

Disability Awareness Sunday

January 31,2021

Today is Disability Awareness Sunday in the Peninsula Delaware Conference. The purpose for having a specific Sunday in the Church year is to raise everyone's awareness of disability and to celebrate the ability of people with disabilities. It is also a time to remind ourselves that we can be advocates for the disability community.

Too often when we notice or know of another's different level of ability, we don't know how to respond. We may unthinkingly make degrading comments. Perhaps we stare, or maybe we look away trying to ignore or not notice. We are afraid to say the wrong thing; we are afraid to hurt someone's feelings and we are inhibited by our own feelings of helplessness and inadequacy in the face of the challenges faced daily by the Disabled community OR the DIFFERENTLY ABLED COMMUNITY

How do we decided who is disabled? How do we decide what is normal??? I always say normal is a setting on your dryer. The dictionary simply says, "conforming to a standard; usually typical or expected".

As a noun it is a synonym to usual, average, or typical, condition.

ORDINARY, COMMON, STANDARD.....I'm not sure I want to be normal

At a clergy session, Bishop Johnson showed a video. It included an executive in a wheelchair coming to his first day at work at a new office. All the employees were lined up at the office door to greet their new boss. When he rolled in in a wheelchair, they didn't know what to do or how to act. One of the secretaries started shouting at him. It was funny because so often we don't know how to act around people with disabilities. We don't know

what to do or say when confronted with a situation that may be new to us. First and foremost, we need to treat everyone with respect. If we do that we don't have to worry about if we are doing the right thing.

It's important to remember that not all disabilities are visible. Many are hidden. Some people are great at hiding their disability.

Take time to remember a time when you couldn't do everything you wanted to. Perhaps remembering a time when you were injured, wearing a brace, walking with crutches, or even hospitalized. Perhaps you remember a time when you were so down in the dumps you didn't want to do anything or talk to anyone.

Try to remember what you were feeling at that time. Were you feeling frustration, helplessness, sadness or maybe even anger? And then try to imagine what it would be like if that situation never went away. How would you face life? How would you like others to think of you or even treat you?

The greatest challenge for any community is to realize that the Disabled are not "THEM, THOSE people over there," but coming to the awareness that THEY are US. All of us are disabled in one way or another. And that is the message of the Gospel, the Good News brought to us by Jesus Christ. In this season of Epiphanies, our greatest hope is that we come to that realization, that identification of all of us as broken, of all of us as needing help. And then put into practice God's call of love for one another, as God has loved us. For it is in God's vision of each of us, completely whole and well, that we are all healed. The paradigm begins to shift.

Desmond Tutu stated, "the paradigm shift begins to occur when we realize that I am not my brother's or my sister's keeper but that I am my brother's brother and my sister's sister."

Disability touches all of us.

If each dispersion with a disability has only one person caring for them there are so many more people affected by disability. Think about it, if your husband, wife, child, or parent who is in a wheelchair user couldn't get into church then the whole family can't get into church.

Again, Disability isn't just about wheelchairs. Less than 10% of people with a disability are wheelchair users. There are many more hidden problems that people have that may disable them in some way. Those with limited vision struggle with inadequate lighting to read our small print documents and sometimes miss the details in our visual graphics or fail to recognize the colors in our color-coded charts and signs. And we don't even notice – much less try to understand.

Those who are deaf and hearing impaired try valiantly to understand our fast-paced monotone presentations without appearing to struggle. And we make no effort to learn more effective ways to communicate.

Those with mobility challenges struggle with our heavy doors and many steps and long hallways and crowded spaces and we complain about the cost and inconvenience of providing greater accessibility. Then we add insult to injury when we avoid them and treat them as if their challenges are contagious.

When people struggle with mental health issues, in our ignorance, we think they are not trying or don't have enough faith. We fail to educate ourselves about the prevalence and reality of depression, addiction, bipolar disease, obsessive compulsive disorders, paranoia, schizophrenia, and the countless other diseases of the brain. We fail to advocate for adequate, effective, and affordable treatment options.

A quarter of all adult Americans have a mental disorder and over half will develop at least one during their lifetime

While many people can experience mental health issues, mental illness occurs when symptoms cause frequent stress or begin interfering with the normal functions of everyday life.

Often, if someone has a disability they can hide, they will. We have been brought up to believe that we must be normal, that we must be like everyone else. And if someone is brave enough to admit to a hidden disability, we act as if they are complaining, or looking for sympathy. We act as if they have done something wrong or that they are somehow a lesser person for their situation. It is for this reason people continue to hide disabilities. They don't want to be treated differently than anyone else.

Disabilities affect life in general, not just one area of life.

Family life, work, education, transportation, social life and even self-esteem are affected.

There is a two-way link between poverty and disability. This link creates a vicious circle. Poor people are more at risk of acquiring a disability because of lack of access to good nutrition, health care, sanitation, as well as safe living and working conditions. Once this occurs, people face barriers to the education, employment, and public services that can help them escape poverty.

Dr. Amartya Sen pointed out in his keynote address at the World Bank's conference on disability, the poverty line for disabled people should consider the extra expenses they incur in exercising what purchasing power they do have. A study in the United Kingdom found that the poverty rate for disabled people was 23.1 percent compared to 17.9 percent for non-disabled people, but when extra expenses associated with being disabled were considered, the poverty rate for people with disabilities shot up to 47.4 percent.

As Christians we need to understand the issues that both persons with disabilities and their and care givers face. The sad reality is that our churches often reflect society's lack of understanding and care for others.

So why don't we see more disabled people in our churches? One would think the church is a place where they would be accepted. one would think that church would be a place to get assistance. One would think the church would be full of love reaching out and embracing people who are different that the Norm. Isn't the church a place of love and acceptance?

One reason we don't experience the wholeness of community in the church is that our society traditionally approaches disability from what is called the medical model of disability. This model sees disabled people as 'having a problem', which needs 'fixing or curing'. The emphasis is on what is 'wrong' with them, and they are treated as in need of healing or in need of pity and having to be cared for. This has often led to disabled people losing control over their lives. The church seems to reflect society's ideas rather than being the counter-culture that we need to be.

We all have the desire to be productive members of society. We all want friends. Our goal should be to help one another along the way. None of us are complete in ourselves. We are complete only in Christ and in community

We see many stories in the Gospels, where Jesus dealt with people who were differently abled.

In the Gospels there are 35 miracles recorded. 23 of these involved disabled people. 6 were about people with mental illness and 17 involved people with physical disability – including blindness, deafness, a withered hand, leprosy, and the paralyzed man.

In one story of a paralyzed man, (there is more than one) Jesus teaches us about our responsibility to people with disabilities. In the time of the story houses were built of stone and had flat roofs made of mud mixed with straw. Outside stairways led to the roof. The man's 4 friends realized that they couldn't get the man near Jesus by normal means, so they took the outside route and made enough of a hole in the roof to get to the man to Jesus. The man would never have gotten to Jesus by himself; he needed the help of his friends. They recognized his needs and did something about it. When we see someone in need do, we act? We can all help people with a disability just like the 4 friends in the Gospel story.

Perhaps how to act or what to do is not as obvious as it was in this case. What do we do? I would say that the best thing to do is ask if we can be of help and if so how. Do not assume you know what is best for someone else.

I have been a member of the disability community for almost 30 years. I am a member over group called UMAMD. This stands for united Methodists Association of ministers with disabilities. Pastors in our denomination struggle with disabilities and yet God has placed a call in our lives, and we are fulfilling that call despite or because of a disability.

I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder my last year in seminary. Looking back over my life, I can see the signposts along the way. I was in great despair because I began my pastoral ministry the same year. I prayed and prayed. I had people pray for me. I kept waiting for a cure. I kept waiting for my miracle. I had struggle after struggle fulfilling my call. There were times when I was ready to quit but God would remind me that he called me and if he called me, he would enable me to do what he called me to do. Over the years I had people judge me and question my

adequacy and effectiveness for the pastorate. They tried to decide ahead of time what I could and could not do. They tried to decide whether God called me. What I can say 30 years later is that not only did God call me, but he equipped me. And although I did not find the miracle of a cure, I found the miracle of being able to serve despite and because of being differently abled.

Many of us in the Association of ministers with disabilities have written our stories and publish them in a book called "Speaking Out". If you are interested in reading these stories, I have several of these books available. You can buy them on Amazon, but I keep my own stash to share. If you are interested in learning more about how God uses people who are differently abled. Call me and I will get you a book.

There is nothing simple about life. it can be made even more complex through the diversity and various gifts and struggles that we all have. If I can say one thing about ministry with the disability community it would be that we need to be aware that we are all people in need of God's grace. There is not one of us that stands on our own merit, but we stand and live by the grace of God. When asked what greatest commandment was, Jesus said love the Lord your God with all your heart soul and mind and love your neighbor as yourself.

Dorothy Day: (Catholic Worker Movement) "the greatest challenge of the day is how to bring about a revolution of the heart, a revolution which has to start with each one of us."

Let there be a revolution of the heart in each of us that we may love our brothers and sisters and all of God's children. May we see the reflection of God in each of us and know that he loves us with an everlasting love.