

BOOK REVIEW

COPIOUS HOSTING: A THEOLOGY OF ACCESS FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES.

By Jennie Weiss Block,

New York: Continuum, 2002. (Paper, 183 pages. \$19.95, ISBN 0-8264-1349-8.)

There is a new monument on the Mall in Washington. It is dedicated to F.D.R. and when it was first built it stirred up controversy among the disabled who complained there was not one portrayal in this expansive monument of the president in his wheelchair. They claimed F.D.R.'s disability was being denied. And they were right. Why were we unwilling to admit that this world leader was paralyzed? The monument issue shows that even with all the advances made by the disabled in the past 30 years to be recognized and given access, we are still trying to push people with disabilities to the fringes of our awareness. For those who are disabled, Laura Hershey says, our world is "segregated, inaccessible, often discriminatory." (p. 79)

The issues raised by the disabled should be of concern to preachers. In some churches and retreat houses where I have preached the first pews are reserved for the disabled. On first blush one might say that the people in these spaces are the disabled in the congregation. But Jennie Weiss Block reminds us, while some disabilities are very apparent, others are not. It is estimated that forty-nine million Americans have one or more physical and/or mental disabilities. That makes people with disabilities the largest minority in the country, and as the population grows older the number of the disabled increases. (Include among these those with sight and hearing impairment, episodic seizures, AIDS and HIV, stuttering, limited mobility, etc.) So, as the preacher looks out at the people in the pews, there are many with less obvious disabilities gathered to hear the Word and offer prayer to God. This book will help us be more sensitive to their presence and should affect how we preach to them and about them. It will also help us reflect on the theological issues that preachers have always faced--- suffering, the marginalized, oppression and injustice.

Block begins with a historical overview of the disability movement. The modern movement began in the early 1960's and culminated in the signing of the "Americans with Disabilities Act" of 1990. I found it troubling to learn that some religious institutions lobbied to be exempt from this legislation and this position created tension between the religious community and the disability rights

movement. The author also presents the philosophical concepts that drive the disability movement. She calls this the most important section of the book for, “unless nondisabled people change the way they think about disability, disabled people will always be oppressed.” (p. 71)

In Part III the author provides a valuable reflection of theological topics from a disability perspective. She calls for an all-encompassing, inclusive Christian anthropology; proposes a new perspective on scriptural passages that deal with disabilities; suggests ways to deal with access in liturgical and sacramental life and challenges us to speak out in justice against the oppression of people with disabilities. Block has named her book after Edward Schillebeeckx’s description of Jesus as “the host, the copious gift of God.” Her book calls the community of Jesus to come together in a highly intentional manner, seeking life from God for ourselves and others. Then, as the Body of Christ, we are to be his “co-hosts.” “Co-hosting the party to bring about the Kingdom of God, in the here and now, is all about making room for the ‘other.’” (p. 132) To be co-hosts requires us to go beyond our normal boundaries of the familiar and reach out to the other which, as the thesis of the book proposes, must include those with disabilities. Jesus, God’s “copious gift,” stands with the outsider --- that is where his community should stand as well.

“Most nondisabled people have no idea how difficult it is to have a disability and negotiate a world designed for nondisabled people.” (p. 141) Block’s book opened my eyes to a reality I have not fully seen. She doesn’t just show how difficult it is for disabled people to negotiate in the physical world, she also shows how they are marginalized and experience oppression. More telling to church people is her argument that the disabled are also marginalized in our Christian communities because of physical, spiritual, emotional and liturgical barriers. Block challenges us not only to note how the disabled are discriminated against in our society, but to apply the justice questions about them to our own Christian communities, where one would expect them to be most welcomed and included. This book will help us preachers ask the important question---- “who’s in and who’s left out?” of our preaching.

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