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BIBLICAL CONVERSATIONS WITH THE DEAF: THE WORD MADE FLESH, SEEING BIBLICAL THEOLOGY IN PICTORIAL AND PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

In the Christian tradition, our pastoral care and theological thoughts on disability and the persons with disabilities (PWD) remain to be limiting and limited. Our conventional view of disability is confined to a mere physical condition or diagnosis that leans on the medical model of disability. Reading and interpreting disability in the scripture with a medical lens has done little with understanding the persons with disabilities (PWD) and has legitimized medical violence and stigma towards them. It is a hard to accept the reality that disability could occur to any of us. Denial of this existential reality all the more makes it difficult for us to adjust in case disability do happen to us, which is in contrast with the PWD who are well adapted even in the absence of accessibility. They are ahead of many “abled-bodies,” because disability is their way of life.

Centuries have passed and we still allow a homogenous interpretation of disability in the scripture, which unknowingly are offensive and abusive leaving the PWD even more marginalized and stigmatized. Often the insight and interpretation of the PWD are silenced by the majority “abled-bodies.” This article invites the contemporary readers of the of bible to see and be open to some of

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the insights of the PWD, which could give us a fuller understanding of human life, community and of God. Further, the article aims to put into flesh the challenge of Amos Yong in our concrete engagement with the PWD, specifically of Deaf people, by presenting their insights on selected biblical pericopes vis-à-vis our “mono-homo” hermeneutics.

This article has three parts, first, it will present some reasons for the exclusion of the PWD in our biblical conversations and their lack of ecclesial participation. Second, I will present some selected pericopes with homogenous hermeneutics vis-à-vis the interpretation and insights of the PWD, particularly from a Deaf community where I belong and serve. The selected pericopes are drawn from a regular biblical conversation with the Deaf people where I am personally involved. Third, I will present a theological reflection on the importance of having a collaborative and participative biblical conversation with Deaf people.

Keywords: Abled-bodies, Biblical Conversations, Deaf, Deaf Community, Disability, Hermeneutics, Marginalization, Medicalization, Persons with Disability

One matter in life that is indispensable yet often denied and avoided is the reality of disability. Sooner or later we will sense a slowing down of our mobility, short and long memory gaps sporadically occurs, blurring of the eyes, sudden involuntary bodily tremors and so on. These changes happen either due to a disease, accident or simply of old age. The fact is that, we are not ready to accept the existential reality that disability can happen to us any time, which in contrast the persons with disabilities (PWD) are well adapted even in the absence of accessibility. They are ahead of many “abled-bodies,” because disability is their way of life.¹

In the Christian tradition, our pastoral care and theological thoughts on disability and PWD remain to be limiting and limited. Our conventional view of disability is confined to a mere physical condition pegged on a medical model where the “least of our brethren” (Mt 25:40) are often perceived to be in need of ministering and benevolence. Reading and interpreting disability

¹This is in conjunction with Deaf people who see their deafness not a disability but a way of life.

Note: I use the capital “D” in reference to those Deaf who accept their condition, their deafness as part of their identity; hence throughout the article, “D” is used in this sense).

in the scripture with a medical lens has done little with understanding the PWD and has legitimized medical violence and stigma towards them.²

To this date, ecclesial communities in some parts of Asia are less assertive on their articulation on the role of PWD in the life of the Church. The Church welcomes the PWD, however, their participation remains partial and at times liminal. The PWD often do not have their own ecclesial commission or parochial/community organization, rather, their concerns are incorporated with other organizations or programs of the church. Though there is an increase of interest and conversation among ethicists, theologians and biblical scholars, such as, Amos Yong, Jeremy Schipper, Saul Oylan and Louise Lawrence who engage in Disability Studies in their biblical enterprise, yet there is much work ahead for us to truly understand the PWD and disability.

In the book, *Theology and the Experience of Disability*, Amos Yong states that “disability insights are essential to the Church’s self-understanding and to an invigorated program of theological study.”³ Indeed, listening to the insights of the PWD will help us have a fuller grasp of human life, community and of God. Centuries have passed and we still maintain a homogenous interpretation of disability in the scripture, which unknowingly are offensive and abusive, leaving the PWD even more marginalized and stigmatized. Often the insight and interpretation of the PWD are silenced by the majority “abled-bodies.” Have we included the PWD in biblical conversation? Such subtle exclusion makes us impose a hegemony of hermeneutics whenever we encounter disability in the scripture. The space and sphere of the academia and ecclesial communities particularly on the inclusion of PWD in our biblical conversation is wanting. With such concern, this article aims to put into flesh the challenge of Yong in our

²Each of the Deaf in my community narrated to me their ordeal in the hands of “faith-healers” or shamans. They experienced all sorts of physical torment. Their families believed that they will be healed just as how Jesus healed the sick in the gospels. Some shamans believed that deafness is the work of the evil one. Families who make them believe they are “damaged,” is all too painful that it creates even a personal stigma (it effects low self-esteem, and negative self-image) on their part.

³Amos Yong, “Disability and the Renewal of Theological Education,” in *Theology and the Experience of Disability: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Voices Down Under*, ed. Andrew Picard and Myk Habets, Oxon: Routledge, 2016, 251.

concrete engagement with the PWD, specifically of Deaf people, by presenting their insights on selected biblical pericopes vis-à-vis our “mono-homo”⁴ hermeneutics.

The first part of this article presents the possible reasons for the exclusion of the PWD in our bible conversations and their lack of ecclesial active participation. The second part presents some selected pericopes with a homogenous hermeneutics vis-à-vis the interpretation and insights of the PWD, particularly from a Deaf community where I belong and serve.⁵ The selected pericopes are drawn from a regular biblical conversation with the Deaf people where I am personally involved. The third part concludes with a theological reflection on the importance of having a collaborative and participative biblical conversation with Deaf people.

Deconstructing Dominant Perspectives of Disability: A Constant Struggle

Nancy Eiesland’s seminal work, *The Disabled God*,⁶ has propelled theologians and bible scholars to reconsider their theologizing and hermeneutics that has internalized and legitimized an ableist perspective. Similarly, a question remains whether our ecclesial communities have been inclusive, and if it does, how far have we gone? Mindful of the lack of awareness on the real context of the PWD and ways we medicalize, marginalize and stigmatize them and disability itself, a group of Asian theologians and bible scholars, some of them are PWD themselves, have published a resource book that hopes to aid its readership to know more about disability and the PWD.⁷

⁴Coined by this author.

⁵For more than a decade now, I continue to volunteer for every Sunday Eucharist in sign language interpretation for a Deaf community in the Our Lady of Annunciation Parish (OLAP) Deaf Ministry. The OLAP is under the diocese of Novaliches, Philippines. Serving them was a reflexive exercise because the Deaf were the ones who taught me to be open to human diversity and to extend my advocacy to other forms of disability and diversity.

⁶Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994.

⁷Anjeline Okola and Wati Longchar, ed., *Disability Theology from Asia: A Resource Book for Theological and Religious Studies*, Kolkata: EDAN-WCC, 2019. It was a concerted effort by Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network of the World Council of Churches to bring together the theologians who are engaged in disability studies in Asia and publish a book that presents their experiences and insights on how to do Disability Theology in Asia.

The Catholic Church claims to be inclusive, however it is noticeable that most of our church physical structure remains unwelcoming to the PWD (visible or invisible) who quietly adjust to the standards we set. The inaccessibility and inconvenience they go through each day posit a strong statement that disability is viewed as an individual problem and not a social nor an ecclesial concern. In fact, each time we create standards of normality, we further stretch the extent of their marginalization. Structures indirectly affront the PWD by requiring them to reconfigure their physicality to fit, comply to and access the structures constructed by the able-bodied society. Could our religious landscape or location of worship be a liberating and inclusive space for the PWD?

It is difficult to admit that most of us see disability as a deviation from the normal and the standard. Disability is a bodily anomaly that limits the capacity of a person, hence, a condition we dread to acquire. Further, because of the stigma clamped on disability, medical and therapy effortfully works on its reversal, to repair the “defect” or “damage.” A cemented medical colonialization of disability has shaped and imbibed a “defect” mentality even among PWD who were made to believe that they must be “fixed” to be “normal” and eventually to sense belonging.

If we truly are committed to effecting change in society, where inclusion and full participation of PWD is evident, then it is imperative that a paradigm shift must begin with the family that is responsible in providing security and acceptance. How can we work for the well-being of PWD when society has the congenital and construed belief that disability is a dysfunctional condition and consequently is devalued? A recalibration of our moral compass on disability takes on a collective act to effect change. There is a need for us to realize that working for the well-being of the PWD today is likewise working for our future well-being as well, for their present will surely be ours too in the future.

The ecclesial community can effect changes beginning with a re-reading of the scripture with the hermeneutic privilege given to PWD, through the latter’s involvement in the conversations. Contemporary readers need to be conscientized regarding the negative portrayals of bible characters who are disabled as well as the citations of disability in the form of nuances, metaphors, analogies and parallelism that affect our relationship with the PWD and our perspective on disability. How has our century embedded interpretations of disability engendered the concept of disability as

deviant and different and therefore must be “normalised”? Let us have another look at our heteronormative and homogenized perspectives on selected characters in the scripture who are disabled and how these perspectives affect and connect to our present view of the PWD and disability.

Disabled in the Scripture: Engenders a Negative Othering

In her book, *Intersectional Theology*, Grace Ji-Sun Kim⁸ estimates that our context is not simply one layer of a matter. For years, we speak about injustice and calls for liberatory theologies, yet we fail to account the subtle and hidden oppressive systems tangled to a particular issue. Misunderstood and silenced are the PWD and disability, their narratives of marginalisation that is both a social and ecclesial concern. Their concerns are placed behind the curtains, swept under the rugs, put inside a closet that unknowingly many Christians continue to reproduce interconnected forms of domination and subordination towards them.⁹ With the existing and unchecked oppressive ableist (and sanist) language, behaviour, attitude and disposition permeate into our consciousness, the marginalisation of the PWD becomes intersectional resulting to a thickening of the layers of domination by “abled-bodies.” On this matter religion is no exemption, Christianity has supported and enabled domination of women, capitalism, segregation, anti-LGBTQ positions, ableist and sanist mindset through the misuse and misinterpretation of the scripture. Further, liberation theologies focused on the personal account of oppression have failed to recognise the intersectionality of issues.

Disability today goes beyond the physical, cognitive, mental, sensory and spatial sphere; it is now understood to be intersectional, because it brings to the fore of the conversation the dimension of race, class, religion/belief, gender, identity, biopolitics and so on. Disability is not of singularity, because it embraces multiplicity of identity and layered narratives of reality. The context

⁸Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Susan M. Shaw, ed., *Intersectional Theology: An Introductory Guide*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018. Kim is a Korean-American theologian, author and an associate professor who is currently affiliated to the Earlham School of Religion in Richmond, Indianapolis.

⁹Marginalization is not about an issue, rather it is an intertwined system of oppression that continues to work with the spheres of our lives, such as in the academia, work, religion, and even in our families. Patricia Hill Collins refers this as the “matrix of domination.” Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990.

of the PWD cannot be surmised into one for their context is rhizomatous and multifaceted. Our general thought and interpretation of the disabled and disability in the scripture has been monolithic and linear, when in fact an alternate consideration on disability could be diverse. For most people, disability is a pathological condition that consequently we overlooked the context, narrative and the personhood of the PWD. In medicalizing their condition, we remain fixated on their limitations and incapacities. At times, many of us tend to spiritualize disability as either a punishment/curse or a revelation of God's power. All these negative identifications worked against their well-being. We cannot truly claim a liberative disability theology if we fail to account the rhizomatous dimensions of their lives such as, language/rhetoric, gender and identity, culture-ethnicity, economics, space, biopolitics, and architectural designs and so on. In this regard, presenting selected passages or characters will aid us to realize our mistakes on how we see and relate with the PWD and therefore critique our worldview on disability. It is time to recalibrate or reconfigure our hermeneutic compass that will create a better sensitivity and understanding of who the PWD are and what disability means for them.

It takes a close reading of the Old Testament for us to cipher the negative representation of the characters who are disabled. In contrast with the New Testament, the Old Testament is least conferring with the act of curing or healing the disabled. According to Rebecca Raphael,¹⁰ prophets do not include healing rather, they focus on inclusion, such as in Isaiah 35:5-6 where a disability reversal is stated, "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy." Raphael considers this passage more of a promise or hope for transformation than of healing, which presents God who has the power to remake the world and transfigure our bodies into "completeness." Her estimation seems to be problematic and in continuum with the New Testament single nuance of healing a disability, with an end intention of glorifying God's power. Though healing a disability is not the main concern in the Old Testament, nonetheless, there are occasions where disability is seen to be a devalued body, manifested

¹⁰She is an Assistant Professor of Religion at Texas State University. She also published an article, "What Has Biblical Literature to Do with Disability Studies?," SBL forum. Online: <http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=250>.

in the character's low self-esteem. An example is when Moses refused multiple times God's command to face the Pharaoh and to demand freedom of worship of the Hebrew people. He excuses himself because he is slow in speech and tongue (Ex 4:10), and told God to look for another person to accomplish His plan. This is not merely an alibi of Moses, but it is his expression of self-doubt if he can deliver God's expectations. Another possible reason for turning down God's command was the high probability that his people will doubt his capability given his speech impediment. Other Israelites might have expressed thoughts of disbelief or doubt, such as "did HaShem (God) really choose this man to face the Pharaoh?" "Can he really represent us?" "Will the Pharaoh understand him?" and the list of doubts can go on. It is also possible that he avoids the occasion of being shamed or being an object of taunt by the Pharaoh or by his own people.

There is also the negative view of disability as a curse or punishment due to the sins done by the person or of their past generation. In addition, disobedience to God could result to disability such as the story of Samson. His arrogance and the delay to accomplish God's command led to his own fall, when he was eventually persuaded by Delilah to tell the secret of his enormous strength. Losing his strength and becoming a captive of the Philistines, he was tortured by his captors by plucking his eyes.¹¹

Some scholars who have looked closely at prophet Ezekiel's behaviour and rhetoric (words and action),¹² find him to be comparable to a person who is diagnosed with psychosis or with schizophrenia.¹³ If disability in the Old Testament is put in a negative light, similarly, disabled characters are taken advantage of and are devalued. One of the patriarchs, Isaac who was significantly sightless in his old age was deceived by his son, Yacob, which was initiated and assisted by his own mother, Rebekah. In the same

¹¹It took time to vindicate himself. When his hair grew, he regained his strength. In a celebratory assembly of the Philistines, Samson gathers all his strength and finally accomplished his task to overcome the enemies for the safety of Israelites (Judg 16:28-30).

¹²He also has a very graphic-scandalous imagery of Israel's unfaithfulness to God. See Ezekiel chapters 5, 12, 16, 20 and 23.

¹³In contemporary terms, neurosis and psychosis are considered mental health concerns or illnesses. In his book, *The Prophet*, Abraham Heschel (NY: Perennial Classics, 2001) purposely sectioned a chapter on, "Prophecy and Psychosis."

light, Leah seems devalued because of her “weak eyes.”¹⁴ Hence, the commandment of God in the book of Leviticus, “You shall not insult the deaf, or put a stumbling block in front of the blind, but you shall fear your God. I am the Lord” (19:14) is reminding us to respect others and not to use the weaknesses or limitations of the disabled against them. Indeed, many would take advantage of the pathological condition of the disabled for one’s benefits. Therefore, such view about disability and the disabled need some recalibration to end a negative othering and to purposefully create a positive representation and life-giving perspective.

On the other hand, in the New Testament, one of Jesus’ ministries is healing the people who approach him, either with disease or with perceived disability. Such understanding and reading of the stories have greatly influenced a medicalized view of disability,¹⁵ where a defect must be repaired. The desire for “completeness” via healing extends in the Acts of the Apostles, when Peter healed a man who cannot walk (Acts 3:6-7). Healing is esteemed because of its effects of restoration and wholeness to a person’s body. This recurring view about disability and the PWD engenders a negative othering reflected in our attitude, worldview and everyday rhetoric, such as: blindness is associated with ignorance, paralysis with passivity, being lame is associated with vulnerability, and deafness with the unwillingness to respond, especially to the call of God.¹⁶

Perhaps, it would be apt to challenge our “normative” reading of disability and the disabled to see how culture has influenced our perspective on disability and our attitude towards the disabled. Some bible scholars have limited in-depth study on disability and the disabled, where hermeneutics is commonly pegged on healing. Such hegemonic annotation of healing has kept alternate hermeneutics of disability at bay. Limiting our reading to the character’s physical condition is a failure to see and listen to their narrative and context. It is rightful to include the PWD in our biblical conversation to understand their context and appreciate their perspective on the same picturesque. In this case, the Filipino

¹⁴Genesis 29:17. She was not Yacob’s preference because his eyes were fixed on Rachel, the younger sister of Leah.

¹⁵Disability could also be a consequence of a disease.

¹⁶Julia Watts Belser, “Violence, Disability, and the Politics of Healing: The Inaugural Nancy Eiesland Endowment Lecture,” *Journal of Disability and Religion* 19, 3 (2015) 186. DOI: 10.1080/23312521.2015.1061470.186.

Deaf community I serve will set the landscape of the next section of this article.¹⁷

Biblical Conversation with a Deaf Community: Re-Imagining the Word in Pictorial and Performance

With more than a decade of involvement through volunteer service for a Deaf community, I personally experienced something liberative from within, which I consider worth sharing to this readership. This liberative experience is a result of pictorial and performance listening¹⁸ and sharing of their thoughts, insights about certain pericopes of the scripture. Biblical conversations with the Deaf is an open circle,¹⁹ where both Deaf and hearing are welcome to join. As a point of clarification, most Deaf people, especially those who see deafness as cultural,²⁰ does not consider themselves disabled but within the circle of people's diversity.

Below are some of the biblical conversations the Deaf had during our weekly fellowship held after the celebration of the Sunday Eucharist, showing their perspectives and insights on the readings.

A. Mark 7:31-37: A Matter of Bodily Boundaries

The common take on disability in the New Testament leans on cure or healing and bring the person to a "normal" and acceptable state; a typical example is the Deaf man brought to Jesus (Mk 7:31-37). To this very day, such reading has engendered a negative perspective about deafness and Deaf people. This is not to discount the well-motivated efforts by the Starkey Hearing Technologies and Starkey hearing Foundation,²¹ to distribute free hearing aids to deaf people,

¹⁷They are the Santuario de San Vicente de Paul Deaf Ministry, formerly the Our Lady of Annunciation Parish Deaf Ministry. Both parishes are under the Diocese of Novaliches located in Quezon City, National Capital Region (NCR), Philippines.

¹⁸Hearing people listen with their ears, but Deaf people listen with their eyes, which is pictorial in nature.

¹⁹Deaf's notion of life is not linear or square, it is circular and spiral accession; it is of horizontal movement.

²⁰Based on my previous research, as well as those who belong to the Deaf community I belong, they refrain from being pegged or identified by religion or a culture. Rather, they consider themselves, religious and cultural in perspective. Their rationale to this claim is that religion and culture tends to be defined and therefore to some extent is confined, while being religious (or spiritual) and cultural is fluid, which reflects their intersectionality, and fluidity.

²¹William Franklin "Bill" Austin is a billionaire businessman, philanthropist, founder and owner of Starkey Hearing Technologies, which is a manufacturer of

which they claim has benefited millions of deaf around the globe.²² The inability to hear is undeniably pathological, but deafness for the culturally Deaf goes beyond sensory issue. For them, deafness is a way of life and to be Deaf is part of human diversity. For the Deaf community I belong, they consider themselves as culturally Deaf and view deafness not a loss but a gain for other possibilities. The Markan narrative of the Deaf man, which is often read as a healing of Jesus of the Deaf man is far from how the Deaf community I volunteer to serve sees it; rather, they offer an alternate perspective of the phrase “be open” – *Ephphatah*.

The Deaf community saw the action of the crowd who brought the Deaf man to Jesus disrespectful for they sense the absence of consultation with the Deaf man.²³ In their desperation to understand the Deaf, the crowd seem to disregard his opinion and feelings, thus silencing him in the process. Now, Jesus is before a stranger, the deaf man, who began to express to Jesus through his distinct pictorial gestures by touching his own ears and tongue²⁴ that he cannot hear and has difficulty to speak. He used a language that even Jesus, perhaps struggled to cipher what the deaf is trying to express. Intently looking at the Deaf man, Jesus could have figured out what the latter needs and how the crowd could “correctly” communicate with him. Hence, there is no healing that happened, rather an opening of an alternate way of communication. The Deaf language is not limited to spoken words, but extended to a performance or pictorial gestures that is equally understandable to all, only when read with creative imagination. For them, *Ephphatah* is a process of gradual understanding, of being “open” to new ways of communication.

B. Transfiguration: An Event of Non-Surrender and Patience

I observed that when the Deaf give their insights about a certain gospel pericope, it is never abstract, rather it is rooted on their concrete reality that may seem practical yet profound. An example

hearing aids. He, later, founded the Starkey Hearing Foundation inspired with the belief that hearing can change the world.

²²I used the lower key “d” as a mark, that those who avail the assistive listening devise has a medicalized belief of their condition.

²³Park Min-Seo, “Deaf Culture and Deaf Church: Considerations for Pastoral Ministry,” *New Theology Review* 22, 4 (2009) 26-35.

²⁴The Deaf I have been with during the National Deaf Day in South Korea and at the 2nd Asia Deaf Catholic Conference held in the Philippines, unanimously believe that the Deaf man in the gospel will never allow Jesus to touch his body, considering it as off-limits.

here is the pericope in Luke 9:28-36, that is the Transfiguration. This gospel event focuses on Jesus' momentary change of appearance, where the voice is often interpreted to be the Holy Spirit, while the presence of Moses and Elijah represents the Law and the Prophets. All these are taken to be a foretaste of the coming glory of the Lord. In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* No. 568, the story of the Transfiguration is a means to "strengthen the disciples' faith" for the mountain symbolically represents the Calvary. It is fascinating to note that none of these concepts came out during the biblical conversation with the Deaf community.

In the Transfiguration event, the Deaf community looks at Jesus and the disciples' action of climbing on the mountain. For them, climbing is not an easy task because it is both physically and emotionally challenging. Upon deciding to climb, one should not give up, especially if one is at midpoint; to give up makes no sense. They equate the act of climbing with their context, where being Deaf in a mainstream hearing society is full of challenges and truly difficult due to the discrimination they encounter. Yet they never thought of giving up, because once they reach the top, this means that they were able to overcome different odds, and this for them is success. Another Deaf perspective was presented during the 2nd Asia Deaf Catholic Conference held in 2018 in the Philippines, the Deaf delegates from Japan saw this to be an event of miscommunication between Jesus and his disciples. The appearance of Jesus, together with the voice telling them to "listen to him" elicited confusion on the part of the disciples, expressed by Peter, who suggested to erect a tent on the spot. Such miscommunication is likewise a constant struggle between hearing and Deaf people. Though at times, this frustrates them, nonetheless, they gave little thought of giving up on communicating with the hearing people. They continue to show patience in communication until there is clarity amongst each other.

C. John 21:1-19: In a Patient Conversation, Reflexivity Happens

The resurrection account in John 21:1-19 commonly centres on Jesus' repeated questioning of Peter "Do you love me"? Most scholars believe that this is consequential to Peter's repeated denial of his affinity to Jesus, which on the outset seems reasonable and a sort of parallel play that Jesus steers. His repeated question to Peter seems a way to confirm if the latter indeed solidifies his commitment that he denied previously. Still on Jesus' repeated questions to Peter, some scholars argue that Jesus used twice a Greek term of love – *agapao*, which is of deeper meaning, while Peter replies with a shallow term

– *philio*. The Greek term *agapao* pertains to sacrifice that depicts full and firm commitment, while *philio* is a less committed love. Given Peter's reply, Jesus, used *philio* on the third time he asked Peter, but he instead used the *agapao*, which was an expression of his commitment. Another point taken on this resurrection pericope is the commissioning of the disciples through their leader Peter, "Feed, tend my sheep." The commissioning speaks for all followers of Christ.

Gathering the perspectives of the Deaf community on the resurrection account, each of them has their own insights, namely: love language, communication, inspiration, patience, awesomeness, care, concern and protection. How can we find coherence of their diverse insights? How did they come up with such perspectives that seem to be a different hermeneutics? The Deaf were amazed at Jesus who questioned Peter's commitment three times. Having presented to them the insights stated above, they saw the Jesus-Peter conversation differently. For them this is not an interrogation or lack of trust on the part of Jesus, rather, it was a conversation that showed patience of both, Jesus and Peter. They also saw in the same conversation the possible love language of Jesus, that is, through affirmative words. In the same event, they perceived that to effect understanding, one needs to repeat what is said, just as what Jesus did with Peter. It is also with patient communication that the care for each other grows, which can inspire others to love patiently.

In synthesizing their views, the Deaf community came up with this insight: one of the manifestations of love is through constant, patient and deep communication (or conversation), because through it, we will begin to understand, to care for and to protect each other. To communicate with them is a manifestation of love, of care, which will eventually be witnessed by others who will be inspired to imitate. Breaking the language barrier is an explicit expression of love. Hence, love can cause a ripple effect. For the Deaf people, communication coupled with patience matters, because in a world dominated by spoken language and written words, it takes patience for both the hearing and the Deaf to communicate with one another. The conversation between Jesus and Peter reflects the Deaf reality.

D. Holy Spirit: What Does it Mean to a Deaf?

The image of the Pentecost for the Deaf is based on the pictorial depiction of fire descending upon Mary the mother of Jesus Christ

and the disciples. Using the pictorial image of fire, the Deaf grappled on the relevance of the image in their context, where most of the responses that came to the fore was forgiveness. Forgiveness is a concrete practice in the lives of Deaf people who everyday encounter and experience discrimination in society. By forgiving the people who have wronged them, be this their family members or strangers is a manifestation that God's grace of mercy resides in their heart. Another way they view the Spirit is strength in overcoming struggles. We all experience struggles with different degrees, yet theirs can be considered a compounded struggle on language, identity, gender, pathology, economics and culture, to which they constantly adjust to accommodate us and to be accommodated by us in a world where language fundamentally differs from them. To overcome struggles can be linked to the Spirit's gift of fortitude and its fruits which is patience. Finally, one of them shared that the Spirit lives in her when she experiences peace of mind and heart. I requested the Deaf to make sense and synthesize their notion of the Holy Spirit, and they came up with these insights: that in Deaf life they often deal with people who see them differently and treat them with disrespect. When they learn to forgive the people who wronged them, all else follows and they gain the strength to overcome more difficult struggles in life. Overcoming difficulties gives them a sense of peace of mind and heart, and with this, they can affirm that God's spirit truly lives and rules in their lives.

Concluding Remarks: Theological Reflection with the Deaf – Enriching our Normative Biblical Hermeneutic

This paper has presented a glimpse of the context and orientation of a Deaf community, through alternate insights and perspectives on selected pericopes in the New Testament. There is a long-standing culture of charity towards the PWD, with the belief that ministering for them is justice and therefore effects equilibrium. Charity is a virtue; however, have we asked them if this is what they want and need? Many of us assume without consulting them and in the process, we deny them the space to express or articulate what they want in their own terms. Such neglect or perhaps insensitivity shows that our moral compass needs a recalibration because we have lost our communal coordinates²⁵ towards them.

²⁵Borrowing from Liz Crow, "Including All Our Lives: Renewing the Social Model of Disability," in *Encounters with Strangers: Feminism and Disability*, ed. J. Morris, London: Women's Press, 1996.

The overly benevolent yet at the same time an offensive outlook on disability, such as, it is a tragedy, a misfortune, a loss, and worse a curse and punishment by the Divine, is an entrapment that must be deconstructed.

The Deaf invite us to see, reconsider and appreciate their hermeneutic that cannot be absolutely negated simply because it is not a highly technical exegetical exercise or a scholarly structured investigation. For most scholars, this is an overt eisegesis, that is, the reader “forces” one’s context when reading and interpreting the text. This may be true; nonetheless, many bible scholars have likewise “forced” their exegesis and hermeneutics that have engendered a negative othering. Accustomed and uncritical to the heteronormative and homogenous hermeneutics placed before us, we unknowingly excluded the PWD from biblical conversations that resulted to a very poor understanding and acceptance of disability.

The perspectives drawn from the biblical conversation with the Deaf people could be a challenge for us to look at how we see and read the Word of God, that should effect inner transformation and not continue to ignore and dominate the PWD and devalue disability all together. Further, there is a need for our ecclesial communities, organizations and offices to facilitate an inclusive structure that provides access and representations from differentiated communicative groups of people.

The biblical insights on the Deaf have drawn us to an awareness of their orientation. For them, the Word is a perceived perspective through pictorial and performance that should raise questions whether our (places of) worship, communications and fellowship includes the spectrum of disability, that provides liberative space for them. With the spectrum of communication and language, the Deaf offers us an alternate way of seeing God’s words in the flesh via pictorial presentation and performance. Their alternate biblical hermeneutics is often unseen; yet with their unique language and interpretation of the Word via performance, it is not difficult to consider that the Spirit’s “tongues of fire” is beyond the words we hear or read, because Divine communication is creative and constantly gives new meaning to the Word of life.

Further, the Deaf has shown us a different take on selected pericopes, which may seem simple yet at the same time quite profound. Their perception and perspective reveal to us not only their language, but also a glimpse of Deaf culture, with the hope that

we accept them as they are, without the desire to repair them. For them, the first step of acceptance is to meet them “eye-to-eye” and listen with your eyes and heart to their stories that could result in seeing them as equal and eventually to embrace human diversity. It is when they can fully participate in our spaces of worship, ecclesial communities, organizations, offices and the like, that we can claim that we are an ecclesia that embraces authentic communion – *koinonia ecclesia*.

What does a pictorial and performative biblical theology look like or biblical hermeneutics of the flesh feels like in your respective ecclesial communities?