally “broken” for us, attitudes toward disability are complex and often negative. Christian interpretations of disability have described it as punishment for sin, a test of faith, an opportunity to inspire others, a potential demonstration of God’s healing power, or simply a mysterious act of God. While some of these perspectives may seem outdated today, they still linger in hymns (such as Amazing Grace), sermons, bible studies, and other elements of religious practice. In addition, some religious denominations have been resistant to disability advocacy, resulting in faith communities largely exempt from being covered under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, and being slow to embrace architectural modifications or inclusive hiring practices. The employment title, Title I of the ADA, requires organizations of more than 15 employees to be covered in hiring and employment practices.
* Nancy Eiesland published her pivotal work, *The Disabled God,* in 1994, building off of liberation theologies to understand the disability community as an oppressed group who experience injustice in a society that privileges the “normal” body and punishes all bodies that diverge from this supposed ideal. She pioneered the relatively new lens of Disability Theology to consider how we might reinterpret the Christian story as one that is open to and perhaps even on the side of people with disabilities. This work continues to expand through the research of many amazing disabled scholars and through conferences like the Institute on Theology and Disability which meets annually in June.

Disability Theology sees that we are holy in our disabilities, not in spite of them. It seeks to understand Jesus’ healing narratives as restoring relationship and redeeming the lives we actually have rather than trying to “fix” or “cure” us. This lens has revolutionary potential for transforming our communities into places of intentional inclusion and belonging. Christians ought to nurture belonging and help those with visible and invisible disabilities to flourish among us. Anti-ableism must be an integral and needed part of who we are, not just tokenizing disabled folx once or twice a year to make not-yet-disabled people feel better.

**Embodied Activity –*Kintsugi* Art:**

Kintsugi (pronounced kin-sugi) is a Japanese art form (literally meaning “golden joinery”) where broken objects like pottery are transformed into something even more beautiful by piecing them together with liquid gold. In this art form, “brokenness” is an essential and beautiful part of the object’s history, not an impairment or problem.

* Materials Needed: one piece of blank white paper per participant, some form of coloring implements (ie crayons, colored pencils, watercolor, etc)
* Tell participants that you will be engaging in an embodied practice to help the group think about the difference between healing and curing. Invite participants to crumple up the piece of paper and then to open it up. Ask participants what their urge is to do with the paper now.
	+ Some answers may be: throw it away, smooth the paper out, press it under a heavy book.
	+ Talk about how these urgings try to pretend that the “problem” never existed. This is like curing, which sees the body as a problem to be solved, as something that is “wrong” with you, or perhaps your disability is your “fault” or your parent’s “fault” (i.e. the Disciples in John 9 thinking the man born blind sinned or his parents did).
	+ Alternatively, we can respect the beauty that exists in what society deems brokenness through a practice like kintsugi. This is like healing, which respects and brings out the beauty that always existed, looking to the larger systemic problems and reconnecting with community. Healing restores relationship by removing barriers of belonging. We see this in Jesus’ actions throughout the gospels but especially in John 9 where Jesus is abundantly clear that disability is not a result of sin and proceeds to remove the barriers that have excluded the man from his community.
* Invite participants to spend 10 to 15 minutes embodying this healing mindset by creating kintsugi art with their crumpled papers. Use one color to trace the creases and fill in the shapes with a variety of colors to make a beautiful piece of art that respects the integrality of perceived brokenness. Invite participants to take the artwork with them as a reminder that in the Kin-dom we must build relationships and nurture belonging.

Brainstorm together and discuss other examples of healing vs. curing within your congregation and in the wider society.

**Closing Blessing: A Prayer for Seeking Your Neurodivergence by Amanda Diekman**

**Spirit of the living God,**

fall afresh on me as I ask fresh questions of my life,

and seek out answers I’ve never sought before.

They say you made us by hand.

No machine or factory to mass produce humanity

which means you were there when my genes combined

when the alchemy of identity yielded one me,

in all eternity,

the first of my kind.

**I’ve always felt different.**

as though perhaps I came from a different planet

Dropped by accident

among a species so similar to me that no one can tell

from the outside

that I am not made of the same material.

Did you switch up the fabric for me somehow?

Did you choose a different shade of clay

without ever revealing your sleight of hand?

**Now I ask questions like “Is there a name for people like me?”**

And comb lists of criteria, assembled in intimidating order

in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, volume 5

a new holy text over which I pour my identity.

Will I settle into a patterned flow?

Do the drops of my story combine into rivulets, creeks, rivers,

flowing into enough evidence to achieve that holy grail,

diagnosis?

**This book is filled with words that sting**

“Abnormal”

“Fixated”

“Fails”

“Careless”

“Severe”

“Excessive”

These words worm into my secret places, sitting alongside the tender ones I hold close:

Beloved

Created

Desired

Redeemed

**And yet I persist in my investigation, determined**

desiring these labels to apply to me

because then I will know who I am

and who else in this great wide creation might be like me?

Is there a reason some things always feel so hard?

Is there a chance I’m not lazy, too little, too much, too broken, malformed, wrong?

**My deepest longing is to know me as you know me,**

so I beg you to guide my search with your eyes of grace

that I can see my inner terrain, filled with your fingerprints

marks of the artist’s hand.

And if there is an Other Side for me

where I emerge, labeled, named,

may it be a homecoming to myself, a blessed resolution to a lifetime of lostness

a new beginning

with a new tribe of fellow wanderers

who get what it is like

to be crafted from a different shade of cloth.

## Lesson 3: Spurring on Disability Justice

### Overview

*He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?* Micah 6:8 NRSV

*But let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.* Amos 5:24 NRSV

*“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”* Matthew 5:6 NRSV

In this lesson participants will learn from disability activist Lydia X.Z. Brown and the disability justice-based performance project Sins Invalid to begin to construct a collective dream for disability justice. By the end of the lesson participants will have identified and rewritten common disability tropes, enabling them to notice how ableist theology is perpetuated in music, sermons, and other worship practices so that you all can imagine together how to resist and reduce ableist harm in your church communities.

### Room Set-Up and Materials Needed

If meeting in person, plan to gather in a room with enough space to move around when needed for gathering in smaller groups. Set up seating in a circle, rather than in rows facing the front of the room, so that everyone can be seen and heard without assumptions of hierarchy. You are there to learn together in community and each person has valuable wisdom to share. Have enough space between seats so that participants can comfortably move during the opening meditation. Have physical copies of the 10 Principles of Disability Justice and printed copies of the common disability tropes available for participants to refer to during your discussion. Have a screen set up and connected to your laptop so that participants can see and hear the two videos.

If meeting online with a platform such as Zoom, ensure that you have the ability to place participants in smaller breakout rooms. During class be conscious of who may be dominating the conversation and be intentionally invitational so that all perspectives can be shared. Be prepared to share your screen with sound when using the two videos.

Consider emailing the 10 Principles of Disability Justice and copies of the common disability tropes to all participants ahead of time for their review.

### Outline of Class

**Opening Meditation: Arm Dance Video:** Welcome participants into your shared space and share this arm dance meditation to help the group settle into the goodness of their bodies. <https://youtu.be/OTRB4gkCUHE>

Speak aloud: “In choosing to follow Jesus, we are choosing to follow the one who dined with the outcasts, who asked people what they wanted him to do and BELIEVED them rather than insisting on his own way, the one who nurtured relationship with all who society deemed “unworthy” of love. We follow the one who healed by restoring people to their communities, the one who wept at injustice, the one who took tangible action **in community** to subvert oppressive systems. We are not loving in this radically upside-down way when we exclude, defend, or deny experiences of harm. We can say all the right things, but we are not loving in the way of Jesus when our actions, practices, or attitudes do not align with our words. In striving to mirror great teacher and collaborating to love all …l. ;..people well, we must pay attention to alternative interpretations that respect the agency and dignity of disabled beloveds in scripture. Our understanding of sacred text has profound implications for the way we treat one another in community today. To spur on disability justice in the church we must be willing to reject ableist theologies and co-create a more life-giving way forward together.”

**Lydia XZ Brown: Dreaming Disability Justice into Our Future:** Watch this video from Lydia XZ Brown (they/them): <https://youtu.be/CpBly2QKe8w> from the 28th Annual Colorado Youth Diversity Conference (18:47) and discuss.

**10 Principles of Disability Justice:** Read [10 Principles of Disability Justice from Sins Invalid](https://www.sinsinvalid.org/blog/10-principles-of-disability-justice) (<https://www.sinsinvalid.org/blog/10-principles-of-disability-justice>) and discuss implications for individual lives, life of your congregation, and exclusionary systems out in the world.

**Concluding Activity or Homework:** Invite participants to spend time thinking about and rewriting ableist narratives in common hymns, popular songs, books, movies etc. Identify common disability tropes and think about what more life-giving alternatives might be. Below are two examples of hymns which may be helpful for spurring on discussion.

**Example Disability Trope #1:**

You are invited to rewrite the final verse of “Here I Am, Lord,”

“I, the Lord of wind and flame
I will tend the poor and lame
I will set a feast for them
My hand will save
Finest bread I will provide
'Til their hearts be satisfied
I will give my life to them
Whom shall I send?”

**Example Disability Trope #2:**

You are invited to rewrite the refrain of “Mary Did You Know,” a common contemporary Christmas song.

“The blind will see, the deaf will hear
The dead will live again
The lame will leap, the dumb will speak
The praises of the Lamb.”

**Closing Blessing: “You Get Proud by Practicing” by Laura Hershey (1991)**

If you are not proud
for who you are, for what you say, for how you look;
if every time you stop
to think of yourself, you do not see yourself glowing
with golden light; do not, therefore, give up on yourself.
You can
get proud.

You do not need
a better body, a purer spirit, or a Ph.D.
to be proud.
You do not need
a lot of money, a handsome partner, or a nice car.
You do not need
to be able to walk, or see, or hear,
or use big, complicated words,
or do any of the things that you just can’t do
to be proud. A caseworker
cannot make you proud,
or a doctor.
You only need
more practice.
You get proud
by practicing.

There are many many ways to get proud.
You can try riding a horse, or skiing on one leg,
or playing guitar,
and do well or not so well,
and be glad you tried
either way.
You can show
something you’ve made
to someone you respect
and be happy with it no matter
what they say.
You can say
what you think, though you know
other people do not think the same way, and you can
keep saying it, even if they tell you
you are crazy.
You can add your voice
all night to the voices
of a hundred and fifty others
in a circle
around a jailhouse
where your brothers and sisters are being held
for blocking buses with no lift,
or you can be one of the ones
inside the jailhouse,
knowing of the circle outside.
You can speak your love
to a friend
without fear.
You can find someone
who will listen to you
without judging you or doubting you or being
afraid of you
and let you hear yourself perhaps
for the first time.
These are all ways
of getting proud.
None of them
are easy, but all of them
are possible. You can do all of these things,
or just one of them again and again.
You get proud
by practicing.

Power makes you proud, and power
comes in many fine forms
supple and rich as butterfly wings.
It is music
when you practice opening your mouth
and liking what you hear
because it is the sound of your own
true voice.
It is sunlight
when you practice seeing
strength and beauty in everyone
including yourself.
It is dance
when you practice knowing
that what you do
and the way you do it
is the right way for you
and can’t be called wrong.
All these hold
more power than weapons or money
or lies.
All these practices bring power, and power
makes you proud.
You get proud
by practicing.

Remember, you weren’t the one
who made you ashamed,
but you are the one
who can make you proud.
Just practice,
practice until you get proud, and once you are proud,
keep practicing so you won’t forget.
You get proud
by practicing.

## Lesson 4: Nurturing a Community of Belonging Moving Forward

### Overview

In this lesson participants will take part in an opening practice of rest, write love letters to their bodies, and discuss the Wheaton Center for Faith and Disability’s Ten Dimensions of Belonging. By the end of the lesson participants will understand the criticality of belonging as you brainstorm together how to necessarily move your church from a place of simply inviting or tolerating disabled people to one in which disabled folx are needed as integral parts of your community. Building on the previous lessons, this final lesson gives you space to come up with tangible steps for moving forward so that disabled people can lead and thrive together in your faith community.

### Room Set-Up and Materials Needed

If meeting in person, plan to gather in a room with enough space to move around when needed for gathering in smaller groups. Set up seating in a circle, rather than in rows facing the front of the room, so that everyone can be seen and heard without assumptions of hierarchy. You are there to learn together in community and each person has valuable wisdom to share. Have physical copies of the Dimensions of Belonging graphic from the Wheaton Center (<https://www.wheaton.edu/wheaton-center-for-faith-and-disability/disability-foundations/dimensions-of-belonging/>) available for discussion. Also, be sure to have blank paper, writing instruments, and tables or clipboards available for the letter writing practice.

If meeting online with a platform such as Zoom, ensure that you have the ability to place participants in smaller breakout rooms. During class be conscious of who may be dominating the conversation and be intentionally invitational so that all perspectives can be shared. Consider emailing the Wheaton Center’s Ten Dimensions of Belonging to participants ahead of time for their review and ask participants to have a piece of paper and writing instrument available for the embodied practice.

### Outline of Class

**Opening Practice of Rest:** Invite participants to settle into a comfortable position, eyes closed or gazing down. With all your group has learned together in the past few weeks and looking ahead to necessary actions moving forward, read aloud this blessing for small steps when you feel overwhelmed:

“Life has unraveled. All my plans, wrecked. My hopes, impractical. And it seems daunting to imagine what comes next. The bills that need paying. The texts that need responding to. The loneliness that seeps in every night. Blessed are you who need reminding that, yes, a lot of things aren’t fixable or even tackle-able right now, but there’s something you might try instead. Taking that tiny step that might make today a smidgen lighter. Maybe not easier or necessarily better –but lighter.

Being extra generous to a stranger or hopping in bed a little earlier. Asking a friend to grab coffee or listening for the birds instead of doom-scrolling Twitter. Setting down our to-do lists and picking up a paintbrush for no reason at all except joy. May we be people who anchor ourselves to the now. Not allowing our minds to skip to the what-ifs or the what-will-happen-whens.

Blessed are you trying to put aside the ‘everything is possible’ mentality. You who know that sheer effort will not put these pieces back together. You who have taken yourself off the hook for perfection and discover rest in ‘good enough’ instead. One small step, one deep breath, at a time.”

**Small Group Discussion:** Divide participants into small groups to discuss the following question from Hillary McBride for about 10 minutes, then come back together to discuss insights as a larger group.

“What would it mean for you to believe that Sacred breath is in you from the moment you are born to the moment you will die? How might this change the way you think about yourself and others?”

**Activity: Love Letter to Our Bodies**

Invite participants to spend 10-15 minutes writing a letter to their body, respecting their wisdom and thanking their body for all it has carried them through. If you believe it would be helpful for your group to hear an example before writing their own, find one I published here: <https://themighty.com/topic/chronic-pain/self-love-disability-body/>. When finished writing, have the group discuss how it felt to write to their body-mind-spirits and encourage them to continue this practice regularly in times of joy and stress.

**Ten Dimensions of Belonging**

As a group, explore the Ten Dimensions of Belonging from the Wheaton Center for Faith and Disability. To disrupt the hierarchy of bodies in the church and dismantle ableist theologies, disabled people must not only be present or welcomed in church spaces but must be needed, loved, and given opportunities to lead. What are some actions that participants can take in their own lives and in your church community to bring justice and enhance belonging, noticing how we all with all of our bodily complexities are integral parts of God’s good design?

**Closing Blessing: Benediction from M. Jade Kaiser of enfleshed.com**

Before the burning bush of this world,
asking us to love all its holy, hurting ground,
come with whatever seed of faith you can muster, and listen:
Listen for the voice of God thundering softly in your depths.
Listen with your hunger. Your hurt. Your heart and all its wisdom
cultivated over time in the company of others.
These are the soils from which God calls us to blossom and bloom, to bear fruit that nourishes and grow our future with care.
This tending requires courage but it is not a sacrifice.
Just let yourself unfold in the direction of shared flourishing.

Maybe you are a cleansing fire or a safe place to rest.
Maybe you are the grit that won’t let us give up.
Maybe you are the queer love poem that
opens something holy and hopeful in a thousand other people.
There are a million ways to be Love
in this groaning and gorgeous world.
And that is it. That is God’s invitation. Their promise. Their lure
away from all the counter-forces that leave you
doubting your offering,
selling your soul,
or hoarding the precious and unique resources
of your story, and spirit, and life.

Trust in whatever sacred thing bubbles up from within you.
The Divine takes on flesh and yours is no exception.
You can be a conduit of eternal love.
You can be an act of radical solidarity.
You can be a moment of grace.
There is so much hope in knowing God is always that close.
There is so much joy in showing up to our collective possibility
saying “yes,” saying “here I am,” saying “may it be so.”

## Handout: Self-Love Sentence Stems

1. The three things I love best about myself are: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.
2. I am showing more interest in \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.
3. This week, I’m going to reward myself by \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.
4. I’ve been told I have great \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.
5. I hereby choose not to worry about \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.
6. I deserve to feel good because I do my best to \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.
7. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ is something about me that others have admired.
8. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ are two people who give me strength.
9. I can’t change \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ about myself, and I choose to accept it.
10. My ability to \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ is something I’ve always been proud of.

This week, I’m giving myself a break from thinking about \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

## Glossary

**Anti-ableism:** strategies and practical actions that counter ableism by recognizing the privilege that is given to nondisabled bodies in our society and by actively taking steps to dismantle this unearned advantage

**Body-mind-spirit:** Christianity has historically taught that the mind is more important than the body. Many people in the disability community use the term “body-mind” to push back against this assumption. In my disabled embodiment and my ministry, I use the term “body-mind-spirit” as a purposeful reminder of interconnection and love. Our bodies, minds, and spirits are not segmented or subordinate components but are rather united as an integral part of who God created us to be.

**Liberationist:** principles or attitudes that advocate for liberation/freedom from oppression in all its forms

## Resources for Further Study

Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God*

Lamar Hardwick, *How Ableism Fuels Racism*

Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*

Amy Kenny, *My Body is Not a Prayer Request*

Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*

Lisa D. Powell, *The Disabled God Revisited*

## About the Author

Angela Molloy is a queer and congenitally disabled scholar-activist who holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Comparative Religion from the University of Washington and a Master of Divinity degree from the Iliff School of Theology. She served as a Faith Inclusion and Belonging Fellow at the disability-led nonprofit Disability Belongs™. She is currently the Becoming Anti-Ableist Coordinator at a local United Methodist church, the co-chair of the Disability Ministries Committee for the Pacific Northwest Conference of the United Methodist Church and is the founder and chair of the Iliff Disability Coalition As a disabled writer and accessibility consultant, Angela is particularly interested in how congenital disability is perceived and how belonging is nurtured (or, unfortunately, not) for disabled folx within the Methodist context. Called to work with and on behalf of disability communities to disrupt ableist systems, Angela will study in the Joint Doctoral Program at Iliff and the University of Denver in September 2024.