



# ***The Freedom Files***

## **A Pursuit of Justice Podcast**

### **Feature Story**

## **Rev. William Gaventa**

### **Disability and Spirituality: Free Exercise of Religion**

By Trinity Pierce

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

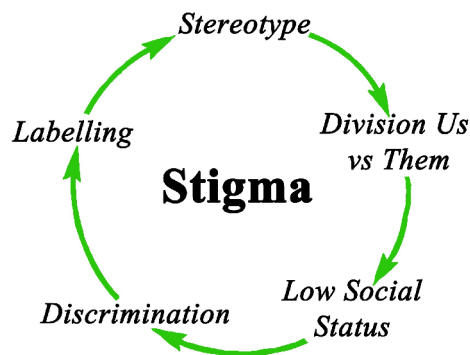
This excerpt from the First Amendment to the Constitution is the foundation of freedom of (and from) religion in the United States of America. Every citizen is entitled to this freedom, but for some, it does not necessarily mean that they will receive it.

People with disabilities, particularly disabilities that impact their cognitive function, can face problems from their communities, including religious communities. Dr. Bill Gaventa, a Baptist pastor, professor, author, and founder of the Institute on Theology and Disability, has written and presented extensively on the issues that people with disabilities confront, particularly in their religion.

In the past, both faith communities and secular communities have shared responsibility in their mistreatment of people with disabilities. In a 2016 lecture at Boston College, Gaventa explained that while “bad science” happens with eugenics, “bad religion” blames the cause of disability on sin, and often the lack of a cure is also attributed to a lack of faith.

“I think, especially for people with intellectual disabilities, it’s because people equate faith and religion with intellect, capacity to reason, and whether or not they understand,” Gaventa said. “Historically, around people with disabilities, faith communities have sometimes been really good, and sometimes really bad.”

According to Gaventa, society's treatment and view of people with disabilities was reflected, to an extent, within faith-based groups. When many kinds of special education programs were started back in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Gaventa said, congregations followed with special religious education for kids.



Gaventa said that special religious education was not present in every faith community at the time. He explained that it took some time for programs to develop for a variety of reasons.

“The social stigma around disability kept many families with kids with disabilities hidden,” Gaventa said. “You’re coming out of decades of people saying the best thing you could do for your kid is to put them in an institution and essentially forget about them.”

As public attitudes towards those with disabilities changed, so did many religious communities’ attitudes.

People with different types of disabilities may also face different challenges. For example, people with autism often struggle to understand the “hidden curriculum,” which is present in every community, Gaventa said. The “hidden curriculum” are the community’s expectations of how a person should behave and what is expected of them, he said. This also extends to religious communities.

“For people, it’s a lot of, ‘How do we help people who haven’t really grown up in a church or synagogue and haven’t been encultured into how to be a good Baptist or Catholic or Jew,’” Gaventa said.

Fear contributes to issues with spirituality and religion as well. Clergy and other religious leaders may feel as though they do not have the training to properly manage people with developmental disabilities, Gaventa said, and families can get nervous that others would judge them if their child had an outburst that disrupted worship service.

The secular side of society also struggles with the relationship between people with disabilities and faith. Until recently, people did not recognize the important role that faith and spirituality can play in a person’s life, Gaventa said.

“In many people who work for secular systems, they say, ‘Well, I can’t talk about this [faith and spirituality] because of separation of church and state,’” Gaventa said. “Also, on the secular side, [people] not knowing how to talk about it or to approach it, or how to deal with it is another factor.”

Now, the impact of spirituality and religion is being recognized by people.

“Over the last 20 to 30 years, there has been this huge amount of research,” Gaventa said. “The role of spirituality, for instance, in mental health and addiction and basic health care.”

The role of spirituality and religion in treatment is acknowledged more frequently, it is still lacking for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.



“I think it is lacking for the some of the same reasons about people not thinking that they would understand faith and so on, but that’s changing, and there’s people doing really good stuff these days,” Gaventa said.

In the age of the internet, there are more resources available now to pastors, clergy, and lay people than there ever has been. Educating others of resources is not the only action someone could take to foster understanding of people with disabilities. Listening to people’s stories is also necessary, Gaventa said.

“I don’t know if you’ve ever seen that TED talk, but it was done by a Nigerian novelist about the danger of a single story,” Gaventa said. “I think that’s so true with people with disabilities since whatever kind of disability they have is what becomes their primary story, when really they have all kind of stories connected to them.”

Spirituality and religion can provide a faithful community, a place to seek answers to existential questions and to explore one’s sense of identity. For people with developmental and intellectual disabilities, gaining access to organized religion or spirituality can be a challenge.

Most systems and support services work on “person-centered planning,” which is planning centered around thinking about people with disabilities in terms of both their strengths and their needs, Gaventa said.

“Good person-centered planning gets at not just the therapies or the services that are needed, but at how we can support people around their strengths and their interests and their gifts and their passions,” Gaventa said.

For families and friends of loved ones who have disabilities that may cause them to involuntarily act out, the religious institution would hopefully have gotten to know who this person is so they can understand where this person’s reason for their actions is coming from, Gaventa said.

Communication is important, as well as recognizing the differences in each faith setting. For example, a church where clapping and yelling is commonplace may have a different reaction than one where it is not, Gaventa said.

When Gaventa lived in New Jersey, he knew a rabbi who had a son with autism. The rabbi shared his experience with Gaventa.

“During one of the holy day services, his [the rabbi’s] son started humming or kind of not making intelligible words along with the cantor’s [words], he was doing parts of the service. Afterwards, the cantor was kind of mad and said that he was spoiling the beauty of the service, and for the rabbi that was the beauty was that his son was joining in and singing along in his own way.”



Situations like that, Gaventa said, is when one needs to start helping the typical body of the respective faith community understand different behaviors, and to also recognize that not everyone in the church behaves the same way.

In addition, by religious members helping people with intellectual and developmental disabilities learn what behaviors are expected, people with disabilities can become more comfortable and be less anxious in a worship setting, Gaventa said.

As when any unexpected event in a person’s life happens, the onset of disability, whether by birth or by accident, is often a spiritual crisis for people, Gaventa said, and if it is interpreted negatively, more questions will arise.

Families may worry about how their children will be treated, and those with physical disabilities may question why they have such a disability. There can be a period of grief, loss, and mourning, but also acceptance, Gaventa said.

“You’ll hear many, many families begin to say, after a time, that they may have had a really hard time, but [they] come to the point of really intense commitment and connection and love for their child,” Gaventa said. “They want other people to see their child as they see them and to befriend and to welcome them.”

A man named Bob Persky once shared a story that deeply touched Gaventa. Persky once heard one dad say to another dad, ‘Can’t you see, it’s we who tell other people our tragedy,’ Gaventa said. In short, Gaventa said, the dad was saying that it was their reaction and attitude about their child’s disability that would influence other people’s reaction as well.

“I think that the hardest part of disability for many families is dealing with other people’s attitudes sometimes,” Gaventa said.

With the internet and sites like Google and Amazon, there is a wealth of information about disability, religion, and spirituality available online.

“If you just type into Amazon and put ‘faith,’ ‘disability,’ ‘faith and autism,’ whatever, you’re just going to get all kinds of stuff these days, which is really wonderful,” Gaventa said.

Gaventa also wrote a book called “Disability and Spirituality: Recovering Wholeness”, which is available on [Amazon](#).

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