

Dancing With Eleanor

by Stanley McMahon

Eleanor was profoundly disabled, both physically and mentally. She was unable to walk, talk, feed herself or look after her personal hygiene. She lived on a cot in the corner of a living room, with my aunt constantly caring for her needs. It was twenty-four-seven caring in an age before “caring” became a recognized entity in its own right. Today, Eleanor would have probably been institutionalized, with daily specialist treatments and stimulation. My cousin Eleanor didn’t have any of that, but she had one thing—influence.

Although her communication was limited to groans and squeals, when she looked at you, you felt she was trying to say something. Or at least that’s the way it felt to me. The thing that disturbed me most was the way she was left out. I wanted to talk to her, but her shaking and groaning frightened me, and so I was constrained to leave her out, too. I wanted to tell others about my cousin Eleanor who was essentially trapped inside this collapsing and disabled tent of a body, but I was afraid they wouldn’t understand.

She was spoken *about* by my exhausted aunt, but rarely spoken *to*. Somewhere in the recesses of my childish heart, I longed for her to be respected more because she was my elder cousin, and she had the right to be heard and listened to. But there she lived, on the cot, in the corner, until she died at the tender age of thirteen.

That was when my simple and budding, but extremely limited, theology was first challenged. My understanding was that if a person died without having accepted Christ as their Savior, they would not be spending eternity with the Father. I struggled with that and hoped God would understand—but the rule of thumb was black

and white. Was she saved or was she not?

I still struggle with thoughts that are “too wonderful for me...to attain” (Psalm 139:6). I still hold to the basic tenets of the Christian faith. I still believe that Christ is the only way to salvation, that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone. But there is more gray on my palate as I paint my theology. I have made room for the

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Eleanors of this world, for the exceptions of life and the stuff I can’t understand.

The wisest man of all time wrote a book called Ecclesiastes, about his observations of life. In one section he wrote that God has put eternity in the heart of man that he might not understand the beginning from the end (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

Eternity is the stuff that makes us want to be remembered beyond our natural days and assures us that death is not the end; it’s the

thing that explains Augustine’s “God-shaped void” in the heart of man. But God has indeed done more than put eternity in our hearts. He has opened our vistas to unfathomable mysteries which he invites us to grapple with so that our faith in him might grow and so that our worship might deepen.

One day I will be in heaven with my Father, and my cousin Eleanor will be there, too. She will be the

one who is singing at the top of her voice a beautiful song of praise, and running and dancing in her perfect resurrection body. How great is our God and how worthy of our praise! □

Stanley McMahon has always been passionate about communicating the Word of God in a vibrant manner, whether through speaking or writing. Having served the Lord for many years in Italy, he is currently a pastor in Northern Ireland.

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