I grew up in a Christian home on a dead end street. Around the corner was what we used to call a “home”—a group home for the mentally disabled sited in a typical residential house. Its residents didn’t seem to get out much, leaving only a thin residue of childhood memories. They shuffled by the end of our street in single file in the company of a single caregiver. These incongruous moments lodged in a child’s mind as spectral and discomforting reminders that the world is full of strange and unmentionable things. It was only in such public spaces that I ever rubbed shoulders with the mentally disabled, for this was the end of a long age in the developed West of hiding them away (Schweik, 2009). Such people were to be kept in “homes” and special schools and largely away from churches.

The accessibility of public spaces to those with disabilities has been at the forefront of the disability rights agenda for several decades now, with some apparent success. How often do we see ramps into buildings, disabled-friendly bathrooms, and crosswalks arranged to accommodate those who cannot see, cannot hear, or who need a wheelchair? The fights for these changes in the infrastructure of our cities have been hard won, and have certainly made public spaces more accessible for those with various disabilities. But the visibility of these mechanical modifications brings with it the very real risk of suggesting that public space in modern Western societies can now be considered open to all, the struggle for accessibility having been decisively won by its advocates (Lewis, 2008). In this chapter I will raise some questions about the accuracy of this presumption by indicating how even the most apparently benign public space is fraught with complicating human relationships that renders such spaces anything but hospitable. The experienced inhospitality of public space to those with mental disability can easily lead to the shrinking of their worlds and the worlds of those who live with them.

I write today in the midst of a life that is almost the opposite of my childhood: I almost never attend church without my son Adam, who like most other people today with mental disabilities attends a school with mainstream children, and is in principle welcome in every public space our society has to offer. Adam is six years old, and has Down Syndrome and autistic tendencies. Largely non-verbal, he is often unresponsive to verbal commands or defiant when he understands them. Along with a warm and open personality comes a fascination with throwing things, pushing objects off of tables, and the occasional playful slap at the passersby who might be in arm’s reach. Proclivities like these are in broad terms predictable and so can be guarded against with enough vigilance, but the overall effect of such behaviors, I want to suggest, is that if he becomes visible in public at all, it is as a stalking specter of potential property loss. These behaviors have certainly constrained our family life, though we try to seek out public spaces where they will be most acceptable: parks and pools, fairs, and at least the pedestrian areas of shopping malls, to take some of the more obvious examples.

The worship of the Christian church has had a decisive role in preparing me for such a radical shift in life experience, though the ways in which it has done so were indirect and pluriform. In this chapter I want to trace what Christian theology can say about how God might well be breaking in on the inhospitality not only of the habits of negotiating public space and the legal conceptions predominant in the secular West, but also the church. My central question is, How does hospitality to the mentally disabled arise in a Western world that finds it disturbing and uncomfortable? What is the origin of such countercultural hospitality, theologically conceived? My analysis will orbit around a comparison of several anecdotal accounts of life with disabled persons that I trust will reveal recognizable trajectories within modern
Western societies in which most people now presume (wrongly, I will suggest) that they are open to the needs of those with disabilities (Gray et al., 2009).

Friday night at the pub

In the United Kingdom the family pub is a public space designed for hospitality, a place to relax and enjoy a convivial atmosphere. In a North American cultural framework the family pub is like a cross between a coffee shop and a diner, a public space at once oriented to profit and service, but intentionally configured to be inviting to families. Our family was out for a Friday evening meal, feeling celebratory and relaxed.

Before ordering our food, I took Adam (at that time four years old) and our other son Caleb (then two years) to wash their hands in the men’s room. Having washed Adam first, I was ten seconds into Caleb’s wash when out of the corner of my eye and to my horror I saw Adam fishing the suspiciously candy-like sanitizer balls out of a urinal. I immediately yelled at him to stop but to no avail, and in a second he had the viscous surface material from the balls on his fingers. Before I could stop him he had rubbed his eyes. Almost immediately he began to cry and then scream, soon becoming apoplectic as I attempted to wash his hands and eyes in the sink. All eyes were on the three of us as we emerged hurriedly from the men’s room, Adam’s frantic cries rising above the music of the jukebox. We met my wife Stephanie at the table. Being a nurse, she knew it was imperative to discover the exact makeup of the sanitizer balls and immediately asked the manager to look up their constituents. He hurried into his back room office, clearly shaken by the turn of events, soon returning with the news that the balls were made of a very strong base that needed immediately to be neutralized. He also brought a glass of milk (unsolicited) and his folder of emergency procedures. After a brief consultation we decided it was best to take Adam to the emergency room. The manager gave us the number of a cab company, and we decided a crying and hungry two-year-old would not help us negotiate the emergency room with a four-year-old in very loud agony. So Stephanie left for a grueling few hours holding Adam down while his eyes were bathed in a neutralizing solution that would ensure that they were not permanently damaged (though he did have burned and red irises for several days afterward).

I begin with this narrative because it exposes the particular accessibility of a business establishment. A hazard existed for our son in this material environment that the proprietors could not easily have foreseen but for which they most likely would nevertheless have been legally liable. The manager clearly felt the pressure of this potential legal liability and immediately documented in writing what had happened. Whether or not out of fear of legal repercussions or genuine concern, the manager was as helpful as he could have been, though the net effect was that we were left bearing the financial costs of the taxi ride, and the much greater emotional costs of a few hours with a screaming child in the emergency room and a happy family outing in tatters.

This narrative ought not be read as suggesting that the private sphere of the home is free of many of the same dangers. A child who repetitively slams doors, throws things, or flushes the toilet is bound to find trouble at home. Nor is the family home as hermetically private as we like to imagine; Adam once badly burned himself pulling down a cup of boiling water in the kitchen, and did so within arm’s reach of a family friend who then struggled with guilt at not having stopped him in time. That the family then had to decamp to the hospital for a week as a result of this accident again reminds us of the ways in which private and public are not strictly separable spheres.

Saturday afternoon at the pool

My next story comes from an afternoon excursion to the pool at a major private university in the southern United States. It was a beautiful afternoon, and Adam and I spent a pleasant few hours swimming, talking,
and playing with other swimmers. This particular pool does present one physical barrier for Adam: there are no steps or shallow area in which he can splash or paddle on his own. As he loves water and greatly benefits from the exercise the pool affords, this particular physical hurdle is one worth working around. What we end up doing is holding him while he splashes, and taking him over to the ladder and catching him as he jumps back in. The routine is tiring and energy-intensive, but workable. The one drawback of this arrangement is that he is passionate about throwing things into the water—the lid to the skimmer, swim floats, sandals—whatever is near enough to the pool to be grabbed and thrown in before we can swim over to stop him. Objects that are several feet away from the pool’s edge present no danger, as when he heads over to pick one up, we have time to swim over and intercept him. But the fact remains that the physical arrangement of the pool puts us at the risk that Adam will throw something in before we can get to him.

Much to my delight, Adam’s joy in throwing things into the pool had made him some playmates. A group of five children discovered that if they sat on the edge of the pool he would invariably push them in. They spent a merry half hour jumping out of the pool only to be pushed, in rapid succession, back in by an industrious and constantly grinning Adam. As this game wound down, I took Adam and moved 20 yards to the other side of the pool to talk to a friend. It was here that the complication arose. Ten feet away an undergraduate had decided to stand in the pool and read, her book on the pool’s edge and a bag next to her. What to do? Cut the conversation short? Move to the other side of the pool? Warn the student? Hope for the best? Not being able to see what was in the bag, and assuming that the student would grab it if Adam attempted to pick it up, I decided to keep as much distance as I could and to hope for the best, rather than interrupting the student.

Wrong decision. Adam dashed for the bag, and because it was so close to the water, with a flick of the wrist it was floating on the surface of the pool. The student didn’t reach for the bag when Adam picked it up, apparently not having noticed the game he had previously been playing with the children at the other end of the pool. Adam deftly flicked the bag into the pool and the student immediately snatched it up, fishing out a phone in a carrying case, which looked damp on its surface, but happily, appeared to be working fine.

Having spent the better part of the afternoon at the pool, this unpleasant turn of events suggested it was time to go, and I changed Adam out of his swim nappy and began herding him toward the car. Running to catch up with us and now clearly in a panic, the student explained that she had discovered some worrying glitches, though the phone was by no means debilitated. Apologizing again, I handed her my business card, promising to cover any costs that might arise, and asked for her to keep me up to date about the unfolding health of the device.

Within hours I received an e-mail explaining that because the dunking had clearly caused some effect on the phone, I owed her $399 plus tax. I responded that it was perhaps worth turning it off and giving it a day or two in a dry place to let it dry out. The next day, remarkably, I received an e-mail sent from the very phone in question saying that the dealer had informed her that any wetting of the phone voided its warranty, and that I therefore owed her an entirely new phone. A series of negotiations ensued about how much loss the invalidation of a warranty was worth, which it soon became apparent she was interpreting as evasions of financial responsibility. Unfortunately, a planned week of family vacation intervened, exacerbating her belief that I was shirking my responsibilities for Adam’s actions. A police report was filed and a threat to sue was issued if she had not been paid in full by a specified date that fell during the week we were on holiday. Frantic at our apparent absconding, she contacted all authorities who would listen to her story at the university, some who wrote me wry e-mails seeking a resolution to an absurd situation, some who wrote kind and concerned e-mails, and one moralizing and condescending e-mail from the vice principal of student affairs who reminded me that as an academic, I had a responsibility to set an example for students. Pay up immediately, he warned.
The remarkable thing about this experience of public space is how it revealed the reduction of all accounts of justice to the single criterion of the protection of individual property rights. Driven to increasingly frantic measures by her fear of financial loss, the student was left no psychological room even to acknowledge the complicating factors associated with a child who does socially awkward things and does not take verbal direction in any meaningful sense. The vice-principal, wanting the problem to go away, added to the student’s threat of physical force (via the courts) a shaming with moral language. Both tacitly agreed that any acknowledgment of the relevance of Adam’s condition would be coded as a diminishment of the student’s property rights. The concept of rights thus did not bind us to Adam, but protected us from him. The place of rights was between us and him (Wannenwetsch, 2010). Unsurprisingly in a thoroughly capitalist society, the student was concerned solely to recoup her financial loss and therefore became entrenched in her resistance even to discuss the possibility that her lack of awareness of and distance from others in her environment might have contributed to the unfolding of events. This was the story she told the vice principal, and in her story no disability was present. Protecting her rights meant corporate responsibility for a child with disability could not be admitted.

The university, a public space shot through with talk of accessibility and equality, turned out to be a place utterly closed to any discussion of the deep incompatibility of this language with the dominant ethos of litigious capitalist (acquisitive) rights-based individualism. The one place that might have been open to a child with disability in a university that is rightly configured to serve adults, the staff and student pool, had clearly become deeply threatening not primarily because of deficits in the physical environment, but because the actors inhabiting that space were so thoroughly saturated with the myopia of acquisitive individualism that no awareness that public space is always shared could emerge. It is very difficult to entice students to an elite university without playing on their drive to acquire precious goods for themselves in the process, and if they have made sacrifices to do so their sense of rights and entitlement is sure to be strengthened. Hence the conflict with anyone who is perceived to place a barrier in the way of this all-consuming aim.

Adam had not damaged a book in the library, nor had he spilled a coffee on a computer in the dining hall, each being environments even less suited to his presence. One hopes that in an “enlightened” public space like a civically progressive university the lifeguard tempted to ban Adam from the pool for having thrown something into it would be rebuffed by superiors who have learned at least the legal importance of accessibility. But as events unfolded it became clear that it was the students who rendered this public space inhospitable with their acquisitive and legalistic presumptions about what counts as justice. Even a university explicitly committed to producing “moral” and “civically engaged” students cannot guarantee this will have the effect of opening students’ eyes to the marginalized in our societies, as it clearly had not in this case. Public service can easily become another section to be filled in on the well-rounded curriculum vitae (Brooks, 2001).

The student in question in this case later explained that she was “not a bad person” and was involved in voluntary service in a nearby socially deprived area. It was nevertheless the case that after this incident it was much less stressful for us all to take Adam to the river where a lower socioeconomic cohort tended to gather and which was therefore a less physically and socially threatening environment. One can only wonder whether the riverside presents a better culture for being trained in empathy than the university. Also missing at the river are the academics. Whether through active support or evasive inattention, the anti-empathic tendencies in students seem to have been echoed and even reinforced in this case by those given responsibility for speaking for universities. While there is perhaps more awareness of the theoretical issues that might make possible discussion of problems of accessibility, this is easily swallowed in the much stronger currents of justice conceived as the protection of individual property rights.
Once again Adam and I were left at the end of a trajectory beginning with the expectation of enjoying a public environment, moving to the arising of complications and threats, and ending with bailiffs at the door, threats and personal cost ($427 to be exact), and the sense that any welcome extended to Adam and people like him was in reality a highly conditional one.

At the height of the fraught discussions associated with the pool incident, we talked to a lawyer at the local autism advocacy center. She told us of an older autistic boy with problems with his balance. While at school, and in a special education class, he lost his balance on the stairs. Instinctively reaching out for support, he caught and broke the necklace of his teacher. His family was sued by the teacher for damages.

Here we reach the furthest absurdity of a liberal framework within which disability access and personal property rights can only appear in competition. In the public space that is the school, and within the sub-space specially configured to host those with special needs, the actors who inhabit it render it threatening when the ethos of rights as standing between people trumps the ethos of shared care and responsibility for those among us with special needs. The effect is that in our societies the disabled and those who care for them are understood to be solely responsible for any untoward events that might occur in any public space. Such a situation is bound to render public space threatening in revealing it in fact to be characterized by the most tenuous veneer of empathy and shared responsibility for those who do not or cannot conform to precise social norms. It seems appropriate, therefore, for Hans Reinders to conclude that “political liberalism is not ultimately capable of engendering and fostering hospitality towards people with overt, recalcitrant needs. The norms encircling the liberal axis of individual autonomy cannot easily accommodate lives dedicated to the care of perpetually dependent individuals, or admit the intrinsic value of these individuals” (Reinders, 2000, 14).

The church as the practice ground for empathy

What seems relatively clear is that all public space in Western society threatens to be rendered inhospitable to the disabled when the actors who inhabit it live as if the challenges of disability are “their” problem and not “our” problem. It also seems that neither public spaces configured by the aims of commercial gain nor education can be guaranteed to foster attitudes of welcome to and solidarity with those with disabilities.

The question this raises is this: what space exists in liberal societies in which such hospitable empathy can be learned? Where are the “dark publics” (Wannenwetsch 2007, 306) in which people can be freed from the blinding fetters of consumerist individualism and justice as the protection of personal property rights, into the genuine welcome of those with disabilities that alone can make public space truly accessible?

In my experience the familiarity bred by casual interactions with disabled people in public spaces can accidentally or occasionally generate the personal bonds that open people’s arms to welcome those with disabilities. But such a welcome accrues first to single individuals and is by no means guaranteed to rub off on others. We can have our favorite “other” without developing any fondness for the outsider class to which they belong. In addition, such individual goodwill is not structurally related to the notions of justice or the configuration of public space in our liberal societies, oriented as they most often are for profit-making, personal entertainment, or consumption, giving material expression to the individualist ethos of liberal society.

There is, however, at least one public space in liberal society that is in its basic formulation and definition framed to foster a more receptive openness to others, a greater willingness to hear, and in which responsibility for others defines its very structure. This place is the church. Adam loves church, especially the music, communion, and the peace. He loves it so much he refuses to go to the nursery until he has
gone to the main service, meaning we always need to attend the early service and sit as close as possible to the piano.

It also means that on occasion, after attending the first service and then nursery during the Sunday school hour that follows, Adam attempts a dash back to the sanctuary in hopes of joining a second service. On one such occasion he managed to make it to a door that opened into the front of a full sanctuary already well into its first hymn. Almost as if making a dramatic stage entrance, he swung open the door at the front of the sanctuary and dashed onto the platform ahead of me. I found myself facing the congregation, most of whom turned in our direction. With Adam now between myself and the singing congregation, I glimpsed in a moment a snapshot of the communion of saints, a wall of love and welcome and of course mirth. It was an opening of a door literally into another time, a time in which all those gathered have their ethos of capitalist individualism challenged and reshaped as they learn what it means to be a body, a community of praise.

Moments like these expose the sense in which the church is a political agent in introducing its participants into a political life in a different time, an eschatological time. As and when it becomes this community of eschatological gratitude it stands as an alternative to those many publics that train citizens in acquisitiveness and litigiousness and rights as protections against others. It does so in a manner with contours that fundamentally differ from attempts to construct an ethos of democratic welcome on the basis of some account of secular citizenship alone (Stout, 2004). While it remains to be seen if the rituals of liberal democracy can effectively form hospitable citizens, it is clear that the form and content of the church’s liturgy are designed to open up a time in which the pitting of individual property rights against the claims and needs of those with disabilities is not only impossible, but revealed as absurd.

On this point Bernd Wannenwetsch has observed that, “the assembly of the congregation reverses the everyday experience of social marginalization...the people who have been ‘bent low’ for six long days can practice an upright walk on the seventh day. What makes this possible is the eschatological experience of kairos which gives them a new definition of their humanity” (Wannenwetsch 2007, 229). When this “real life” of worship is experienced as basic, the machinations of sinful political communion suddenly appear for what they are—a comedic parody of obedience—and “the laughter over this grotesque scene is the Easter laughter which, on the morning of the new creation, breaks forth from the people who all at once perceive the unreality of what they had previously considered to be real...supposedly ‘real life’ can now be perceived as a retreat from worship and its eschatological reality” (Wannenwetsch 2004, 230; translation amended). In the creation and renewal of these opened eyes the kingdom of heaven is truly present, a new time and rationality becoming tangible as it overlays and judges the time of this eon. Though the church does not exist to serve the state, the modern liberal state and the institutions which make it up rely on such “dark publics” to fund the execution of their own highest moral aspirations.

The constant treadmill of updated and “less pejorative” terms for disability (from moron to retarded, then to handicapped, disabled, and now having special needs or a learning disability) is an indicator that what is needed if public space is to become genuinely accessible is not the regular destigmatization of the language we use (Reinders, 2008, 45-46), but a political space in which we can learn, personally and viscerally, that all sorts of people are not “different” from us, but, to use biblical language, are “members of one body” (1 Cor 12:24-25). From this perspective the perpetual retooling of the nomenclature of disability can be understood as a reflex of our developed and enlightened societies to protect their ticklish discomfort with “them,” but without teaching us that this discomfort is in reality a wound created by our systematic attempts to cut these vulnerable lives off from ourselves and our self-designations.

Let me be very clear: none of the forgoing is meant to suggest that the church has any power of its own to open up this eschatological communion, or even that churches are places where the disabled are regularly welcomed with open arms. The stories are many and gut wrenching of parents being told in so many words
(or actions) that their children are not part of “us,” that “the program” cannot accommodate people with their challenges; stories of communion and fellowship being denied to those who cannot understand, and with those presumed not able to comprehend and so maybe even incapable of being saved. We often see the ethos of secular public space reproduced in churches, where, for instance, “difficult” children are considered to be the sole responsibility of parents. It is no wonder that pastors of Christian churches often believe they have no disabled people in them (Reinders, 2008, 335 n.26), or that parents who are told to “be responsible” and look after their “own” children often find it easiest to do so at home, abandoning such churches altogether. Our own experience is that in the vast majority of the churches we have visited in the developed West, the only workable option is to keep Adam with us.

A properly theological account of how public space becomes truly accessible will therefore depend on coming to terms with how Jesus Christ actively engages and confronts not only the world but a church that should know better. To put the terms of our theological investigation in this way also has the surprising benefit of upending the terms of the accessibility debate in disability studies. Notice that up to this point I have assumed the normal framing of the moral equation. The moral injunction in liberal societies to foster accessible public spaces is a moral claim directed to “the public” which translates: “you should be hospitable, or at least tolerant, of all people.” But in putting the matter this way we assume, once again, that those with disabilities need not be addressed. To us they can only be recipients of our good intentions and responsible behavior. They make no contribution to the generation of a truly accessible public space because, in effect, they are assumed not to be “real” democratic citizens (Nussbaum, chapters 1-2).

But sometimes Adam overturns this whole equation in which the problem of accessibility is thought to concern the public and their duty to accept him. Disability advocates have most often worked within a rights-based model of activism that challenges barriers to accessibility through legal means. But Adam, I believe, has sometimes proved a servant of an assault on contemporary habits of inhabiting public space of an entirely different kind.

Public beggars and dancers

One Saturday morning around Christmas time we heard music from a street performer’s accordion wafting through a busy shopping area. Knowing Adam’s love for music, I let him find his way to it. Soon he was dancing with utter abandon, obviously filled with joy, and totally unconcerned with the gazes he attracted. Though it was a cold day, we stood and danced for some time as the shoppers streamed by. It was quickly apparent that Adam’s embodiment of joy was radiating out to reshape this busy public space. A few people would scurry by without a glance. Most would smile as they passed. Many would pause for a moment to watch, with obvious pleasure. Adam’s oblivion to all this, and his abandonment to the Romanian folk music that so attracted him, were captivating – impossible for most to ignore. In between songs I discovered that the young musician was from Romania and unemployed.

Between Adam and this legal alien something was happening that broke through the web of human activities conforming to the logic of a public space organized for commerce and duly inhabited by shoppers bent on efficiencies and exchange. This was no grand act, nor was it a powerful incursion into normal patterns of this public space, but it was undeniably real. Somehow Adam’s joy and lack of shame were resonating with the bravery of a social outsider willing to play what most would hear as “primitive” music for pennies in the legal borderlands of public space. Such music, especially when combined with a tip jar, tends to tempt Western Europeans to xenophobia, reminding them as it does of the “immigration problem.” But between them was emerging what I as a theologian can only call an assault of grace. The two of them were combining to give something to all who passed by, something they did not merit or expect, so breaking open the shell of acquisitive busyness that marks this space in a particularly deep way at this time of year.
There may well be many ways to explain this incursion, and many discourses in the humanities and social sciences could no doubt describe it in their own illuminating terms. But such discourses cannot name the ultimate source of hospitality, the sheer inexplicability of human hospitable activity (Ulrich, ch. A6). I would like to name it as an incursion of the prophetic Christ—not because the name of Jesus was explicitly pronounced, but because the grammar of this incursion into the habits of that public space was one that preemptively struck down the incipient antagonisms that hover around a “disabled boy” and a “begging immigrant.”

Israel, we must recall, longed for just such an assault; Isaiah depicts the suffering servant as an object of hope because he will not be put off by Israel’s unfaithful lives and worship, but will set upon them unexpectedly.

I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask,
   to be found by those who did not seek me.
I said, “Here I am, here I am,”
   to a nation that did not call on my name.
I held out my hands all day long
   to a rebellious people,
who walk in a way that is not good,
   following their own devices. (Isaiah 65:1-2)

The earliest Christians immediately recognized that this assault had taken place in the work of Jesus Christ, the form of whose assault became definitive of the form the church was to take. As St. Paul puts it,

God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption. (1 Cor 1:27-30)

In the worshipping life of this body of Jesus Christ we learn what it means to recognize this God’s activity. This Trinitarian activity is both the measure against which the church’s liturgies can be assessed, and the forum in which Jesus Christ has promised to announce himself. We cannot escape the reality that the God who is the origin of the church’s liturgy must continue to reveal his power as the power of powerlessness (cf. Williams, chapter 25). He must continue to do so in the face of our sinful human tendencies to transform Jesus Christ’s form of strength into the strength, prowess, and possession learned in the many liturgies in which the rest of our lives take place. Christian worship’s “shaping” and “training” is ultimately a multifaceted invitation to be made vulnerable to this God.

The assault of the prophetic Christ

Writing after enduring two world wars and in the midst of the Cold War, Karl Barth was tired of the language of military assault. Repulsed by a church that had revelled in martial exploits (all too like the contemporary church) he chose to subvert the language of assault by turning it back on human folly. Assault language is not to be given up by the Christian, he suggests, because human sin is not some harmless metaphysical taint, but is the embodied crushing and marginalizing of real human beings. The work of Jesus Christ is solely and exclusively the confrontation of this sinful activity: “It is He first who with a pity which is not idle but active, angry, militant, aggressive and therefore genuine, takes pity on [humankind’s] aberration and confusion, its infirmity and misery” (Barth, 328). The prophetic self-annunciation of Jesus Christ is recognizable in assaults on human activities which demean human life.

It is a remarkable stroke in a strange and remarkable war. For the attack is that of the love of the Father and the Son. It is the attack of the grace of God. It is the attack of His affirmation of the world,
of his generous self-giving to it, His intervention for its salvation, of his pleading and guaranteeing of its life. This is what the Prophet Jesus proclaims to the whole world and to all men. (Barth, 240)

Barth’s formulation has the marked advantage of reminding us that it is Jesus’ assault that opens up the shells of self-protection built against disabled people not only in the world, but also within the church. This “assault” is not against humanity, but in the most fundamental sense creates humanity, creates human beings who do not resist and stave off the demands of others but are genuinely open to them. Christ’s work is to reach into history to create humans whose traits cannot be explained by the normal course of historical cause and effect. As Barth puts it, this genuinely grateful and embracing human being is created only by the address of Jesus Christ who tells us we were made to be reconciled in the face of our actual behavior. Because it is an assault on that in us which holds us aloof from others, it can only “sound alien” to the “alien element in people, to people in their self alienation.”

...we humans and even we Christians usually talk past one another except when a miracle occurs. We do this even when we are talking to ourselves. We cannot, then, derive certainty, the certainty of victory, from any genuine superiority in us. But Jesus Christ in His word can and does. He is the Neighbor who can and does really speak to the other as Neighbor to neighbor, and therefore in this sense too, He is superior and radiates certainty. (Barth, 271-2)

It is a salvation to humans to discover the gap between their self-confessed hospitality and their actual, lived inhospitality. Jesus Christ alone is capable of opening this rift between the time of our common sense and the time of the kingdom: “This total inversion is the content of His prophetic Word” (Barth, 241). Though this inversion is often accompanied by the infectious joy that marks this king’s sphere of rule, I am not suggesting that because the situation I have recounted was one marked by infectious joy it must have to do with Jesus.

What most obviously marked this event as having the character of grace was the way two outsiders, who typically make people uncomfortable by challenging the smooth operation of various social expectations, effortlessly commandeered and controlled space, without intent or manipulation. By being themselves together they reversed the normal patterns of public activity. By radiating music and joy they set upon all around them. Very few passed through the space who were not captivated by the sight. Like the innocents and peasants J. M. Coetzee depicts in a South African internment camp (Coetzee, 1983), simply by carrying on in their own ways of being in the world these two outsiders were joyfully demoralizing and disarming the habits and patterns of productive, consumptive, efficient, security-conscious humanity. In such moments Adam joins those witnesses who might be termed “angelic” in the sense of bearing witness (Wannenwetsch, 2007) and as a member of the city of God, that eschatological city that the church fathers assumed was made up of the saints and angels. Every such witness occurs not because its messengers exist simply as dependent beings crying out for care, but because the prophetic Christ collaborates with their real agency to announce his love.

Worship and annunciation

Where do we learn of this God? In liturgy as a whole, and in all of its parts: liturgy is shaped time and space, the provision of a God who takes time, who waits for us, doling out the space, place, and forms for petition, exhortation, praise, and preaching through which we learn to hear his word as we are fed and unified as his body (Knight, 2006). In this long drawn out condescension into our brokenness and incoherence through the Scriptures and liturgical moments of worship, our eyes are lifted out of ourselves and onto the other by the God. We are allowed to hear, see, and touch the truth that he alone is the one who breaks into human struggles for self-creation—both secular and mundane and those of the religious. Worship thus conceived is a human response growing from human hearing, is primarily passive, and its most basic ethical import is to create those who listen and so can hear others. Liturgy is not human action that trains others to act in certain ways, but is at root the place where that most political of skills is
learned: observing, listening to and learning to communicate with those outside of us (Wannenwetsch 2004, Part III).

The diverse and evolving liturgies of the churches may be best understood as an extended attempt by believers to sing praises to the God who claims believers. These different liturgies thus introduce us to a historically specific gospel, offering us a place to “chime in” with a gospel heard by a given set of foremothers and fathers that informs our worship and prayer in the most primal sense of fostering those who listen for a specific divine voice. We thus cannot escape the question of how we understand divine action to have shaped both the forms of our liturgical practices and the content embedded in them. Different liturgies amount to different gospels, differences that can only be seen as unified if they are taken to be expressions of the diversity of the one God whose internal diversity has been heard by millennia of Christians. In sum, the church is best defined as the community astonished by, gathered by, praising and placing its hope in the Jesus Christ who, in being a good Neighbor, makes us one single communion of good and grateful neighbors.

Sources consulted