

## HOPE, HEALTH, AND THE NATURE OF HEALING – INVITED SESSION

Topic: Insights from Disability and Trauma Theologies  
 Convener: Megan Heeder, The University of Scranton  
 Moderator: Berit Guidotti, Boston College  
 Presenters: Stephanie Edwards, Boston Theological Interreligious Consortium  
 Miguel Romero, St. Louis University  
 Madeline Jarrett, Boston College

This invited session featured three papers that engaged disability and trauma theology to offer insights on hope, health, and healing.

Stephanie Edwards from the Boston Theological Interreligious Consortium in her paper, “Hope in the Darkness: Trauma Healing beyond the Colonial Curative Model,” addressed colonialism’s impact on healing in light of faith’s hope in three movements. First, Edwards established the distinction in disability theology between cures and healing. She recognized that both health and the integrity of the body are goods, but that pursuing a “perfect” body and mind can remove the possibility of embracing persons with differences that render them “imperfect” in a curative colonial view. Edwards then reflected on the work of indigenous scholar and mental health practitioner Renee Linklater to highlight the need to take up “the journey back to oneself;” framing trauma in the context of community is central to this journey. Third, Edwards used psychologist Laura Brown’s work to offer theological insights on decolonizing mental health practice by placing the act of listening and responsiveness over the all-too-human need to feel competent in providing care.

Miguel Romero of St. Louis University presented on the aid Thomas Aquinas offers in reading the Gospel healing narratives, particularly in light of the potential to correlate disability in these narratives with sin or unnatural differences. In his paper entitled “Aquinas on Disability, Original Sin and the Healing Ministry of Christ,” Romero began by arguing that vulnerability is integral to human nature, allowing a person to recover their (right) status as a creature. In the Thomistic view, human limits are not penalties, or corruptions of human nature. Understanding disability as a “bad-difference” is a failed presumption because it allows sin’s consequences to become mingled with humanity’s created nature. This distinction, Romero argued, is fundamental to Aquinas’s anthropology, which allows one to read the healing narratives as achieving a genuine good without making those who are not healed “moral strangers” to the people of God or “ontological strangers” to humanity. In the end, Romero concluded that in the healing narratives Christ understands human fragility and limitation as a “canvas for glory” that reveal Aquinas’s claim that grace perfects nature.

Madeline Jarrett of Boston College presented a paper titled “Disabled Agency and the Contours of Healing.” She articulated that disabled bodies do not necessarily need medical correction, but that the socio-cultural narratives about them do. Jarrett located uplifting disabled agency as a key component of constructing a vision of healing that is not rooted in a medical reality, but rather involves political and cultural changes coupled with individual and communal agency that can help counter the damage done by harmful perspectives on disability. Understanding the ways in which agency is

present in those with disabilities challenges the traditional paradigm of what one can give to or do for a person with disabilities. By way of example, Jarrett noted this agential paradigm in Christ's encounter with the man at the poolside in Bethesda (John 5:1-15). In sum, authentic healing is nurtured by recognizing and cultivating disabled agency in response to reductive societal narratives.

The discussion that followed included affirmations of the cohesive insights of all three presenters on addressing the effects of colonialism so that faith's promises can be fulfilled, reading the Gospel's healing narratives in light of disability theology (especially an accurate theological anthropology and understanding of the consequence of sin) and prioritizing disabled agency, respectively. The cohesiveness of the paper themes offered participants opportunities to reflect on Romero's insights from Aquinas alongside Jarrett's corrective suggestions for preserving agency. Edwards shared in her paper that her theological insights were shaped by an experience the prior week with theologians who participated in a listening exercise with a (self-named) medicine woman, and one participant followed-up on this experience in light of her desire to root out colonialism's effects in her life and theological work. Participants asked all three presenters about navigating the possibility (and hope) of physical healing alongside their theological contributions, and named the challenge (and necessity) of embracing the messiness of grace and the mystery of God.

MEGAN HEEDER  
*The University of Scranton*  
*Scranton, Pennsylvania*