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The Worship of God • October 24, 2021



The Scripture
1 Corinthians 12:20-26

As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

The Message
“Jesus, for Real: That All My Flourish”
John DeLaporte

It was a beautiful summer day as my Mom and I entered the fairgrounds at Marathon Park in my hometown of Wausau, WI. You could see the balloons and banners from afar. The sound of dance music and the smell of hotdogs grilling drew you right to the registration table. Today was my hometown's annual Down's Syndrome Awareness Walk, and we were there to walk alongside a young man named Jeremiah. My Mom got to know Jeremiah through her work as a special-ed assistant in the local elementary school. Jeremiah is an exceptional child with Down's Syndrome, and my Mom was

about the only person in the school with whom he would connect. A friendship quickly grew between our families, and it was wonderful to be a part of the day's festivities with him. We got our t-shirts and entered the grounds only to realize that it might be hard to find Jeremiah in the sea of people all wearing the same t-shirt!

But not to worry, my Mom assured, because if there is a dance floor within earshot, you will inevitably find Jeremiah right in the middle of it! And sure enough. There he was! bustin' moves worthy of his own TikTok challenge! There are two things you never want to challenge Jeremiah in. The first is a dance contest. You will always lose! The second is quoting Scripture. You will always lose!

As the day unfolded, you couldn't help but be swept away by everything happening all around you. People from all walks of life, bringing an array of gifts and abilities, coming together for a shared purpose and a shared vision. It was a glimpse of community where stigmas and stereotypes were suspended; where the divide between ability and disability didn't exist; where true inclusion and cooperation carried the day. There was a spirit of collective empowerment in the air. People working, and playing, and eating, and dancing, and walking along side one another for something greater than themselves. And I couldn't help but think that maybe this day came close to what Jesus called beloved community.

As we continue exploring the sacred implications of our Priority Action Plan, we arrive today at our fourth action area: creating a community where every ability can flourish. Broadway has long been a place that has worked toward greater inclusion and accessibility for all our members. We strive to be a church where the diversity of God's people, and the array of our giftedness, can find expression and place among us. Our history demonstrates this, and our renewed vision and values reflect this. Ministries such as All God's Children, headed by our amazing Crystal Harrison; or the Parkinson's Support Group, led by our amazing Patsy and David Dalton, or the upcoming community conversation around faith and disabilities, are just a few ways our church has sought to practice what we preach.

But like many churches right now, Broadway stands at a new threshold of possibility regarding accessibility and inclusion. Welcoming persons with differing abilities and gifts is a wonderful first step. Adapting programs and

facilities to be more accessible while growing ministries that serve diverse needs is celebrated and needed. What remains to be explored is how to take our church from a place of care for and friendship with persons of differing abilities to a community of full, active, and integrated inclusion in every area of church life.

Author and disabilities advocate, Rev. Dr. Brett Webb-Mitchell, puts the question this way, *"How would the church look, sound, feel, and move as a fully-inclusive body of Christ? How would a church feel or be if a person's abilities or dis-abilities didn't really matter at all since our place in the body of Christ is not predicated upon what one can do or not do, but rather upon who we are and whose we are...God's."*

Like all things in community, this movement toward greater inclusion doesn't happen in a single step or sermon. It is a process; a journey of continued development out of what we've already begun. As our priority action plan begins to put vision and into action our church is poised to take the next step. Broadway are you ready to take the next step with me today? Let's go!

So, we've said, we want to create a community where every ability flourishes. The language from the Priority Action Plan speaks of engaging persons with disabilities and their families into the full life of the community. Deeper integration at all levels of the church. Growing community partnerships that create inclusion and accessibility within and beyond Broadway's walls.

Such a lofty goal is both brave and daunting. And the first step for us today is to reflect on how we think about "ability" and "dis-ability" in the life of our community.

The word "ability" covers a range of things! You can imagine my week trying to pin down a message on a topic such as "every ability flourish"! An ability, simply put, is to possess the means or skills to do something. To have a talent, a gift, or proficiency in a particular area.

There are some things I am very good at like catching fish, or feigning interest when my son talks about Minecraft, or cooking a delicious dinner when it seems as though there is nothing in the house to eat. And there are some things that I am able to do with a little support or adaptation. Such was the case when I enlisted my father-in-law to help us bring our 1970s bathroom,

complete with saloon doors and an avocado-colored vanity, into the 21st century.

When it comes to our abilities, we tend to evaluate what we can do in positive terms. Yet, when it comes to what we cannot do, we quickly pivot to the inverse framing our inabilities in the negative.

That simple three-letter prefix, “dis,” carries an array of implications. Add “dis” to any number of terms and it can imply being “broken down,” “torn asunder,” “taken away.” “Dis” can signify a negative, reversing force. When attached to a verb “dis” implies a lacking or a missing component as in disrespect, or disenfranchisement, or disempowered. It can mean to affront, disparage; or belittle.

For a person who's lived experience has been seen through a lens of “dis” ...the consequences can be deep and long lasting.

Recognizing such negative implications of framing ability in stark positive/negative terms, the UN Convention on Human Rights of Persons with Disabilities crafted a different definition.

Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments which **in interaction with various barriers** may hinder their full effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.

A bit of a mouthful to be sure. But such a definition reframes disability not as a personal deficiency, or a lack, but as a phenomenon that arises when an impairment meets an injustice.

In this definition, the person is primary. The impairment secondary. These impairments can take multiple forms affecting anyone at any time. Some might be visible and physical, others might be less overt and hidden such as a genetic condition, mental health issue, or a learning challenge.

As our own LeAnne Lowry likes to say, “The disability community is the largest minority group of which you can become a member on any given day.” Birth, illness, aging, a slippery floor, a blown stop light can all result in card-carrying membership.

What is important to recognize in reframing disability is that such is a normal and regular part of the human condition. Most of us experience impairment at some point in our lives albeit to differing degrees and of differing kinds. And the experience of disability is one that plays out both in the person as well as in the community.

Broadway, if we are naming as a priority our desire to be a community where every ability can flourish, the first step is to reframe how we think about abilities and disabilities and work intentionally to remove any barriers that hinders the full participation of a sister or brother in Christ.

And we do this not because it seems like a nice thing to do. We do it because it is what Jesus did... Jesus for real... time and time again. We do it because it is what Jesus desired when he envisioned a community that reflects the radically inclusive and accessible love of God.

You know of the 37-recorded miracles of Christ from across the four Gospels, 25 recount a miracle of healing. Jesus was a healer *par excellence*, but what is important for us to recognize in this conversation is that his acts of healing were less about curing some ailment or impairment in an individual. For Jesus, which seemed to be the easy part. Far more important is to recognize how these acts of healing publicly challenged the social, cultural, and religious barriers that marginalized a person in the first place.

You see, in the ancient world, much like our own, illness, impairment, or disability often resulted in one being set apart from the wider community. A person suffering an “unclean spirit” would have been considered ritually impure according to Levitical law and barred from engaging in temple life or synagogue. A person’s blindness or leprosy diagnosed as a sign of punishment for sins, or the sins of one’s ancestors visited upon a later generation.

In the real world that Jesus walked. the message was clear: physical, cognitive, or spiritual impairment sets you apart from God and the community. And for Jesus, nothing could be more antithetical to a Gospel where Kingdom Community should embody the radically accessible love of God.

It is no coincident, then, why Jesus frequently healed in very public forums often in full view of the persons responsible for these barriers in the first place.

No HIPPA Laws or patient/physician privacy here. Time and again, Jesus' healing challenged and subverted law and convention leaving many of the boundary builders to ask, "Who is this that even heals sins?"

Often, Jesus instructed the recipient of his healing to "go and show yourself," or "go and return" to your friends, family, the rabbi in the synagogue, the Pharisees in the temple, your town or village. Show those who have set you apart where God desired you to be all along. Show them that God's power works through you and in you and for you, too.

And show them that the barriers that kept you out were never a part of God's plan.

Author, advocate, and disability theologian Stephanie Tait says that for Jesus, healing and wholeness is only fully restored when the standards of inclusion are met. When barriers and boundaries are broken. When stigmas and structures that set people apart are healed. This is the fuller message of the healing narratives that the Church needs ears to hear today.

If we are to be a place where every ability can flourish, we need to reflect upon what boundaries and barriers need to be broken among us? What stigmas and structures still exist in our hearts, our church, our ministry, and our world? How might we be keeping sacred community from being accessible to all?

While Broadway has done some phenomenal work on this front there is always room to grow. The Church (big C!) has not historically embraced what Jesus sought to heal. Far from removing barriers, people of faith and houses of worship have often been guilty of maintaining barriers to full participation. As in Jesus' time, the sin of ableism discrimination and social prejudice against people with disabilities - manifests wherever we create community, including the church.

For example, in the months leading up to the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act in early 1990s, many denominations fought hard for a religious exemption to the pending law. And they got it. To this day, houses of worship, religious schools, and para-church organizations enjoy certain exemptions to the ADA that non-religious entities must legally comply with. Stephanie Tait recounts how the Church's push for exemptions were steeped in stereotype and financial self-preservation.

Today, it is not uncommon for churches to think that persons with disabilities don't exist in their congregations. *We don't have them here, or maybe we have a few of a certain kind, but they seem to get along just fine with what we are doing.* So often a person's unique need or gift goes unseen, unmet, or undeveloped.

Christians with disabilities share stories about being treated as theological case studies, objects of charity, or teaching tools for pastoral care, the recipients of what one person called "golden rule guilt!"

Even in churches that have adopted a "mainstreaming" model of ministry, programs and community life can often struggle to get beyond separate but equal. The disability community is approached as a separate audience with segregated programming developed to meet their "special needs" (another term that carries problematic connotation).

Differentiated ministry has a place, but frequently falls short of full inclusion. Mainstreaming ministry can perpetuate a false dualism and power differential where able-bodied leaders design ministry *to and for persons with disabilities not alongside of and with persons with disabilities.*

One Broadway parent whose son is on the Autism spectrum recently shared her heart when she said, "I long for a church where ministry is done alongside persons with disabilities, not simply for them."

Abelism in the church carries real consequences. According to a recent study, 67% of families affected by disability have left a church because they did not feel welcome; and of that 67%, one-third report leaving their faith tradition altogether.

Such are the barriers we must examine in every area of church life if we are to truly be a community where every ability can flourish. If Broadway is going to be a leading voice on this front, we must grow in awareness and step boldly in the direction of deeper and fuller inclusivity.

And so, with disability reframed, and barriers both broken and healed, we return to that key question we began with from Rev. Dr. Brett Webb-Mitchell.

Just how would the church look, sound, feel, and move as a fully inclusive body of Christ?

St. Paul's answer to this question is the same answer he gives to the community at Corinth... a fully inclusive church would look, sound, feel and move, like a single body with many parts enlivened and animated by the Holy Spirit herself.

Webb-Mitchell states that Paul's ecclesiology of *church as body* is not mere analogy or helpful metaphor. The church is not "like" a body or "as a body." For Paul, the Church **is** the body of God, literally. We are the living, breathing, moving incarnation of Love on earth. A beautiful amalgam of diverse people and diverse gifts all unified and activated by the one and same Spirit. A Spirit who allots to each individually just as the Spirit chooses.

Indeed, one cannot underestimate the role of the Spirit in Paul's ecclesiology of the body! It is the Holy Spirit that decides which gifts, talents, and service we bring to the greater body of God – not us. Webb-Mitchell reminds us that the Spirit does not play by the same rules as we do, nor move through the same categories we construct. Rather, the Spirit gives out gifts in abundance so Her Body can operate, exist, and function in the world. And most often, the Spirit opts to work through the gifts and abilities of those deemed "the least" by the dominant culture, to animate the works of Grace more perfectly among us. Most often, what is ours to do is discern the will of the Spirit, and then get out of her way.

Jean Vanier, co-founder of the L'arche Movement, an international network of communities where persons of varying abilities create life together, states, *"Each human being, however small or weak, has something to bring to humanity. As we start to really get to know others, as we begin to listen to each other's stories, things begin to change. We begin the movement from exclusion to inclusion, from fear to trust, from closedness to openness, from judgment and prejudice to forgiveness and understanding. It is a movement of the heart."*

Just how will a fully-inclusive Broadway look? Only God knows what is to come. Today it is ours to wrestle with questions not create answers. Answering the questions will fall to the action team over the next few months. But if my time with Jeremiah taught me anything that day, then I can say with

certainly we are walking in the right direction, and I for one, cannot wait to find out where love will lead us.

And as we take this next step together, our church, Broadway Christian Church, can live into the same invitation Paul extends to the Corinthian church... to strive for the greater gifts in full confidence that our God will show us a still more excellent way.

May it be so.

Song of Focus

"You Are Loved"

WORDS AND MUSIC BY ED VARNUM

1. You are a child of God, a special life (just lift your eyes and see),
with gifts to share and with such joy to know (alive and free to be).
Whatever this life may send your way,
above all please know this:
no matter what may happen, you are loved.

If there is fear of tomorrow,
if there is pain or some loss,
there's a power that's greater than sorrow,
there is new life after the cross!

2. You are a child of God, a special life
(there's so much you can do),
an endless universe of possibilities
(and it can still come true).
Whatever this life may send your way,
above all please know this:
no matter what may happen, you are loved.

This life has pathways to choose,
some choices we don't like to make,
but we gain some things as we lose,
things to see with each step we take.

3. You are a child of God.
The stage is yours; it's time to stand and sing!
Just hear that orchestra; you're not alone.
The choir waits in the wings.
Whatever this life may send your way,
above all please know this:

no matter what may happen, you are loved.
Just one thing to remember: you are loved.

BROAD HEARTS BROAD MINDS BROAD REACH