

# Episode 45: Ableism

*transcript*

A very special thanks to a few Liturgists in our online community for making this possible:

Brandon Everhart, Taylor Cole, Erin Chambers and Taylor Cole.

**Michael Gungor:** I had this teacher in fourth grade named Mrs. Hammond. She was great. She would always teach us these little songs that helped us to memorize things.

**Michael Gungor singing:** Am Is Are Was Were Being Been

**Michael Gungor:** Being Verbs

**Michael Gungor singing:** Have has had do does did shall will should would may my must can could

**Michael Gungor:** Helping Verbs

**Michael Gungor singing:** All mammals have four limbs, a little bit of hair and milk for the babies, lungs, warm blooded mammals.

**Michael Gungor:** Mammals, obviously. All these songs may not have been compositionally sophisticated, but they were effective. I still remember them. But as I think back on those songs it makes me think about how human beings tend to see the world. We often see reality as a set of separate and distinct things that can be defined with lists and little songs that we can teach fourth graders. We learn that a human being is another one of these classifications, another one of these lists. A human being is a mammal, a homo-sapien species more specifically. Not only does it have all the characteristics of a mammal, it has an upright erect standing posture. It has articulate speech. It has these five senses of sight and hearing and smell and touch and taste. It has 23 pairs of chromosomes and so on. But of course, not all homo-sapiens have all these things. All the kids in my class in the 4th grade had all their limbs. It never even occurred to me what that song about mammals might sound like to someone who is missing their limbs.

**Michael Gungor singing:** ...All mammals have four limbs...

**Michael Gungor:** Would that make them less mammalian? Is a human being who doesn't have five senses less of a human being? Or a person that has 47, rather than 46 chromosomes? When you make lists and definitions there's always going to be outliers. Because reality is not as neat and clean as lists or cute little songs that fourth graders can memorize. Today on The Liturgists podcast we are talking about Ableism, talking about life outside of the lists. Life outside of the typical, and how our individual and collective bias towards what we think life ought to be, or is inherently, robs so many of some of the richness of life as it really is...

Diverse, messy, and beautiful.

## MUSIC

**Ginny Owens:** I lost my sight at the age of three.

**Mike McHargue:** This is musical artist, Ginny Owens.

**Ginny Owens:** I had a type of treatment that I don't even think they do anymore. And when I had it, it was one of those things that they were hoping would restore my sight, but it sort of had a 50/50 chance of restoring my sight or taking it all away, and that's what happened. But I had wonderful parents who insisted that I do all the things the neighbor kids did. So I climbed trees and, you know, skated and rode my bike without training wheels all over the neighborhood and dug for gold and all the things that everyone else did. I didn't realize something was different about me until I went to school and church. I realized the problem wasn't being blind, the problem was I didn't belong. I could easily conquer blindness, especially having grown up with it. But when you find that you have this obvious sort of thing that everyone can see, and sets you apart and makes you not fit in as well, then you know, that leads to an interesting set of circumstances.

**Michael Gungor:** One of the ways that Ginny coped with this was by writing a lot of music.

**Ginny Owens:** Writing about, you know, what was going on in my life, writing about sometimes my relationship with God and about how I felt about how people would often treat me because of the fact I couldn't see. Fast forward a few years, and after college I ended up... I really wanted to be a music teacher. I loved writing music, but first of all, I lived in Nashville and went to Belmont and didn't think that writing music was ever gonna be something that I would be able to get paid to do. But also, I just sort of had this idea that the stereotype for blind people was that they loved music, and ya know they were good at it, and I was like screw that, that's dumb. I'm going to be a really awesome teacher and I want to prove that I can do that. I'm probably the only person in Nashville that really set out to get a teaching job and ended up, ya know..

**Michael Gungor:** As an Artist! \*laughing\*

**Ginny Owens:** as a recording artist instead.

*(Laughing)*

**Ginny Owens:** But I also feel like one of the huge blessings for me in that has been the ability to I guess even the platform to educate people. People are terrified of disabilities. Actually, when I was searching for a job just out of college I remember a vocational rehab person saying to me, blind people are usually the hardest people to get employed because people cannot imagine how they would live their lives if they couldn't see, and so they assume that you can't have a full life if you can't see. It is hard not to get impatient with people's stupidity. Just because they think they need to shout at you...

*(Laughing)*

**Ginny Owen:** ... or you know just speak really slowly or talk about you as if you're not there...

**Mike McHargue:** I'm sorry I don't mean to laugh <more laughter>

**Ginny Owens:** No, it's true.

**Mike McHargue:** That's hilarious

**Ginny Owens:** But what's fun for me is that I've been able to find some ways to counteract that. I started a fun little, just real lo-fi video series called How I See It.

<Clip from Ginny Owens> "...and one of those really simple things that people wonder about is, how I cross a street. So it's actually really simple for a blind person to cross the street. You have to just listen for the parallel traffic..."

**Ginny Owens:** Essentially just did stuff that I do all day long and videoed it and said, here's how I match my clothes, here's how I cook, and it's funny because especially when I first came into being an artist, I didn't want to talk about being blind ever. Just because I didn't want that to define who I was. And I still don't want that to define me, but what I have realized is that sometimes people have questions that they aren't comfortable asking. And so if opening up about my disability inspires dialogue amongst people and even releasing these videos I've had a lot of parents say to me "Wow I'm so glad to know that this is possible that my kid, ya know my child that has this physical challenge can grow up to do things I never imagined he or she could do." So that's been really cool. Ya know, it's like I say, not something I want to wear as a

banner, but if I can educate people and just invite them to a discussion than it's absolutely worth it.

**Michael Gungor:** Can you give us a couple of instances of how people treated you differently?

**Ginny Owens:** How many hours do we have? No, the good thing is I actually have a short memory for a lot of it so I try not to dwell on it. Gosh, so a couple of weeks ago, I went to church, and the family that I went to church with pulled up right in front of the church to let us out. And I got out of the car, and someone opened the door which was the first surprise, a couple of ladies came to the door and opened it and I got out of the car and one of the ladies goes "Oh bless your heart, you got out of that car so fast!!" And I was like, I'm going to have a bad attitude all of our church. Because I'm just like, what did you think I was going to do? I know that people, I guess, they just don't know how to relate to one who, you know, might have a different set of life circumstances than they do. But that's a mystery to me. I didn't know why she would say that and what it meant. I want to say, ya know, I've been getting out of cars for a really long time and it works pretty well. So ya know, I've definitely had to learn to have some compassion.

MUSIC

**Michael Gungor:** As you can tell, Ginny has developed a pretty thick skin about all of this, but there still have been times in her life with the treatment has been less than well intentioned.

**Ginny Owens:** When I was a kid, a very memorable experience happened in 5th grade, which is not a great time for any kid regardless of whether you have a physical challenge or not. But there was a ringleader, her name was Summer and Summer loved to, I don't know, just pick on me and then invite all the cool popular kids to pick on me as well: all day, every day. So one of her favorite past times was when I would bring my lunch to school she would steal stuff out of my lunchbox. And I was so shy, I knew she was doing it but I didn't know what to do about that. So one day in particular I remember, she was picking rice krispies off my rice krispy treat as I was trying to eat it and then she would just say "I'm stealing your food!"

**Mike McHargue:** I'm pretty sure that's a high crime, like you can be executed for that.

**Ginny Owens:** <laughing> It should be! Those are definitely things I'd like to forget, but they happen often. Ya know, I travel a lot by myself. When I'm flying in and am in

an airport I'll generally have at least one encounter with someone who decides to talk really loud to me or just assumes because I can't see I also can't think, you know. But we all know what it means to be misunderstood.

**Mike McHargue:** Which ironically means that they can't think.

**Ginny Owens:** I would love to get in people's heads and sort of see what they're thinking. Is it just fear? I mean, it's hard to know when you're dealing with that everyday. I mean, I always think why would people be fearful? But maybe...

**Michael Gungor:** I think it's a mixture of fear, and there's pity involved, I think for a lot of people. You know, I think you're correct in your assumption, or your assessment that people don't know what to do because they can't imagine it for themselves. You know, when you just come across a person getting out of a car at church that's blind and you've never considered what it would be like what it would be like to get out of a car if you're blind. I'm sure that woman had good intentions and she was on some level just trying to connect with you, and make it light, and trying to use some humor that wasn't funny or whatever by making it light and ya know like, "Oh she's feeling uncomfortable." And what she's feeling uncomfortable with is her own ignorance and her own inability to understand what it's like to be you. And so I think you're very admirable in your grace for being able to just move past that kind of stuff and just forget about a lot of the stuff that happens. And so I think most people are well intentioned, but they just don't understand. We operate so narrowly on our own perspective all the time and ableism, racism, sexism, ageism - all the ways that we assume that the people who aren't exactly like me are alien in sort of a threatening way. Or if not threatening, a scary way or whatever, and think the more that we can hear the stories and understand the common humanity between all, yes, everybody's got their own intersections of things happening that make us all unique in different ways, but the farther we can get outside of our own, such small assumptions and perspectives, I think the better the world is for it.

**Mike McHargue:** I thought that was a really interesting question you had, Ginny. So, I can't imagine your experience. Which I think that flips the table, flips the script so much for people. Just as much as you would say well I can't understand what it would be like to be blind, someone who is blind can't understand what it's like for you to not be blind and have some response to someone who is.

**Ginny Owens:** Right, Exactly.

**Mike McHargue:** I would say for any of our listeners, who are disabled or have different ability levels, whatever your preferred language is, I'm really good at speaking honestly about embarrassing things. So, I will tell you exactly what it's like. When I was young, I would have a visceral, almost physical reaction to people whose disability had some visual quality.

**Ginny Owens:** Interesting...

**Mike McHargue:** And that is one of the roots of ableism, is that our response to people who have some form of physically visible disability gets processed through the circuits of the brain that are responsible for looking out for communicable disease.

**Ginny Owens:** No way.

**Mike McHargue:** And that's what makes ableism especially nefarious, is the way that in some cases we have a natural visceral reaction to certain stimuli. In the same way, if you've never seen a spider in your life. We've found an experiment that if you show a human something the size and movement pattern of a spider, they have a visceral reaction to it. These are evolution shaped cues. And I remember as a very young child my own great grandmother had lost her vision due to cataracts. So she had these very very milky grey eyes, and I remember I would have a visceral reaction and be afraid to hug her which would be immediately followed by shame at that reaction. And because I felt shame, I wanted to distance myself. Now, I had the good fortune of a Father who was very, very involved on an annual basis with a program called the Special Olympics. So I spent a week each summer volunteering and assisting with carrying out the Special Olympics which was a set of athletic competitions exclusively for disabled persons. And that exposure completely eliminated that visceral response. Your brain can relearn anything. I learned that these were just people. But what I found a few years later, especially as a teenager and a young adult, what I would do instead of having a visceral reaction and then feeling shame, I would be excessively helpful, excessively warm to try to compensate for what I perceived as how the world related to disabled people. And it was only in my late 20's that I actually heard a deaf stand-up comedian, using humor frankly, but talk about ways that sort of excessive assistance was also alienating, and that sometimes he just wished people would relate to him like anyone else. So at that point in my life I started to imagine, like how do I like to be treated, how do I treat everyone else? And when do you actually want to intercede and help anyone, right? So I went a really strange project, this is almost embarrassing to talk about, but I'm just going to do it. So I would wear blindfolds a lot, or headphones with noise cancellation on, and I would try to simulate, for hours at a time, the vantage point of someone with different disabilities. I wouldn't use my arms. I would only use one

arm. I would only use my non-dominant hand, to try and get some understanding of the lived experience. And what I found out pretty quickly is, even after just a couple hours of time, you can figure out how to do most things really quickly. And that made me realize the time to offer assistance to anyone is when they ask for help. <laughing>

**Ginny Owens:** Yes.

**Mike Mcharge:** And just relate to people in a normal way. But the reason ableism is such a powerful topic to me is that role our unconscious, unconditioned lower brain plays, and then our response to, it ends up defining our relationship with real people. Which it's just not fair; it's what it is, but it's not fair. So the question becomes are we interested in creating a world where we move beyond the viscera and into the thoughtful and engage people in human terms. Ya know, Ginny, I was reading your bio just before the call, and here you are in a very rare place. You're a successful performing musician and songwriter. How many people just go to bed dreaming about that, and wake up dreaming about that that would be their ultimate accomplishment. And in your bio you mention that sometimes you hear people expressing pity or sympathy or feeling sorry for you after a performance. And what a strange, if you think about it, what a strange response to someone who is living out a life dream. It's just nonsense.

**Ginny Owens:** It is.

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**Ginny Owens:** Well, and as the recipient of pity, what I've learned is that as much as you try to let that roll off your back, it sticks with you. I mean, just the idea of, oh gosh, there is something wrong. Wow that was a great concert, but there's still just something wrong with you. You carry that around. And I've really learned in the last few years just about the process of letting those things go. And I feel like part of that or so much of that is going back to God and what does he say about us. Ya know one of my favorite passages of scripture is where he is, God is, talking to Moses and Moses has endlessly given God excuses for why he cannot go lead the people out of Egypt, and finally he gets to his speech and ya know, whether he actually has a stuttering issue or just doesn't think he can speak clearly, ya know, we don't totally know. That's kind of his last ditch effort to not do what God wants him to do. And God says: "Wait. Who is it that allowed this issue in your mouth? Who is it that allows the deaf to be deaf?" I just, I do feel like there's some truth in that. There's a lot of truth in that. You know, one of things that's so important to all people is to be accepted and known and understood and to also just have a valuable, viable role to play. You know for me, one of the most

challenging parts of being part of a church, for example, is connecting with people because I find they want to come over and say hello, and if there's anything you need please let me know. And I would say what I need is to be respected and to be invited to participate. I love when people allow me to serve them. I've had that opportunity recently just to be involved in some different groups, small groups, and to be able to make meals for people, to be able to be generous and share hospitality. And I love that opportunity, and love when it's received and when it's asked for. So one thing that I think is really important is not just to say hi to the person in the wheelchair, but to engage with them as you were saying Mike, means to consider that they have similar basic desires to you. To knowing that involving yourself with them, and knowing their heart, asking them to be involved just as you would with any other friend is super important.

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**Michael Gungor:** How can people see what you're up to, and hear your music? Where would you point people?

**Ginny Owens:** I would point them to [Ginnyowens.com](http://Ginnyowens.com), with a G, G-I-N-N-Y, twitter is @ginnyowens, facebook is ginnyowensmusic, and instagram is @blindchickphotog, because, why not?

<Laughter>

**Mike McHargue:** That's Amazing..

<Music>

**Listener Call-In:** My son Owen is almost four years old and has Down syndrome. He makes my life a better place by teaching me not to judge others and by showing each and every one of us that differences are awesome, and that we can accept people for who they are and meet them where they're at. He doesn't use words yet, and he also teaches every one of us to be patient with one another when trying to communicate our needs and wants and feelings. We love him and we don't know what we would do without him.

**Listener Call-In:** Hey, my name is Kyle, I've been working in the disabilities ministry at a local church here for about 6 years now. I've pretty much gone through a deconstruction phase over the last two years. But what's been consistent has been my desire to be continue to be a part of that ministry. There's so many different mental

disabilities, physical disabilities within that ministry and I love it so much. I always tell people that I don't go there to show love, I go there to receive love. It doesn't feel like any kind of ministry or work to me. They just reflect God so much. Sometimes I even think, are they even able to process the thought of God? But. I can just see God in them so much. So disability ministry is always going to be a part of my life.

**Listener Call-In:** My brother, Josh, has a moderate to severe form of autism. One of the main differences between us, is that he can't communicate verbally at all. When most people hear that, they can't imagine how anything good could come out of that. But, even without verbal communication, I'm just as close with my brother as I am with anyone else in my family. Josh reminds me to see beauty in things that aren't typical. Josh reminds me to use my situation to the fullest. Josh reminds me to relentlessly stick up for those who cannot, or should not have to, defend themselves. Josh reminds me that love is much more than something we say. It's service. It's warmth. It's being.

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**Michelle Kaplan (Rebelwheels NYC):** Hello, my name is Michelle. I am a queer intersectional activist and artist, absolute geek, and I am disabled as fuck and get around with my motorized wheelchair, I think there is often a huge disconnect between the disability rights movement and the rest of society. So many people don't even know the word ableism. If they don't even know the word, they probably won't know to fight it. Sometimes when I chat with people outside of the community, I hear "Disabled are oppressed?" Um, that's when you realize people have no idea.

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**Unknown Person:** Or sometimes people with good intentions will say "Oh, I don't see you as disabled." Which they mean as a compliment, but it's really not. There is nothing with seeing my disability, it exists, it's visible. The problem is

1. the default negative value that you place, and
2. If you don't see my disability then you're certainly not going to see the oppression I face and won't fight for my rights.

So it's not doing me any favors. I think it stems from the fact that disabled people are so rarely represented in the media, tv, movies, etc.. Um, so if you don't have any exposure to disabled people, particularly disabled people who aren't elderly then it's very easy to forget that we exist. On top of that, the few moments of representation that we do get are more than not written by able-bodied or non-disabled people who rely on these toxic tropes. The tragic plotline where the only chance of happiness is to make a death. The ever happy, never complains disabled person who exists to

inspire the non-disabled audience, or the sneaky evil villain. It's like, "really, you can't think of anything new?" When there is such few examples of disability representation, and when people don't know any disabled folk, this is where people get their information. Furthermore, they could never know what it's really like to be disabled. At best, they can only guess, but really they end up perpetuating toxic stereotypes. That is the reason why when I leave my home in my motorized wheelchair, random strangers will gawk at me. Often giving me looks of disgust and or pity. Some will even say, "Would you look at that? What a waste! What a shame!" When I am in blatant earshot, and that begs the question, where did they get this idea about disability? I'll tell you, no one asked me.

**Heather Avis:** So we started the adoption process because we couldn't have kids.

**Mike McHargue:** This is Heather Avis.

**Heather Avis:** We were at a crossroads, of IVF or Adoption were our only options to grow our family. And IVF was just not anything I could put myself through at that season of my life. So we started down the adoption road and wanted a healthy infant. I think any Mom or parent listening, what do you want your child to be? Some people are specific, but so many people the answer is, I don't care as long as they're healthy. And that was our goal as well. And then we ended up with a little girl who has Down syndrome, had a congenital heart defect, had an incurable lung disease. I mean, everything our daughter, our eldest was on paper, was nothing we ever wanted.

**Michael Gungor:** We sat down recently, with Heather and my wife Lisa. Heather and Lisa have become good friends over the last couple of years. Not only are they both mothers of children with Down syndrome, but they are both Enneagram 2's and both kinda sassy.

**Lisa Gungor:** We met through instagram.

**Heather Avis:** Initially through instagram, yeah.

**Lisa Gungor:** Which is pretty great, because there's a lot of haters about instagram, you know, these days. You're not one, i'm not one.

**Heather Avis:** People can go there, I get that, but I'm not one.

**Lisa Gungor:** It can bring people together. Well, we met, and that's forever changed our children's lives because our children are going to get married.

**Heather Avis:** They are, which Michael, I think, wants us to lay off that.

**Michael Gungor:** No, I like it.

**Heather Avis:** Ok, Good, done.

**Lisa Gungor:** It's on a podcast, and it's printed in your book.

**Heather Avis:** It's happened, it's happened.

**Lisa Gungor:** So we met on Instagram, and we had, a friend of mine in Tulsa, I figured this out, thought it was my sister-in-law. It was a friend of mine in Tulsa, showed me your Instagram after we had Lucy. We were devastated, Lucy was about to go into her first surgery and she sent me your pictures of you and your children and I just cried and cried and cried because your family looked so beautiful. I mean like, I think what I was looking for was a family that looked like, ok, we can do this, we can go through heart surgeries and we can have therapies and have different things that happen that come with special needs. So I was looking for someone to make it look like a very typical life, but you made it look like this beautiful, rich, amazing life. And so, it was beautiful, and I can never talk about it without tearing up about it. But it was what we needed right at that moment. Just so you know Heather is champion, goddess, warrior of the year. Thank you.

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**Michael Gungor:** Alright, Heather, you find out Macyn, your oldest, has Down syndrome. Is this something that you knew before you had agreed to adopt her?

**Heather Avis:** Yes, so when we found out about her, the thing that's wild about adoption is you get to say yes or no, and as a parent you have that option as well. Which we see with people terminating pregnancies when they find out their child has Down syndrome or other defects. And so, we could say yes or no. We knew fully who Macyn was. And it felt like the wildest thing we've ever done. The most foolish thing we've ever done. But it was the right thing to do. You know? The best thing to do.

**Lisa Gungor:** For anything that's wondering, Heather and Josh are both 2's on the Enneagram. So what do 2's do when they get married? They adopt children, all the all babies.

**Heather Avis:** We adopt all the babies! We said yes! And so it was really hard, I mean there was for sure seasons. It was a roller coaster. I had moments where I was shaking my fist at God, just because, I had come to grips with my infertility, come to grips with adoption, and then this? I'm supposed to bring this baby home? This is going to be so hard, this is nothing I wanted. And then she entered our lives and it was pretty instantaneous, that she was the best yes I ever said. And she was just incredible, and what I figured out more than anything, was having a baby with Down syndrome is like having a baby. Granted she's my first, so it was our only, we had nothing to compare it to. But all these things I desired in all those years of infertility, and all those years towards motherhood, she entered my life and I was a Mom, and it didn't matter how many chromosomes she had, it didn't matter that she had heart surgery. I mean all these things can be a big deal, but I was just a Mom and she was just a baby.

**Lisa Gungor:** Which is amazing that you say that, because in reading your book, you and Josh, with having your first child, all of the fears that just go into just having a child. You're always wondering, are they sleeping? Are they breathing? And so, when you guys are talking about the oxygen tube and lacing it through her pj's so she doesn't strangle herself in the middle of the night and just what champions you both were with handling that. And like, this is what we do. And then the first time she was off of oxygen and you can toss her in the air. I was on the plane, like, "Oh God!" And the things that every other parent takes for granted.

**Heather Avis:** Definitely. Those first few years, there were many moments where I ended up being a stay at home mom and I'm hangin out with other Mom's with their babies at similar stages and watching parents do these things with their kids. Like push them on a swing, and my daughter is tethered to oxygen so I'd push her on a swing and I'd have to like walk back and forth with her on this swing, ya know, to make sure the oxygen didn't pull out of her nose. I would watch parents just do things with their kids, that most parents take for granted. But I was so thankful for the things that I did get with my daughter. I think the thing that I have found in interacting with parents who have children with any kind of disability, is we think we can't do something, and then it's your kid. And then you do it. You have to do it. And then you can do it. I had moments, my husband and I, like this is wild that this is our life, and we're pretty kick-ass at this. Like surprised, ya know, like surprised, I never thought I could do this, and we're doing it. And this is great, it isn't even that bad, or bad at all.

**Michael Gungor:** So then you added a second.

**Heather Avis:** Yes! Our daughter Trulie Star. No health issues, just a lot of sass.

<Laughing>

**Michael Gungor:** She's sassy, she's amazing!

**Heather Avis:** She's amazing. And then we got this call from a birthmother who was 7 months pregnant, and got an in utero diagnosis, she was a single mom with two kids already, and felt that she couldn't raise a kid with Down syndrome as single parent, that wouldn't be best for him. She was having a boy, and he had a heart defect as well. So we never intended to adopt a second child with Down syndrome. But, Down syndrome has rocked my world in all the best ways. I feel completely honored to bring another child with Down syndrome in our lives, and so we did. We said yes to him. And he's three now. And he will soon be Lucy's husband.

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**Lisa Gungor:** So I love in your book, it's like, and we talk about this all the time, but I guess I didn't even realize how quickly you said yes. And when you said, "I need him, like, I need him, I have to have him now!"

**Heather Avis:** I think what for me, the yes didn't erase any of the fears, and the yes didn't erase the reality of what our lives are going to look like when we have children with Down syndrome in a world that doesn't love Down syndrome, you know? So, the yes was quick, and a really good yes, for all three of our children, but for our eldest and our youngest, it didn't take away the fear and the reality that it's going to be really hard.

**Michael Gungor:** What have you learned from all of this? About ableism, and about how our society sees life and what is a good life and what is a healthy life.

**Heather Avis:** Oh man, Michael, so much. I've learned so much and I think I'm just in the depths of all of that learning still, and my eldest is 8. So I've been in this Down syndrome world for only 8 years. It was just a couple of years ago that I had this realization of, the second a child is born, you guys can attest to this, so Lucy enters your life and you've got people in the room saying you need A, B, C, D - physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy. You can do this special mouth thing. We're doing all these things to help our child be what? Normal? Less Down syndrome? What are we striving for here? A couple of years ago this light bulb went as I'm with my daughter Macyn and pushing her to do all these things that she's not good at, that she can't do. Why? Why do I want her to do these things? So that she's less Down syndrome? And I think that's the goal for a lot of people who have a child with a

disability. If I can be so bold to say that, just in my interaction with people, that if we don't stop and check ourselves that that's the goal that we're trying to make our child more like everybody else. So there's got to be a fine line there, and the reason that's there, is because there's these systems in place that are rooted so, so deeply and so strongly that are saying there's a right way to be and a wrong way to be and if you have a disability that's the wrong way to be. And whether people admit that they think that or not, if you really stop yourself, even as a parent with children with disabilities, I think that was in the back of my mind for years. My daughter, I love her, I love Down syndrome, but there was still that idea, that this is not the best thing, and it's wrong. Because it is the best thing, it's who she is. But we still live in this world that takes people who have disabilities and places them in corners. I mean, look at our education system. It's everywhere, it's everywhere. So even though things have been in place, like the ADA, all these acts and laws put into place, those are growing from a system that is broken and ideas that are broken that are saying people who are different, people with disabilities, are less worthy and they should be the ones to change, not everyone around them, to make room.

**Lisa Gungor:** I really love that we're talking about this today because I recently had a really difficult conversation. I get it, people see Down syndrome, and what goes off in other people's minds is they think sick. And there are health issues, there are health risks. So Heather's book is called the Lucky Few, and I think it's so interesting, because even before I knew that was your thing, I remember saying to myself, I feel so lucky. But it's really hard for other people to understand that, just like it's hard to understand something you don't go through. So in talking with other people, have had very hurtful conversations that they want Lucy to change. But as a Mom, I'm sitting there going but that's Lucy, would you say that about Amelie, or me, or Michael. Would you say that about anything else?

**Michael Gungor:** Yeah, somebody was praying for Lucy's healing recently.

**Heather Avis:** So we had, two times, strangers with Macyn, when she was our only kid. Once when we were on vacation in Hawaii, and someone stopped us, and they quickly told us they were there as missionaries, and, I mean, that's a nice gig, a missionary in Hawaii. <Laughter> And they said, "Can we pray for you guys?" and we're like, "Great!" And they started praying, and they said, "And in Jesus' name, will you heal this child of Down syndrome?" Josh and I just looked at each other, and in the moment it's so shocking, we didn't say anything. And the second time was at a camp, a family camp, and a couple did the same thing and prayed for her: "God, it's just one extra chromosome; you have the power to take that away." I feel like, friends, if the church, if Jesus-loving people are not understanding, that when God created my kid with Down

syndrome, he put an extra chromosome in every single cell, that if we can't see that as people who love Jesus—then what are we gonna do with the whole wide world?

**Mike McHargue:** It also reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of cellular biology and human development. I mean, even if by some magic notion, you suddenly removed that chromosome from every cell of the body, many of the body systems have already been produced and developed. That would be potentially catastrophic to the organism, frankly. Sorry, that just really, it's a) abusive and b) bad science, which is the epicenter of things I can't stand.

<Laughter>

**Lisa Gungor:** Yeah, I mean, exactly. I'm so glad you said that, Mike. Because I feel like for that to change, Lucy would be a different child. She would not be Lucy.

**Heather Avis:** No, our kids wouldn't be who they are.

**Lisa Gungor:** And I get it, and I feel like I...

**Mike McHargue:** She would probably not survive is my point.

<Laughter>

**Mike McHargue:** What they're talking about. It literally is denying the inherent component of what makes that person that person, and you cannot transform a human being into another human being just by modifying their DNA. DNA is expressed over a long period of time through a complicated choreography of development that embodies unique personhood into an individual in concert with the environment. So, it's an ethically, spiritually, and scientifically absurd notion at every level.

**Lisa Gungor:** Yeah. Well I think some people would maybe respond to that and say, "God is big enough. God is in and around it all and holding it all." I think some people would say "God is a strong enough God to replace whatever is taken so that their biology, their makeup would not be destroyed, and they would remain who they are, just without Down syndrome." I think that's probably what they would say, but, like you said, that understanding is not there.

**Heather Avis:** Yeah, it's ridiculous.

**Lisa Gungor:** And you say, Heather, about this intentionality of them being created that way. I know a lot of people would disagree with that. But I, like, every time you say that, I want to weep. It's so beautiful. I mean, I know you've walked through this for eight years, but, like, you see something different than other people see, and so that, like, it's so, I love your book; I love that you and Josh have chosen this path because I think this is such a needed, this is needed, people need to know. I think they're uneducated; we abort most children with down syndrome, and so it's been taken away from our narrative, like people just—you don't know. I was terrified of it because you're terrified of the dark.

**Heather Avis:** Yeah, you can't know what you don't know. And that's just true. You can't know what you don't know. So I have a lot of grace for people, but I also get really fed up. Enough is enough. And so, if you quit sticking my kid with down syndrome in corners of this world and instead made space for her to be exactly who she is, then we can start really recognizing and learning what it is that we can learn from people with Down syndrome, people with a different ability. I think that most people think, "What can I teach them?" And Macyn's in second grade, and when we start school, all I want her teachers and administrators, people at school, to say is, "I'm so excited to learn from her." Because that's definitely not where people start. It's "Okay, what are we gonna do with this kid? How can we teach her?" So that she can—I mean the way that they wanna teach her is put her in a separate room.

**Michael Gungor:** To be a cog.

**Heather Avis:** Yeah. So Macy's in a typical classroom right now, and, for most her day—not all of her day because everyone has to compromise, the teacher is just constantly talking about how everyone in the class is benefitting from her more so than she's benefitting from them. And this is a conversation I have over and over again with people who have someone with Down syndrome in their lives. How much they've benefitting from them. And so, all of us who get that, all of us in this room, people who get that. I feel like we're just shouting it, and no one's listening. And it feels frustrating; it feels super frustrating, like, when are people going to listen up and take the time to make a space for my kids? And a space for them to be who they are and then in return to learn from them.

**Lisa Gungor:** Yeah, I think in the small amount of reading that I've been doing about Lucy going to school, and in talking to you, that everyone benefits when that child with special needs is in a typical classroom, they are, everybody benefits from it.

**Heather Avis:** Right.

**Lisa Gungor:** Most specifically the typical, quote “typical,” children. And I thought that was so interesting because for so long, in my head, I’m thinking, well, if Lucy’s not learning, I mean, yes, I want her to not feel alienated or if she’s being put down or whatever the case might be. We’re not in that world yet. So I’ve struggled a lot with “What are we gonna do with Lucy?” But everything points to, hey, this is good for everybody. And we’ve had those comments even already, “Well, don’t let Lucy hold Amelie back ever.” And it’s hard to sit there and take people’s opinions, but also I feel like I have a duty to say this is what I’m seeing and because again, they don’t know, people just don’t know. And I feel like both of my girls will have a richer life growing together, like, they’re children.

**Heather Avis:** I know, the thing I say to people often is the hardest part of having a child with Down syndrome is living in a world that doesn’t accept Down syndrome. That’s the hardest part, for me. You know, if people would just let my kids be who they are and honor that, it would make life so much easier. I mean, the heart surgeries, the therapies, all those things are a piece of cake compared to trying to prove my child’s worth because they’re different.

**Michelle Kaplan:** I met Janessa at a support group dinner for adults with congenital heart defects. And she quickly became a role model for me in the art of not giving a shit about what other people think about you. She will boldly go into grocery stores and use the little motor powered grocery cart because she knows she needs that, where I’m really nervous about being judged when I use my handicap spot because I’m under 25 and don’t outwardly look ill. But recently, in addition to teaching me how to put my needs before what people think of me, she also went out and was at a protest at the airport. And I had been wanting to go to one but had been holding myself back with reasons about why I shouldn’t be standing for that long or be outside in the cold that long. But she had those exact same excuses and knew those exact same risks. Her face was red for 17 hours after being outside because she wasn’t prepared for that physically. But she knew that the protest was for something important. She taught me in that that not only are my health needs more important than whatever anybody thinks of me, but that there are certain causes that are more important than any limitation that I might use as an excuse to stop me.

**Listener Call-In:** My older brother is severely mentally and physically handicapped. My world is not an easier place because of him, but I do think it’s a richer place because of him. I wouldn’t wish the stares we received, the crappy service we got, the extra hospital visits, or the random strangers at the airport who, as well-meaning Christians, wanted to pray over him. I wouldn’t wish that on anyone. But those bonds with people

who get the deeper complexities of life, the times our community measures success as a step or a word instead of degrees or dollars made, the churches who included us without patronizing when it was easier to ignore or exclude, that is what has made my world a better place.

**Listener Call-In:** My sister Adie is unique in that she's the only person I know who is never anxious about anything—she never spends her time living in the future; she's always fully engaged in the present moment, whether it's jumping in the pool or watching Toy Story 3 for the thousandth time or talking about Santa Claus or dancing in the aisles at church even though no one else is dancing—she just lives in the moment; she just loves her life and loves the people in her life and has a contagious joy that I envy and that I hope I can learn from throughout my life.

50:00-1:00:00

**Michael Gungor:** What's hard about some of these huge systemic issues is, it's all built to be like a machine to run an assembly line or something. It's like...run the kids through the educational machine, and get 'em out the door. Medicine; health care is like that. It's not about human beings. It's about sicknesses, so treat these diseases, cross the things, get the insurance forms filled out, get them out the door. It's like these big dehumanizing systems. So I'd be, like, in traffic. If I'm out on The Two and traffic pulls out, I'm like "What are you doing on the highway?!" Everybody has an expectation of "This is the speed at which a kid learns to read," you know? I guess you can see through having someone that you love and in your life, with special needs, is how dehumanizing it is. And it's not just towards special needs; it's dehumanizing towards all of us, these systems. Because we don't build these systems, a lot of times, in ways that are human. Our sick, even, and our dying -- we don't treat them like human beings that are sick and dying; we treat them like issues and diseases to get out of the way. I guess the question has to be like what kind of human beings we want to be. Do we want to just be machines, or do we want to be human beings that can actually encounter other individuals in all their unique beauty? And this goes to any intersection of any sort of unique person. It's not just...It's ableism. It's racism. It's sexism. It's the whole way that our society wants to simplify and cut off the edges to make you a cog, in order to make their life simpler. They don't have to think about it or actually encounter another human being, just kinda dot the form or whatever. You know?

**Heather Avis:** Yeah. I think the thing that frustrates me the most with ableism is it feels like, for most of society, it's a non-thing. Like, racism is a thing.

**Michael Gungor:** Yeah, you're right. Yeah.

**Heather Avis:** Sexism is a thing. Ableism? What's ableism? And you know, like, what are we supposed to do with sweet beautiful people who are African American women with Down syndrome, you know? Talk about an uphill battle for that person! So I get frustrated that with ableism, people just don't care. It's so marginalized. We can go back to the school systems, and some school systems are doing inclusion well, but with the majority of the systems, your child with the disability is put in a separate classroom, usually in the corner of the school, for real, go to your schools and check it out. And that was happening how many years ago with black people? And we're saying - "But it's better for them. This is better for them." I need to put this out there: that parents who are listening who have children with certain disabilities, that putting your child in a separate program is the absolute best thing for them, and that's fine. That's totally fine. We all have to do what's best for our kids, but not because the system says so, but because we know our kid, and we know how our kid is going to best thrive as a human being. So it's just so, in my face! And I walk around in my kid's school, and I think "Nobody here cares that when we first got here, she was placed in a separate classroom, and that we've had to fight, i mean fight, so hard to get her where we are today because she has Down syndrome." And because of these systems... it's wild.

**Lisa Gungor:** Well, it's because we so champion the brightest, right? Everyone is looking for the best. We've talked about this before, I think, a little bit on the podcast. The "bigger, stronger, faster" thing that drives me totally crazy. I didn't see it before, honestly. I didn't see it before we had Lucy. I just thought that was the way of the world. "You have to be the best of the best." Even when I tried to be an athlete in high school, my brother and sister were awesome stars, and here I come wanting to sing and draw. I felt like something was wrong with me. I would go and practice playing basketball...

**Heather Avis:** <laughs> I cannot see you playing basketball!

**Lisa Gungor:**... because I used to think I was going to marry a guy that was playing basketball! Like, that was just the world. You have to be the best of the best. We were just at a school, and these kids' names were up in the gym, and I was looking at that thinking it's just a very... interesting, I feel like is such a boring word to use, but it's a system of, well, I bet those kids feel really great about that, but all the other kids, how do they feel? Their name is not up on the board, and they have to be able to do, like, something amazing according to our own standards. Because again, I could look at our kids and other people with special needs and I could tell you all the amazing things

that they can do that I can't do. Or how Lucy can light up a room in a very, very incredible way. In a way that I can't. That's not said at all in a way that's putting pity on her, "Oh, look at the cute baby who has Down syndrome." No, it's, there's a joy in her and an understanding for people that she connects with people that I believe she's going to take through her entire life.

**Heather Avis:** Sure.

**Lisa Gungor:** And it's not because she has Down Syndrome, you know what I mean? So, we have placed value on very specific skills.

**Heather Avis:** Right.

**Lisa Gungor:** Maybe I'm wrong, but I hope - I feel - the tide is changing. All these little books that started coming out about five years ago about emotional intelligence. I think people have felt that, that they have cut off a part of what it means to be human. They've seen people climb the success ladder and then kill themselves, you know? "Oh, this is not the measure of a good life. What's the measure of a good life?" Everyone is trying to figure that out. I hope, god, I hope, we're coming back to an understanding of the value in all people.

**Heather Avis:** But I wonder if we can even learn that lesson until we're willing to learn it from people who we've already shut out.

**Lisa Gungor:** Oh, yeah.

**Heather Avis:** We've got to take that step back and learn it from people who we have yet to listen to, which would, at the top of that list, be people with disabilities.

**Mike McHargue:** And I don't want to rain on the parade here, but I might even question the assumption that we're making progress. [humorless chuckle] You know? They did a tracking study in the UK trying to figure out what role the Paralympic games may be playing in public sentiment and ableism, and in their tracking study, they found a significant increase in implicit bias and unconscious bias against disabled people in the period from 2012-2014 and 2014-2016. A pretty notable clinical finding. Closer to home, there's a program run by Harvard University, the Implicit Association Test, which lets you do self-measurement in a clinically valid way to measure how much implicit bias you have for or against different categories of people. One of the categories they do implicit bias testing on is abled and disabled persons. A'nd in that test, about 76% of people who take the test, have an unconscious, implicit bias towards able-bodied

people, with a full 33% showing a strong, automatic preference for abled-people. So one of the big problems, not only in terms of society and systems that we create, and culture, and law, and legal frameworks, is that there's also a conditioning process that is amplified by evolutionary-driven features in the brain. Racism is nefarious because in our very young ages, as infants, our brains learn to create basically an algorithm to quickly assess whether a stranger may or may not be part of our tribe. That bias forms the foundation for racism and race-based prejudice later in life. Unfortunately, for disabled persons, very often the outward physical indicators that someone may be disabled in some way will trigger some of the unconscious mechanisms that human brains use to look for disease in other humans. So, abnormal abdomen shape; abnormal skin tone; body or face asymmetry; those are all three very strong, unconscious indicators of potentially communicable diseases. So what people have is an uncomfortable tension, at least what I've seen clinically. On the one hand people tend to look at many disabled people like they would look to, like, a puppy. They relate to someone with Down syndrome as cute and harmless and helpless. That's an emotional reaction, but deeper down, there can also be a more visceral neurological reaction that begins to lay a framework for an implicit bias. The only way around that is deep, personal experience. It cannot be communicated in a podcast. It can't be exposed very well through media, although portraying more people as protagonists in stories who have differing ability levels would help. But really the only way to combat and overcome that implicit bias is exactly what we've talked about, direct personal experience that is prolonged. And that's difficult for people because when you actually spend time with someone who is bound to a wheelchair, or someone who doesn't have sight in the way that you have it, or someone who has Down syndrome, it will subvert some of your assumptions that I would call "positive ableism." So positive ableism might talk about how people with Down syndrome are always angels or angelic, which denies their humanity, of course. But also it doesn't actually bear out. People with down syndrome get angry, they get frustrated, they have bad days. They have people they don't like, like anyone else. None of these things can be validated in our brains without lived experience.

**Heather Avis:** Preach it Mike. It's like we need to drop a microphone or something.

<Laughter>

**Michael Gungor:** Fighting like you have in the system, it's a pain, right? You go through the frustration of it. But now all of those kids and those teachers now do have personal experience for the next kid, it'll be a little easier. And maybe their bias is a little less implicit because they've had some personal experience now.

**Heather Avis:** Ya, when Macyn started school I just wanted her to have a friend, like just one friend who will love on her. There was the sweetest girl in her class who is the tallest girl in the class and Macyn is the shortest so that's my favorite thing also. And we got invited to her birthday party, it just blessed my heart. So we go to this birthday party and we are hanging out with the family, and they are a really big family, there's tons of people there. And there's two women there that have an obvious intellectual disability and they're sisters. And so I am interested about that and I end up course drawn to them, and hanging out with them and come to find out my daughter's friend's mother grew up next-door to them. So they are not family but they grew up their whole lives together. And then these two women have become an integral part of their lives and it just, this lightbulb went off and I thought "aha!" of course the girl in the class that is able and willing and excited to be friends with my daughter has always grown up with someone in their life who has an intellectual disability. And then I think about how everyone in Macyn's class, even though it's not a prolonged relationship for all of them, that I really believe all of them at some point will be like "I remember that girl Macyn in my second-grade classroom," and because of that will respond differently, hopefully more positively towards people with Down syndrome and people with disabilities. But that relationship piece is so important. So, so important.

**Lisa Gungor:** I was listening to a podcast, it's this whole town. Did I tell you about this?

**Heather Avis:** Yes, I listened to it. Yes.

**Lisa Gungor:** The whole entire town has adopted someone into their family with a disability, or a mental illness.

**Heather Avis:** Yeah, a mental illness, yeah.

**Lisa Gungor:** They said the thing about this town is, a lot of people will end up moving there, who have a mental illness, because they are not treated any differently and they get so tired of being treated like a non-person. And what the people here do is they don't accept the labels. One of the dads said the young man who is living with them have hallucinations that lions are chasing him. And so they don't like treat it with medicine and say like "no this isn't happening, can't you just understand this isn't happening." But he chases the lions away, he enters into this thing with him. He said, "This is real for him, who am I to say I just don't see the Lions"

<Laughter>

**Lisa Gungor:** Which, I love. I feel like The Liturgist people would be so into like, what is reality? Like, who to say we're the ones seeing reality here, I mean

**Michael Gungor:** Uh oh, getting close to the end of the interview.

**Mike McHargue:** By the way, the name of the town is Geel, which is Belgium, which was on NPR's podcast Invisibilia.

**Heather Avis:** Ya, and on that podcast the women doing the interviewing in the town had said, "Why do you do this?" Something along those lines. One of the people said something along the lines of, "Well this is always has been." Like, this is how it was for her as a kid, how it is for as an adult, for her kids, like they've always had these people people with mental illness in their community. And that important piece of that relationship piece. Like making sure it's a part of who you are now, and maintaining that for your children.

**Mike McHargue:** And frankly as a program that talks about the intersection of science, art and faith. To me the most interesting piece about Geel in Belgium, which is largely post religious, is the practice in that town is attributed to a Saint who, in the 7th century fled to that country and because of her life experience, devoted her life serving the mentally disabled. And she was actually martyred according to history. The town in honor of her carried on her work and it became a cultural value. And so, you know, you have this kind of post-religious community carrying on a practice that began in their faith and ultimately becomes a better model for how to do things world-wide.

**Lisa Gungor:** I love that.

<Music>

**Michael Gungor:** I think there is something about this conversation that strikes at the heart of Christianity. And just Christ, that something about people that make us encounter them in a way that is not so automatic. That is such a gift to us as human beings. It brings us into a moment, brings us into presence, brings us into connection, in a way that's so easy to go through these automatic, "Hey, how's it going? Fine. How're you? Oh the weather's..." You know you get into this sort of like automaton life. And people that are on the margins and that you have to encounter in a different sort of way. It's grace. It's like it's connection to the divine in a really special way, I think. And then the more that our society progresses we've got CRISPR and our technologies of being able to start doing gene work. And what's going to happen, I mean, us right now might be considered disabled people to people 100 years from now. You know what I

mean? Like we only have this way low IQ because we don't have the nanobots in our brains. I hope we don't that we don't use our technology to wipe out our differences. And that we learn our love, and that it's of matter of faith, and just being of human. It's a matter of what kind of humans do we want to be? The kind that are kind of just automatons that great reasoning capabilities or are we trying to make ourselves computers?

**Mike McHargue:** Hold on. I'm literally trying to make myself a computer automaton.

<Laughing>

**Michael Gungor:** Just a computer that loves other people too.

<Laughing>

**Michael Gungor:** But those resetting the program moments, I think are so important. And every way that we can counter that through disabled people, through intersections through humanity that we don't normally encounter, I think those are perhaps what Christ would teach is that's where he is most clearly found when we encounter who is imprisoned. Or who is sick, disabled, who is poor and starving and bleeding on the side of the road. It's those people that we have to be present in a new kind of way, and in that we find the divine.

**Lisa Gungor:** There's this quote, I was just looking for it, I found it from John Vanier, it says: "The society which discards those for weak and non-productive, risks exaggerating the development of reason, organization, aggression and the desire to dominate. It becomes society without heart, without kindness, irrational and sad society, lacking celebration divided within itself, and given to competition, rivalry and finally violence.

**Heather Avis:** Wow, wow. I feel like that, on certain days that is all you see. On certain days, these days. And I think about termination rates for people with down syndrome. And the statistics vary depending on countries but it's as high as like 93% of people who get a prenatal diagnosis of down syndrome terminate the pregnancy. And you think, 50-60 years ago the baby was born with down syndrome and placed in an institution, or advised to. You know that was the norm.

**Michael Gungor:** Not even that long ago, right?

**Mike McHargue:** No, it's not really that long ago. I mean I'm thinking we have a couple of friends who are in their 50's, and their parents were strongly advised to institutionalize. I have a really good friend, she is 24 or 26 and she has down syndrome. And her mother was told to put her into an institution. She is 26 years old. It's wild. But today, the termination that's happening, that is just the normal thing, like of course, of course they're testing. And I think there's certain countries where it's required. You have to have the blood test done to test for down syndrome so that you can terminate. That's the only goal for the testing. And I feel like it's being ignored, and we are losing this population, and we are seeing like what you just quoted. You know?

**Lisa Gungor:** So Christopher, Michael mentioned Christopher earlier, I remembered reading somethings about that, and it hit me. I think I called you after I was reading that and I thought I mean, it's possible that this is one of the last generations of people with down syndrome.

**Heather Avis:** Ya...but it can't be.

**Lisa Gungor:** But here's the thing that is my confession.

**Heather Avis:** Sure.

**Lisa Gungor:** Five years ago, I probably would have said, "Oh, oh wow, ok, like, you can choose. Not for terminating the pregnancy. But like the petri dishes, they can see what children have what. So we are not going to pick those children with down syndrome. And now like, I wept wept when I read that. Because, like, I go "No no no, like no. This shouldn't be, you know, this is, we are losing such beauty in this world and I feel like have such a gift what we've learned with Lucy and I want everyone to know that gift. And like, how are they are going to know if these children don't exist anymore. How is this going to be? And ya, it really floored me.

**Michael Gungor:** it's a shift to love despite like it seems like for a lot of people you'd think like "you know you'd love them, it's not just the down syndrome, you can look past the down syndrome. It's like almost an issue to get past. It's a very different thing than actually loving down syndrome.

**Lisa Gungor:** Oh ya.

**Michael Gungor:** As you you would love a C Minor chord. Rather than like, I love it even though it is not major, like it's ok, it's minor, it's ok, you know, it's like, No love that

it's minor. It's like this other way of being, it's this other thing that exists within god, within all, within reality.

**Lisa Gungor:** We're disposing of a gift.

**Mike McHargue:** We're disposing of a gift. Yeah, and I think that's why it's so important to keep doing what we do. I mean, we started talking about Instagram and the beginning, and it's just this really, very silly tool and I'm sure it's causing a lot of damage in a lot of people's lives. However, I am interacting with people all the time who are saying, and have been around people who have said "I was going to terminate this pregnancy because I have been following your family." Or I know numerous people who have gone across the ocean to adopt kids because of following our family. And not to toot our horn, but just that it's so important for those of us that get it. That have a front row to this gift, and a front row seat to this beauty, and we are living in it to keep talking about it. And you know, to keep it a priority and to shout it from the rooftops and we have to make that a priority. Ya. Because the world of down syndrome is going to be like a shitty hell-hole.

<Laughter>

**Heather Avis:** And now I want to know more from Science Mike because, just the whole idea scientifically of survival of the fittest. How many people still are, like that's how they function, you know, like in the survival of the fittest? Because obviously our kids with down syndrome are not going to survive.

**Michael Gungor:** Yeah, they're not the fittest.

**Mike McHargue:** Well let's remember, "survival of the fittest" is a highly outdated and inaccurate way of describing evolution. Using in fact the phrase "survival of the fittest," which is often associated with things like Eugenics, which are social movements that use bad science to justify some form of genocide. And are frankly too often attributed as scientific ideas when they are not. A better and more contemporary understanding of the role natural selection plays in shaping the diversity of life, which does include weeding out unfit genes is "survival of the timeliest," or "most adaptive." The fact is, if I suddenly were teleported with a small population of humans to some point in the distant past when dinosaurs roamed the Earth, you might think because I'm more evolved, humans would take over the planet. But it may actually be true that humans would die out almost immediately because we're not better adapted to the weather, climate, ecology, and potential infection of the Triassic or Jurassic era anymore than those animals would be adapted to the web of life that exists on Earth today. It's not

that the strongest survives, the strongest survive, maybe, when calories are plentiful to support that much muscle tissue. But as soon as you have famine, suddenly the meek inherit the Earth, right? So there's this oversimplification of how evolution works, especially conversationally. In terms of an agrarian context, or pre-agrarian human context, it is very likely that many people who are disabled, maybe even most people who have severe physical or mental disabilities would not survive to adulthood or would not pass their genes on. But, that is not the context that the human organism lives in today. It may be that through human activity we have created an environment where it is more timely, more adaptive, more possible to be a person with Down syndrome. How do we know this? Because those people live today. They have fulfilling lives. Sometimes they get married, right? The earth has changed enough because of human activity that for a test of timeliness and suitability, people with differing ability levels pass with flying colors today, which is a good thing. I'm not sure if you go back to the industrial era if I would have survived. And I think people who want to take a hard line to that, ya know, let's build a time machine, and send you to the middle ages, and you probably wouldn't survive a day in the fields. Evolution is not about fitness, evolution is about timeliness. So let's make a world where more people are timely. Because we have that creative power today, why wouldn't we?

<Music>

**Michael Gungor:** Heather, thank you for being on the show. When does your book come out?

**Heather Avis:** Thank you so much for having me. The book is out March 21, which is World Down Syndrome Day.

**Michael Gungor:** Oh, great! And it's called The Lucky Few.

**Heather Avis:** It's call The Lucky Few. That's right.

**Michael Gungor:** Get it.

**Heather Avis:** It's available on Amazon, right now.

**Mike McHargue:** We hope you enjoyed this episode of the Liturgist podcast on Ableism, if you'd like to discuss this topic and things that have been shared in this program with other people who listen, please visit [theliturgists.com/podcast](http://theliturgists.com/podcast) and click

on the ableism episode where you can view and leave comments. We'd also like to connect with you on facebook, at [facebook.com/theliturgists](https://facebook.com/theliturgists) and on twitter, @theliturgists.

**Michelle Kaplan:** For those who would like to educate yourself on ableism and how you can be an ally to the disability community, and this is key especially if you identify as intersectional. There is an outreach project you can check out at [whatisableism.tumblr.com](https://whatisableism.tumblr.com).

**Michael Gungor:** Thank you so much Michelle Kaplan, for being a part of the program with us. Also thanks to all the other guests - Ginny Owens, Heather Avis, Lisa Gungor, and of course all of you that called in.

**Mike McHargue:** We want to thank our patrons who make The Liturgist podcast financially possible. You can learn more by going to [theliturgists.com](https://theliturgists.com) and clicking on Donate Now.

**Michael Gungor:** Aside from Science Mike and I, the podcast team includes Corey Pigg, Greg Nordeen, and Madison Chandler, and Tyler Chester helps me with a lot of the music. By the way, Tyler and I are going to be putting out a record of the some of the instrumental stuff that you hear, and actually that you're hearing right now, on this podcast, within the next few weeks we'll let you know more about that.

**Mike McHargue:** Thanks for listening everybody.

**Michael Gungor:** So much love to all of you.