

Rebecca F. Spurrier. *The Disabled Church: Human Difference and the Art of Communal Worship*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2019. 272 pages. \$30.

In our current cultural moment that feels rife with division, it is refreshing to read a thoughtful and hopeful book about a community navigating and embracing difference. Rebecca Spurrier's ethnographic research offers the reader a vision of the "disabled church"—a church home to people with psychiatric disability, mental illness, or mental difference alongside other able-bodied/minded congregants. As stated in the introduction, "The central argument of this book is that Christian liturgy embodies consensual, nonviolent relationships that rehearse a Christian response to an encounter with the beauty of divine love, which makes possible belonging to a community through and across difference" (3). In short, the author explores what or who makes a gathering church.

In the introductory material, Spurrier provides a framework for the project by defining terms, introducing theological aesthetic(s) and disability studies, and describing methodology. The chapter also includes history and insight into the congregation of study, Sacred Family. Chapters 1 through 5 artfully weave together theory, theology, and practice. Chapters are organized according to the movement of the liturgy in this particular congregation: gathering, weaving, disrupting, naming, sending.

Chapter 1 invites the reader to "loiter with intent" at the liturgical centers of Sacred Family. Spurrier describes the community's access and relationship to church spaces such as the garden, smoking circle, and art studios, concluding that the spaces connected to the sanctuary are "the lifeblood of its work and imagination" (37). The liturgy of Sacred Family unfolds throughout the week as people of difference gather to eat, play, and worship. Chapter 2 pays particular attention to the types of engagement between participants of Sacred Family: arts of gesture and touch, arts of silence and imagination, and arts of jokes and laughter. The liturgy at Sacred Family is shaped by relationships, one person next to another, and traditional practices next to improvised art forms. Chapter 3 tells how time and disruption mark the liturgy of Sacred Family. Chapter 4 wrestles with questions of naming: How does the church name relationships and struggle? What are the gifts or challenges of being named? Chapter 5 turns the reader's attention to a broader context, naming the difficulty of being sent out to love and serve a world that does not love and serve many of the congregants.

Spurrier builds each of these chapters around stories, interviews, and observations of Sacred Family. This ethnographic work is done with a great deal of care, and the writing draws the reader into the community. Spurrier also engages with theologians and disability scholars in a way that adds to her argument without overwhelming or intruding upon the central narrative—the people and liturgy of Sacred Family. The book concludes with a chapter on beauty, borders, and consent. The reader comes back to the question, "Whom do we need in order to have church that assumes difference at its heart?" This time Spurrier posits an answer: "At the heart of any Christian liturgy are people whom we would not otherwise choose to surround us and a fragile system of human communication by which we consent to or dissent from the relationships that are a given of any religious ritual" (210).

Spurrier achieves her stated purpose, arguing for and demonstrating how Sacred Family embodies a community of difference in which people participate consensually, encounter God, and feel a sense of belonging. Spurrier also challenges the reader to think about what constitutes church or liturgy through her thick description of the "weeklong liturgy" of Sacred Family.

Many church communities find themselves in a time of transition and challenge. We need books like this that de-center or trouble our notions of liturgy and offer a life-giving vision of what church can be—a place to gather, a place to play and work, a place to name each other and our circumstances, and a place that sends us out into the world knowing we are loved and we belong.

This book is written in a way that will appeal to a variety of audiences including liturgical theologians and disability scholars. While the introduction and conclusion may be difficult for lay readers or seminary students, the heart of the book is engaging and accessible without sacrificing depth and intellectual integrity. The story of the church is artfully told, the theological and theoretical reflection is insightful and generous while still offering a critique of church or liturgy as we know and practice it.

Allie Utley, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN