

WHY WE GATHER
Caring for Others Through Social Transformation

“Disability”
(Luke 4:16-30)

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Introduction

1. Nearly 5% of all people commuting to and from work in downtown Minneapolis ride their bicycle regardless of rain or shine, cold and snow, light or dark. When I was invited to be pastor of First Covenant Church and moved downtown seven and a half years ago, I not only couldn't relate to those bicyclers, I thought they were crazy! Not that I didn't ride a bike, because I often rode my bicycle on trails and to parks on warm dry days. But, I never rode my bike to appointments because they were miles apart and didn't even think once about riding my bike at night time.

Then, as I settled into the new pastoral role, I started taking more and more appointments downtown and would be in my car and repeatedly get stuck in traffic, circle blocks struggling to find a parking space for a meeting, and occasionally mistakenly pull into the \$25 an hour parking ramp. On one wintery night I was driving home to where we lived for five years, a condominium just on the other side of the river about one and half miles from here, and the street grid was completely jammed up and my car sat a virtual standstill.

One hour into my mile and a half drive home I was sitting on the 3rd Avenue bridge looking at our condo, pounded my steering wheel and shouted “I could walk faster than this!” Light bulb! That was a moment of awakening to the beginning of a five-year journey of:

- First, realizing that walking was fine, but riding bike was faster! So, I started riding to appointments on warm dry days and remember thinking, “I have never done this before, but I like it!”
- Then, a few months later I thought, well, if I can ride comfortably on a warm dry day, why not throw on some layers and try a *cold* dry day?

(start getting dressed in my winter bicycling gear)

- Then, I bought some light weight rain gear and fenders for my bike and tried a warm slightly wet day. Then a set of goggles and super great wicking gloves for the cold snowy days.
- Then came the day where our second car needed \$1,800 of repairs and I knew that I had only driven it a few thousand miles a year for three years and might be able to do without it. So, we got rid of the second car and barely a few months later after that moved to south Minneapolis about five and a half miles away from downtown and my wife Holly was not enthusiastic about me potentially needing to use her car, I mean the family car for the new commute. Thankfully, we live right on bus line #6, and I could put my bike on the front of the bus and ride. And, at night, then ride home.

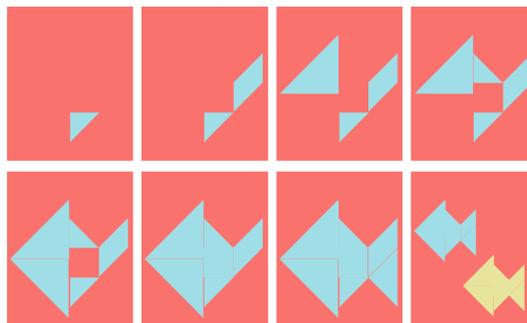
- More fenders, rear bike racks, balaclavas and better clothing, a new highly reflective winter riding coat, swapping out a massive backpack for really bright bike paniers, checking the weather and bus schedule as a wake up routine... and about a year ago I realized that I had made the full conversion to being a year round multi-modal commuter with bicycle as my main mode of transportation!

Now, I think this is perfectly normal! Five years ago I would have looked at myself and thought I was completely out of my mind. Some you here today might think I have lost my mind.

(Take off winter bicycle gear)

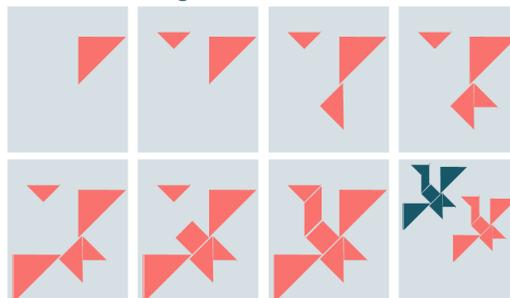
2. What happened? What happened was, my perception of reality and lived experience changed my mind and lifestyle over time. And, in the end I embraced and now advocate for modes of transportation that reduce the amount of car pollution and congestion on the road. And, I am told by church staff and others that burning off some energy between appointments scales back some of my intensity and makes me more tolerable!
3. Why did I share all of this at the beginning of a sermon titled, "Disability"? For a very important reason, but I need take a quick step back and mention we are in a yearlong teaching series called "Why We Gather." This series explores the high level reasons why people gather together outside of work and family for meaningful experiences and asks what it means to do the same as a community of Christ followers. The first segment of the series was...

1. "Growing a Community Devoted to
God, Neighbor + One Another"



"Growing a Community Devoted to God, Neighbor, and One Another." We just finished the second segment on...

2. "Choosing a Personal Transformation"



“Choosing Personal Transformation of body, mind and spirit.” And, today we begin “Caring for Others Through Social Transformation” (Pursuing compassion, mercy, and justice in the world through the creation of networks for good)

4. True to our style at First Covenant Church, we are not going to avoid difficult topics. The next eight teachings are going to be these topics:

- Disability
- Incarceration
- Race and Privilege
- Relationships to Other Faith Traditions
- LGBTQ
- Violence
- Sustainability
- Poverty

These are the some of the most pressing social matters of our time.

5. As you have already experienced in today’s worship, additional layers for these teachings will be programming in our services that emphasize Black History Month in February and Women’s History Month in March. Collectively, these themes and two months focusing on human identity advocacy represent an essential set of convergences for us. The convergence is that we see the importance of both awakening to Christ and awakening to the sacredness of human difference, and the ways such conversions are connected.
 - In saying “awakening to Christ” I mean the awakening of our hearts and minds to the presence of God within us and Jesus Christ as the means of grace and ultimate One whom we follow and imitate in belief and action.
 - In saying “sacredness” I mean a God ordained freedom for people to understand and express who they are and who they are becoming that is to be protected by Christ followers.
 - And, in saying “human difference” I mean the diverse identities that humans have including race, color, religion, gender, gender expression, age, national origin, disability, marital status, and sexual orientation.
6. Now I can give the reason why I began with my conversion to being a multi-modal bicycle commuter: I have been a pastor for more than twenty-five years and have become convinced over time that the most difficult struggles of our churches and society as a whole is that people rarely if ever can be argued and debated into awakening to Christ and protecting the sacredness of human difference, we can only be awakened or converted over time and in proximity to those difference from ourselves. Yes, some of us have sudden conversations to Christ and sudden conversions to the sacredness of human difference. But, only over time can such awakenings transform our souls, minds, and strength such that we then in turn care for others through broader social transformation.

In light of this I am going to first articulate a brief basic theology for the sacredness of human difference and then speak to the topic of disability as the first key illustration of how we can protect a sacred difference through the work of compassion, mercy, and justice.

A. A Theology for the Sacredness of Human Difference

1. In the Covenant Christian tradition, we consider the Scriptures as the Word of God and the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct. The challenge of living out such an elevated claim comes with the reality that our library of holy texts was written over approximately a 6,000-year span of time, and is in substance as much a mirror to the Judeo-Christian messy human experience as it is multiple conversations about our Creator's pull for us to become Christ followers. And, even as hard as some try to sanitize and completely systemize the Bible into one theology on this or that topic, a more honest appraisal points out that there are actually many different and sometime competing theological strands in Scripture which has led to many and sometimes competing Christian religious traditions.
2. One competing theological narrative is that of human sameness versus human difference. As early as Genesis chapter 11 we get a front row seat to the very strange ancient Hebrew account called "The Tower of Babel" where there is a battle between "sameness" and "diversity" with God pointing to difference as necessary to meaningfully populate the world and remind humans of their intrinsic and real vulnerabilities. From there forward in the Scriptures, essential God themes such as "welcome the stranger" across cultural lines¹ get swamped time and again by constantly rising tides of fear of the stranger and projections on to God that we need to annihilate the stranger.

I say "projections" because there is simply no way to square the violence done in the name of God in a few of the more violent Hebrew texts of our Bible and the profound reset in Jesus, the center point of our faith and theology who taught us to love our neighbor and our enemy and pray for those who persecute us. Violence and non-violence is another competing set of theologies in our Scriptures that we hold as the Word of God and the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct. They are both in the texts and we have to make choices as to which we will follow and which look most like Jesus.

3. There was one critical moment in the life of Jesus that I believe is a central text that grounds the larger biblical theological conversation about human difference. In the gospel biography of Luke, chapter four, it is recounted how Jesus returned to Nazareth, his childhood hometown, as a guest speaker at the local synagogue. Chronologically, this was the starting point of Jesus' known ministry, that I am quite sure that he hoped would have gone better. Luke wrote:

¹⁶ He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,

¹ Deuteronomy 10:19; Leviticus 19:34.

to set the oppressed free,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

²⁰ Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. ²¹ He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Luke 4:16-21. NIV

Many Christians consider this Jesus' inaugural address because he quoted an ancient messianic text from the Hebrew book of Isaiah to both frame the content and intent of his work on earth. It was ground breaking, and *very controversial* as Luke reminds us in the rest of the passage. We do not know what Jesus' full sermon was that day but what started as admiration turned to violent rejection. Luke tells us:

²² All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" they asked.

²³ Jesus said to them, "Surely you will quote this proverb to me: 'Physician, heal yourself!' And you will tell me, 'Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.'"

²⁴ "Truly I tell you," he continued, "no prophet is accepted in his hometown.²⁵ I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. ²⁶ Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. ²⁷ And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian."

²⁸ All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. ²⁹ They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff. ³⁰ But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.

Luke 4:22-30. NIV

4. Did you notice that people questioned Jesus when he said he was the fulfillment of the messianic prophesy, but they became unhinged when he made mention of God's favor to people outside of their religious tradition? This entire experience went so poorly because Jesus' hometown did not yet have eyes to see that their religion needed to expand to be about more than just their culture and their social history to that point, and ultimately that non-Jewish people were as important to God as Jewish people. The reference to the widow of Zaraphath, a non-Jewish follower of the local god named "Baal" who was wooed toward God through the generosity of Elijah the Jewish Prophet, and Naaman the Syrian being chosen instead of other Hebrews emphasized this point and was arguably more offensive than Jesus claiming to be the promised Messiah.

For my entire life and until becoming pastor of First Covenant Church I had not heard one sermon or teaching that pointed out the hometown offense at "difference." The point was always been about Jesus being rejected as the Messiah, which was true, but Jesus was ultimately rejected for pointing out that faith in God through Christ is for every person on the planet and emphasizes the sacredness of difference. The Apostle Paul, originally a Jewish leader who became a follower of Christ reinforced this important and often missed point to the degree that he eventually called himself "the apostle to non-Jewish people." And, my friends, it cost him his life in ways not too

different than what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and dozens of other women and men Christ followers did regarding equality for non-white people in the American Civil Rights movement.

5. This inaugural address of Jesus invites, confronts, and exposes our blind spots and religious exclusions today as well because reading across the sweep of Jesus' teachings we learn that the mission of Jesus is not about dividing, its about reconciling.² This is why Jesus, in this inaugural sermon, centralized the hard work of reconciliation, both vertical and horizontal, people to God and people to each other. Reconciliation is the ultimate answer to Jesus' archetypal prayer for God's kingdom to come and his will be done on earth as it is in heaven. In heaven there is no distinction between 'rich and poor'. 'Better than' and 'Less than' is not tolerated—everything and everyone “sees” one another and sits at the same banquet table of life.

Life on earth doesn't look very much like Jesus' banquet table, though. Jesus knew this and in Jesus' interpretation of the ancient Isaiah text he unveiled his and therefore Christian religion's three most important tasks across human differences:

1. Proclaim good news to the poor (the poor was not mostly a reference to money, but rather *all* who existed in disadvantaged or marginalized positions, which in first Century AD included most people, but in a profound way--women, the diseased, and people stuck in lower caste systems) What was Jesus' good news? Their suffering matters to God and is to be a priority interest for all Christ followers.
 2. Proclaiming freedom for prisoners, giving sight for the blind, and setting the oppressed free. This second proclamation encompasses spiritual liberation from sin and blindness to seeing God and the world as they are, healing physical diseases and disabilities through touch and connectedness, and transformation of societal social structures through the God-honoring work of justice and compassion.
 3. Proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor. This line reinforced the previous two because it refers to the ancient Hebrew mercy practice of the cancellation of debts that occurred every seven years and was called “the year of Jubilee”. In the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ he ushered in an era of unstoppable grace, unparalleled mercy, and Jubilee every day of every year, not just one year out of seven.
6. This is the framework of what Christians call “the gospel” or good news of Jesus Christ. And, this frames the Christian work of protecting the sacredness of human difference, even in relation to and across religious lines, which we will discuss in the week that focuses on the topic of relationships to other faith traditions. For the rest of today's teaching let's talk about it in relationship to the topic of disabilities by first hearing from a few people with disabilities:

[ONSCREEN: TRT 3:00]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bwW6mYdJ7Xc>

² Luke 14:20-26.

A. Disability as Difference

1. The World Health Organization points out that over one billion people globally experience disability, which equals one in seven people. They describe disability as “a complex phenomenon reflecting the interaction between features of a person’s body and features of the society in which she or he lives.”³ And, they also point out that overcoming the difficulties faced by people with disabilities requires interventions to remove environmental and social barriers. This is the work of all moral people, but especially Christ followers committed to setting the oppressed free.
2. We face some theological quandaries in Scripture however, because the Bible has very little to say specifically about those of us with disabilities, and when it does there are, again, competing narratives. For instance, in the Hebrew book of Leviticus we are given a long list of people with disabilities and then told that they are forbidden from coming anywhere near the place of worship because they would “profane” it.⁴ Yet, Elijah suffered from depression, famous people had leprosy, Moses had a speech impediment of some kind, King Saul’s grandson Mephibosheth had a mobility impairment, and most importantly, Jesus went out of his way to be near people with disabilities of all kinds as if to completely reverse what was supposedly God’s decree in Leviticus. In everything, though, there is no list that says “these are the classifications of disabilities and here is exactly what a Christ follower is to do.”

Another quandary is that some have read the New Testament and have come to the conclusion that Jesus came to eradicate disability because he performed some miracles that healed some of their disability. The thinking follows, then, that if Christians only had enough belief in miracles and faith in God, all disabilities would be eliminated.

3. Such thinking is false and harmful for several reasons. First, because there is no direct line between human sin or wrongdoing and disability. Nor, does God punish a person or their descendants with disability because of their wrongdoing. Jesus made this very clear. You can look this up for yourself in John chapter 9.⁵ God loves everything and created everything to include difference. And, difference to include disability.
4. Me and my wife Holly, and my family on the Collison side have spent a great deal of our lives living in community and advocating for friends with disabilities of various kinds. I grew up in a home that first introduced me to disability through foster care children that lived with us for a year at a time. Then my parents were hired...

³ <http://www.who.int/topics/disabilities/en/> (accessed 2-4-17)

⁴ Leviticus 21:16-23.

⁵ Read John 9 to see one example.



As co-directors of Ottawa County Community Haven, a farm and home for 60 disabled adults that had in its origins been a poor farm. My family lived in an apartment on the campus and for ten years me and my siblings worked and played alongside the women and men like John who taught me how to play cribbage and George how to be a hard working dairy farmer.

We encountered painful rejection together as well. I learned to stand up to bullies on the school bus ride home that said such things as “Dan lives with ritards.” Something almost animal came out of me that day! The worst was with churches because Larry always sang the same melodious lines no matter what hymn we sang and always sang loud and longer than when the hymn ended. And, after some Sundays with this or that tick any number of members of our community ended up with the same outcome: “we just don’t think this is a good fit.” That continued through two churches until we landed in a church headed by a women pastor who modelled more of a Jesus kind of embrace.

5. So, I grew up in this world of sacred difference, but my wife Holly, as she does time and again, jumped into disability as difference with abandon right after collage. We were in our early 20’s when we ran a home for six men with various disabilities ranging from mental illness and developmental disability to Marfan Syndrome and Autism:



Over the years our lived experience made it abundantly obvious to Holly us that everyone belongs, are loved and created by God, and beautiful just the way they are. And, they have great purpose to bring to the world. The men that lived with us in our home taught us far more about ourselves than about how to operate and live together in a foster care for adults with disabilities.

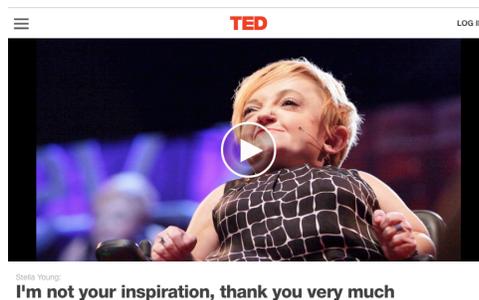
We learned that there is no difference in our humanity even as there were physical differences in our beings. The men carried barely any form of pretense. In fact, coming from a New York music conservatory where Holly and I were compelled to maintain a sense of pretense and façade as performance to living with Kevin, JP, George, Seth, Harold, and Peter was like a cleansing bath that awakened us to our shared foibles around meals, daily routines of laughter and tears, hygiene check-ins (not my favorite thing) and vacations together. It grounded us in our humanity, and our faith.

6. Thomas and Mary Reynolds are also Christ followers and parents to a child who has Tourette's Syndrome, Asperger's Syndrome, Bipolar disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. They have struggled to find community for their son and so Thomas has written a book called, "Vulnerable Communion" where he wrote this:

"Disability need not be denied, decried or overcome as an incomplete humanity, a defect indicating failure or sin. Full personhood is neither diminished by disability nor confirmed by ability. Instead it is a factor of the interdependent relationships we share with one another as creatures loved into being by God and the image of God."⁶

Thomas E. Reynolds

7. This is the second piece of truth that dissolves false theologies and narratives around disability. It is why a friend of mine who is blind once said to me "every time she meets a Christian who wants to pray for healing of her blindness she wants to punch them in the nose!" It is why comedian Stella Young...



...gave a TED talk titled "I'm not your inspiration, thank you very much." In it she described images of disabled people used to raise money for this or that organization is what the disability community calls "Inspiration Porn." She calls it this because she believes that we objectify disabled people for the benefit of nondisabled people and even feed the sentiment to able bodied people "Well, however bad my life is, it could be worse. I could be that person." Most poignantly she said:

...life as a disabled person is actually somewhat difficult. We do overcome some things. But the things that we're overcoming are not the things that you think they are. They are not things to do with our bodies. I use the term "disabled people" quite deliberately, because I subscribe to what's called the social model of disability, which tells us that we are more disabled by the society that we live in than by our bodies and our diagnoses.

⁶ Thomas E Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion A theology of Disability and Hospitality*, Page 42.

8. Based upon a Christian theology of mutual vulnerability, that is one of the best frameworks I have found for Christian activism on behalf of those with disabilities. And, if we have eyes to see, it is also the deeper reason for Jesus' physical healings. Sure, the healing miracles were meant to help us believe in him generally.⁷ However, the deeper personal healing was eliminating the profound social exclusion and enabling women and men, girls and boys, to re-enter their community. This is why Jesus often said "go show yourself to the priest" because they were, for better or for worse, the gatekeepers back into the community.
9. If we are willing to open our eyes and awaken to and advocate for the beautiful equality of people with disabilities, we will find ourselves living in solidarity and community with people with disabilities grounded in the Christian theology of vulnerability and among friends who say and sing "yes I can" along with the creative souls who made this commercial for the 2016 Rio Para-Olympics:

[ONSCREEN:TRT 2:51]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=locLkk3aYIk>

Conclusion and Communion

1. This video celebration of the sacredness of human difference was designed by people who have both awakened to the sacredness of human difference and long been on the path of protecting the journey of people with disabilities. This is a journey that one begins and never ends, just goes deeper. This is true for all who are willing and courageous enough to advocate for those marginalized. We are never done reconciling the differences and fixing the wounds that people do to one another, we only widen the circles with which we do it all.
2. Invitation to a journey. Beginning and going deeper. Reminding ourselves of the sacredness of it all. This language and practice flows out of the Christian practice of Holy Communion that is quintessentially an experience of mutual vulnerability and community in and through Jesus Christ.

It is shocking to realize that vulnerability begins with God. Jesus Christ became vulnerable when being incarnated into human form. Jesus chose the path identification with our pain and suffering that we might experience a more deeply understood human-divine connection and communion with him.

3. If Christian faith and community is new or unformed in your life--I want you to know that at First Covenant we are a grace-filled gathering of people who see ourselves as a family of equals, everyone humbly in need of grace. And, we are committed to a journey of generous and openhanded faith in which everyone is given safe space to journey toward Jesus Christ.

The act of becoming a Christ-follower is the convergence of God moving upon your heart and mind to become a Christ-follower...and you making the decision to believe that Jesus is the Incarnation of God, that he died, rose again, is here right now, and can and *does* forgive the sin and heal the brokenness in your life.

⁷ John 10:38.

The result of such convergence is the greatest mystery of all—spiritual awakening to the eternal presence of Jesus Christ dwelling in your soul through the presence of God’s Holy Spirit leading and guiding you for the rest of your life.

4. New to Christ or renewed in Christ we are *all* invited to the table of God where Christ invites all of us to eat and to drink.
 - At the point you are ready to receive communion I invite you to move into the two main isles and then return to your seats on the outer isles.
 - As you come down the isle please come in a single line so everyone can return to their seats even when a line is present.
 - We have wooden bowls for the purpose of our monthly benevolence offering for those in our congregation who face special financial need.
 - We have gluten free crackers for those whose diets require that alternative.
 - There will be people here to pray with you if you have specific requests to be prayed for.
 - This is an extended time of refreshing that the worship leaders will guide us in.
5. Hear now, the invitation of Jesus to this banquet table of mercy. Jesus said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, he said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim Jesus Christ until he comes again.⁸

Please pray with me

6. God we are here today because of your relentless pursuit of us. We revel in your embrace. We delight in how you create a sense of family and community that honors all that we are and yet transcends our differences with bonds forged through grace and held because of love.

Meet us here. Speak to us now. As we eat and drink these elements, fill us with your presence and renew our souls. In Jesus name, amen.

Benediction

As our new week begins, may we remember to see the importance of both awakening to Christ and awakening to the sacredness of human difference, and the ways such conversions are connected. And, may we live in solidarity with those of us with disabilities grounded in a Christian theology of vulnerability.

Go in peace. Amen.

⁸ 1 Corinthians 11:23-26