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A place for all God’s children

by Lisa Heffernan

Just about every Sunday morning, three men from a nearby group home for adults with disabilities come to worship at the congregation I serve. Accompanied by their carer for the day, they enter the sanctuary and say hello to the ushers and me before picking up bulletins and taking their places in the pews.

It took me a little time to feel comfortable greeting and chatting with them as I would with anyone else who comes to the church doors. Even so, our weekly exchange of hellos still felt a little awkward and stilted. I just wasn’t sure how to communicate authentically with them. “What could I do differently,” I wondered, “to be a better communicator and pastor with and for them?”


In hindsight, this feels strange to admit, since I have a disability myself. Why should I feel uncomfortable around them, while expecting everyone else to feel comfortable around me?

To be perfectly honest, this remained a struggle for me. Even with all my training and interest in disability theology and ministry, I just didn’t know how to communicate with these three parishioners. What could I do differently? Well, as it turns out, I could take a note from my own experiences.

You see, I’m not the kind of person who doesn’t want you to see or notice that I have a disability. Nor do I want others to view my disability as something negative or to be pitied. My life is no more or less full because I use a wheelchair. Living with spina bifida is my reality. It’s a huge part of my identity. I would not be who I am otherwise.

And that’s when the light went on for me. Perhaps, I thought, the same is true for these three faithful neighbors who so dependably show up each week to worship at the church I serve.





What gifts do they bring to the congregation's life together? What could I or others in the congregation do to be more welcoming, so that any person with a disability could participate in worship and activities to the fullest?

It's taken building relationships with Jon*, Monte*, and Bert* to help me think through some of that. Are we best chums? Honestly, no. But each week I get to see and acknowledge Jon's joy as he waves, smiles, and points to the hat he wears each week in support of his favorite team. Will the team win big this year, Jon? Oh, you bet! Each week I get to shake Monte's hand and wish him well for the coming days and ask him if he will get to spend a little time with his sister and nephews. Each week, I get to remind Bert that he's "a good person too" as he says the same of me. And we get to chat a little bit about the pride he has in his family, even though many of them have died.

Most weeks, with joy and sincerity, I get to proclaim God's grace and love to them when I say, "This is the body of Christ, given for you" as I place the bit of communion bread in their hand. I don't care if they can explain without error Martin Luther's explanation of what Holy Communion means. What I care about is that they know God loves them just as they are. And, trust me, they do.

In those small exchanges, a relationship has been built with these neighbors, one that has helped me to see each one's humanity, gifts, and abilities, as well as the ways God's love is revealed in their relationships with one another, their carers, and all the people in their lives who embrace and accept them. It also brings me a great deal of joy to see many others in the congregation embrace them as well. It's not unusual for the ushers to ask Jon, Bert, or Monte to assist with handing out bulletins or collecting that week's offering. When I see that, I know that our neighbors feel welcome in worship each week. And I thank God for that.

Now, do we sometimes mess up and do things that are less than helpful in being welcoming? Absolutely. Sometimes I forget that our methods of giving and receiving Holy Communion are not always so easy when you struggle with mobility or impaired vision. At too many congregational events, Jon, Bert, and Monte find themselves along together at their own table, which breaks my heart. I suppose it other parishioners' fear of the unknown or of not knowing how to communicate that is at the root of this.

My prayer is that I and others can become a model of hospitality for those who aren't as comfortable spending time with them. Perhaps it will take education about disabilities too – I'm just not sure yet. What I do know is that I'm thankful for the presence of Monte, Jon, and Bert each Sunday, and for the joy and gifts they share with the community—with their community of faith.

But a recent conversation with Bert has been gnawing at me. He likes to chat with me for what seems a little too long to those who want to hustle through the greeting line at the end of worship. Sometimes I'll chat for a minute and then gently tell him that we'll have to talk more next week – but that Sunday, I couldn't do that to him.

During the final hymn, Bert had come up to me with tears in his eyes and told me that he wants to be buried with his parents. It totally caught me off guard and I didn't know what to say. I think that I thanked him for sharing something so important with me, and that I thought it was great that he still thought so much of his family as to be thinking about that. This conversation continued in the greeting line, only his tears flowed a little more at that point. Sensing the tension of his carer and of the people behind him, I reminded him that I thought it was great that he had that in mind and that it showed just how much he loved his family. With that, his carer rushed all three out the door, and I was left feeling deflated.

Thankfully, one of Bert's other carers, a member of the congregation, was at worship on Sunday too. I asked him to check in with Bert just to make sure he was okay, and in that moment, my heart was sad for him. In that moment, the fullness of his humanity came through to me, and I silently prayed that those who help at the group home would not dismiss his grief. Bert, Jon, and Monte – they aren't just some disabled men who show up for worship each week. They are God's children and they have a place to belong in the congregation I serve. And I hope that, as my pastoral relationship with them continues to build, that God will grant us—all of us—the ability to embrace one another and all that we bring to the table.

*Names changed.

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Belonging to the body of Christ

by Lisa Heffernan

Most of the time, I hate my feet. They're tiny, have terrible circulation, get puffy sometimes, and I had a wound on one toes that stuck around for almost six years. As a paraplegic who was born with spina bifida, my relationship with my feet and legs is just strange anyway. I don't walk, so what do I need to take care of them for?

That was my thought, anyway, for quite a long time. What really mattered were my arms and core muscles! Those are strong and I rely on that strength to keep me independent and healthy.

Once someone unthinkingly said to me, "You should just get rid of your feet. You don't use them anyway, right?"

The memory of that comment makes me cringe now, and not just because it has to do with my own body. I know I'd still be a whole person even if I didn't have my feet. I cringe because that comment makes me wonder: Would it be right to cut off or remove a part of a body that is weaker or less functional? No – at least not for me.

I can't speak for others who have physical disabilities and what the realities of their lives are. For me, though, my mind goes down a theological rabbit hole and falls into my favorite piece of scripture: 1 Corinthians 12, when I ponder what it means to belong—however you are embodied or gifted—to the body of Christ.

If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? 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. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. (1 Corinthians 12:15-27)

Paul reminds the believers at Corinth that they are indeed a community, meant to live, work, and serve interdependently. They are the body of Christ, joined to one another through and by Christ himself. Does the body need each part? Yes! Because God has given each part, each member, a place to belong.

Often I wonder how the church in all its forms is succeeding at living together as this one body, with its many parts valued, loved and honored.


Do we look at our siblings in Christ with all their different gifts, abilities, and disabilities as assets to our life together? Do we even bother to care for anyone whom we deem less worthy to be a part of the body of Christ?

I see great things, great ministry that we as the ELCA are doing to become more inclusive and willing to live out our baptismal call to care for everyone whom God has made. I have the privilege of serving as a part of the ELCA Disability Ministries team, and it is so encouraging—indeed it is a gift from God—to see how many congregations and ministries are doing the hard work of becoming more accessible and welcoming to people with disabilities.

We are the body of Christ, together. If we aren't all together at the table, we miss out on relationship and experiencing how God moves and acts in all people.

I love getting to talk with other leaders about the ways in which we can adapt our worship and our educational opportunities to be more inclusive too. It makes me proud of our congregations, leaders, and volunteers who understand Paul's words: We are the body of Christ, together. If we aren't all together at the table, we miss out on relationship and experiencing how God moves and acts in all people.

Do we always do this well? No, not really. We're still pretty good at telling each other that we don't belong for any kind of reason. And I honestly think we will continue to build relationships and resources to make our houses of worship and lives together more accessible – in all senses of the word. But that's a good thing: Finding and building



resources builds up the body. It makes the body richer when we look at another person and say “You belong here, too. You are God’s child, too. We’ll figure this out together.” (This is something that my best friends from college and seminary were particularly good at saying to me when we faced obstacles.) The body of Christ is growing stronger and more accessible as more and more people are being welcomed, seen, heard, and loved at our Lord’s Table.

Over the years, that wound on my right big toe – the wound that wouldn’t heal – became a sort of wake-up call for me to start caring for my little purple feet and legs better, even though I don’t use them the same way many other people do. My struggle with that wound reminded me that the whole body matters, it has value. As I try each day figure out how I belong in this body of Christ as a person and pastor with a disability, Paul’s words to the church in Corinth and God’s promises of grace and hope cling more tightly than that dastardly wound ever did. I have a place in this body of Christ. So do you. So do each one of us: those with disabilities, those without – everyone. We belong to Christ and to one another. May we ever strive for a full union of our many members.

Discussion questions:

1. How can we work together, with our abilities and disabilities, to strengthen our lives together as followers of Christ?
2. Who do we most value in our congregations and lives? Who do we value less or not at all? Why?
3. How can congregations begin to think about the accessibility of their churches, both in a physical and relational sense? Where may God be leading your congregation as you consider how you might become more accessible or how you might learn more about our siblings in Christ who have disabilities?

Closing prayer:

God of all people, We thank you for the gifts you give each one of us to serve in the name of Jesus Christ. Help us to care for and love one another, especially those whom we may view as lesser than ourselves. Help us to see each other’s minds, bodies, and hearts as beautiful in their own ways, as we seek to create a church without barriers of any kind. May we see one another as your beloved children, each needed to participate in your mission of love and justice in our world. Amen.

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