

Differently Abled

As you remember from last Sunday, two ego-driven disciples, James and John, wanted Jesus to find a special place for them in heaven—one seated on Jesus' right and the other on his left. And Jesus essentially tells them, "Forget it. You are blind to what I have taught you to look for: whoever would be great among you must be servant of all."

Their ears must have still been stinging when James and John walked into Jericho with Jesus, presumably with the rest of the twelve disciples. We don't know what happens while they are in town. It is what happens on their way out of town that catches the gospel writer's eye. Jesus asks a blind beggar by the name of Bartimaeus the very same question he had asked James and John earlier, "What do you want me to do for you?" And in sharp contrast to how James and John answered, this humble beggar simply says, "My teacher, let me see again."

There are many aspects of this story of Jesus healing Bartimaeus that makes it extraordinary. The first is Bartimaeus' inner strength and incredible faith that compelled him to cry out to Jesus above the noise of the congested traffic on the road from Jericho to Jerusalem.

The roadside in his day was a place inhabited by marginalized persons. This is where he has been told he belongs. It is a lonely place. It doesn't appear that Bartimaeus has any friends in the crowd, except the one friend that means the most, Jesus.

In contrast to the twelve able-bodied disciples who are spiritually blind, Bartimaeus is the one who sees clearly and is most able to lead others to the power and love of Jesus. Bartimaeus, free from the disease of ego-inflammation, embraces the path of radical humility and faith. His utter dependence on the mercy of God is revealed when he cries out for all to hear: "Son of David, Have Mercy on me." When Bartimaeus throws down his cloak to come over to Jesus he is getting rid of the only security he knows. His cloak was what he would have likely been using to catch coins tossed at him by passersby.

Bartimaeus is extraordinary in another way. He reminds us of the differently abled in our own society, some 54 million adults and children, who live with some major form of physical, cognitive, emotional, or mental health challenge.

I am willing to wager that there isn't a person in this church who hasn't personally been impacted by some kind of serious mind, body, spirit or emotional challenge or known a loved one who has; and yet, unlike Bartimaeus, we have often chosen to remain silent about our journeys and our need for understanding, love, and practical assistance.

It should be no surprise to us then that the rate of Church attendance among those challenged in these ways is significantly lower than the general population. Many of these challenges that so many struggle with are very visible as in the case of those who need wheel chairs. Others live with much less visible challenges such as dyslexia or some form of learning difference. I am one of these persons. It is only through the grace of God and perseverance that I made it through the rigors of seminary education without the benefit of accommodations.

A modern day example of the spirit of Bartimaeus crying out to be heard and acknowledged is the brave and bold witness of many activists that led to the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 whose 25th anniversary was celebrated this year. The ADA is a wide-ranging civil rights law that prohibits discrimination based on disability. It mirrors our own statement of equality found in our Episcopal Book of Common Prayer. It is found in our baptismal covenant when we are asked, "Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?" To which we are urged to respond, "I will, with God's help."

Shortly before the American with Disability Act was passed in 1990, activists gathered in front of our nation's Capitol; they shed their crutches, wheelchairs, and other assistive devices, and immediately proceeded to crawl and pull their bodies up all 100 of the Capitol's front steps. As the activists did so, many of them chanted "ADA now," and "Vote. Now!" Jennifer Keelan, a second grader with cerebral palsy, was videotaped as she pulled herself up the steps, using mostly her hands and arms, full of the spirit of Bartimaeus, cried out, "I'll take all night if I have to."

The "Capitol Crawl" of 1990 is seen by many present-day disability activists in the United States as being the single action most responsible for getting the ADA passed into law. As of 2015 the enactment of the ADA has resulted in significant progress helping the differently abled begin to regain their dignity and rightful place within our society.

Sadly, over the years some of the strongest opposition to the disability rights movement has come from religious groups who have opposed it on grounds of separation of Church and State and that it would be too costly to fund the changes to make full accessibility a reality. I am pleased to inform you that the General Convention of the Episcopal Church has consistently supported over the past several years the inclusion of the differently abled into the full life of the Church even though we have a long ways to go.

We here at St. Thomas have in our own way made accessibility a higher priority with the building of the Ebsworth Life Center which with its elevator and bathrooms is a meaningful step in the right direction. As we all prepare for in-gathering Sunday I would like all of us to consider ways to financially support the ways that our worship space could be more accessible: from extra spaces for wheel chairs, to continued improvements to our sound system, to architectural changes. It is troubling that our altar area, the symbolic center of our ritual life as a religious community, is not fully accessible because of its steps and communion rails. My dream purchase would be a van with a wheelchair lift and a pool of dedicated drivers.

But even more importantly if we as the Body of Christ are truly going to be able to say to all who come here, “Take heart, Jesus is calling you” we will need to continue to better equip ushers, worship leaders, teachers, all of us, to engage with and support those with special needs. Not only because they and their families need our help but also because we need what they have to be whole.

The story of Bartimaeus’ cry for healing reminds us that the power and depth of faith is not dependent on how perfect our bodies are, how mentally sharp our minds happen to be, or how balanced our emotions are; the power of our faith is released when we throw off the cloak of self-sufficiency, acknowledge our vulnerability before Jesus, and allow the goodness glue of God’s love and mercy to bring us into deeper communion with God and each other. Amen.

RESOURCES

1. **That All May Worship: An Interfaith Welcome to People With Disabilities.** (<http://www.aapd.com/what-we-do/interfaith/that-all-may-worship/that-all-may-worship.pdf>)
2. **The Episcopal Disability Network** (www.episcability.org)
This website includes information on resources, theology, scripture, General Convention resolutions, and a network of other Episcopalians involved in parish, diocesan, and national level ministries.

