

Sermon Discussion Information

Sermon Series: "Caring for Others Through Social Transformation"

Sermon Title: "Disability"

Sermon Text: Luke 4:16-30

Listener's Journey: I want my listener 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, I want my listener to live in solidarity with people with disabilities grounded in a Christian theology of vulnerability.

Unique Quotes from Sermon:

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. 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 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, an 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.

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.

**

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

¹ Deuteronomy 10:19; Leviticus 19:34.

Jesus' full sermon was that day but what started as admiration turned to violent rejection. [READ SCRIPTURE] 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.

**

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.

**

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.

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."

² Luke 14:20-26.

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

⁴ Leviticus 21:16-23.

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.

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.

Three Discussion Questions:

1. What is your first reaction to the idea of “difference” being sacred? (Personal sharing)
2. What part of the Isaiah text that Jesus quoted stands out to you and why? (Exploring the text)
3. Are you a person with disabilities? If so, what is your lived experience like? If not, how do you interact with people with disabilities in your life? (Direct application)

⁵ Read John 9 to see one example.