

My arm doesn't need healing

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I was born missing my left arm below the elbow. This technically means I have a disability, though I find it hard to identify with the label. Missing my arm is simply what I know, part of my basic everyday existence. I know the limits of my ability, but I see no need to define myself by them. Similarly, I don't mind being asked about my arm, just as I don't mind being asked about a new haircut--I feel no need to be ashamed or apologetic for my physical form.

So it is always a bit jarring when I encounter people who think I should feel ashamed about my appearance. These people, when meeting me, look at my arm and immediately say, "I'm sorry." From their point of view my life must be so miserable that I deserve their pity.

I have church friends (and yes, family members) who let me know that they have been praying for years that God would grow my arm. According to their view, if I only had the faith of a mustard seed then some sort of miraculous arm sprouting would occur. I've learned to take such responses in stride, knowing that their rejection of who I am says more about their insecurities than it says about me. But I struggle more when I hear such things from church leaders.

For instance, Rowan Williams, writing about the eucharistic interdependence of the corporate body of Christ, says that abled people should not respond in fright to handicapped people but instead realize that abled people need the healing of the handicapped for their own good--just as the handicapped need abled people's wholeness for theirs. He calls this the outworking of the sacramental vision.

I could barely read any farther, as his words forced me to realize that he views people with disabilities as "other." Instead of being allowed to be ourselves, we are reduced to a category of people who must be healed before we can be accepted as equals.

Few people would deny that it is hurtful to tell a woman she must become a man or to tell a black man he must become white in order to be a full member of the body and experience wholeness. But some people still assume that people who are differently-abled need to become like someone else in order to be whole.

Our faith celebrates the idea of the word becoming flesh and dwelling among us, yet we reject physical bodies that seem different. It is one thing to say that our condition as human beings is broken. It's another thing to assert that some people are *more* broken simply because they have only one arm, or use a wheelchair, or have different mental processes. We are all the broken body of Christ struggling to be in communion with God and each other.

God created me to be tall, to be a woman, to have brown hair and a left arm that ends at the elbow. I don't need to be healed of any of that in order to be a member of the body of Christ.