



Believers in the Word Full Gospel Ministry
Savannah, Georgia

DISABILITY AWARENESS

CULTURAL RESOURCES

See today's Worship Unit for a comprehensive list of ways to assist persons in your congregation who have disabilities.

Sunday, October 10, 2010

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Introduction

Lection - John 9:1-41 (Key Verses 1-12) (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. (v. 2) His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (v. 3) Jesus

answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. (v. 4) We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. (v. 5) As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” (v. 6) When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, (v. 7) saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. (v. 8) The neighbours and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” (v. 9) Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” (v. 10) But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” (v. 11) He answered, “The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ Then I went and washed and received my sight.” (v. 12) They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

I love the scriptural foundation for this unit. It is yet another revelation of the transformative power of the teachings of Jesus Christ. It was thought that this man’s blindness must have been the result of some terrible sin by him or his parents. Jesus responded, “He was born blind so God’s works might be revealed in him.” What a revelatory statement! I am working on this unit in the wake of the horrific earthquake devastation in Haiti. On the Thursday morning when it happened I was in front of my television crying, howling out loud in sorrow at the images. Then, I was up, determined to work out how I could reach out in support. This devastation, loss and pain to so many is also an opportunity for me to stretch my inner heart. For we are taught to help those in need and also taught that the benefit comes to those who give as well as those who receive. So, assessing my ground and bracing myself, I have been reaching out, trusting that the extension of my hand and resources will provide an anchor for some in need of support.

I. Etymology Notes

Disability from the 1570s from *disable* which from the mid 15th century “dis” as the opposite of “ablen”- a verb meaning to make fit. Thus “dis=ablen” conveys the notion of “not making fit” or “to not be fit,” or to not be “whole.”¹

II. Difference

Each person being different is such an essential part of the human experience that it is difficult to imagine a reality where people are identical. However, we live in a society that weighs difference and uses difference to establish social categories and boundaries. There are limits to the extent difference is acceptable and interesting. Socially and politically much work and struggle has gone into establishing equity and access between groups of humans who share differences within the broader definition of what is “normal.” Groups of humans who share a physical set of markers, whether skin color, eyes, language, body type or hair, have taken up the struggle to force new boundaries where persons will not be separated because of their differences.

Those who have been called “disabled” in their struggle for increased access to the full offerings their communities provide to those considered “normal” began to say that they are not “dis-abled” as much as “differently-abled” and began to wage a struggle for change that would allow them to have their communities restructured to assure them access in the community. Sidewalks were restructured for wheelchair access. Buses and trains had seats reserved for persons who needed mobility support, and were fitted with steps that lowered for easier access. Restaurants that did not allow dogs by law could no longer keep out service dogs.

III. Human Variability or Human Variation

The Linux Information Project in creating a statement for why computers are used by a wide and varied range of humans defined human variability or variation:

Human variability, or human variation, is the range of possible values for any measurable characteristic, physical or mental, of human beings. Differences can be trivial or important, transient or permanent, voluntary or involuntary, congenital or acquired, genetic or environmental. This article discusses variabilities that characterize a person for all or much of his or her lifetime, and these variabilities are perceived as not purely learned or readily changed (such as religion, language, customs, or tastes can be readily changed).

The social value put on these differences by the society in which one lives affects every aspect of a person's life.²

Differently abled replacing handicapped or disabled was coined by the US Democratic National Committee in the early 1980s as a more acceptable term than handicapped (or, in the UK, disabled). The motivation seems to have been both a genuine attempt to view the people previously called handicapped in a more positive light and also as a need to be seen as politically correct. *The Los Angeles Times* critically reported in 1985: "In a valiant effort to find a kinder term than handicapped, the Democratic National Committee has coined differently abled. The committee itself shows signs of being differently abled in the use of English."³

IV. A Song About a Blind Man

The Golden Gate Quartet made famous the Bible story of Blind Bartimus. Lead singer and quartet ballad songwriter, Bill William Johnson, created the song story. The text and an MP3 file of the song by the quartet follow:

Blind Bartimus

Chorus:

Well old Blind Bartimus stood on the way
Blind Bartimus stood on the way,
Well old Blind Bartimus stood on the way, cryin'

Oh Oh Lordy have mercy on me

Verses:

In my Lord's bible in the book of James
Christ was a-healin' the crippled and the lame
Given the poor and the needy bread,
Healin' the sick and a-raisin' the dead

Well they tell me when he came thru Galilee
He passed by a man who could not see
The man was blind, and crippled from birth;
They tell me that his name was Blind Bartimus

When Bartimus heard that the Lord was nigh
He fell on his knees and began to cry
Oh thou man from Galilee
Cryin' Great God Almighty have mercy on me

Cryin' Oh Lord
(Son of David)
Oh Lord
(Mary's baby)
Oh Lord
(Bleeding Lamb)
Oh Lord (Son of man) (Repeat)
Then my God stopped, looked around
He saw Blind Bartimus on the ground
He touched his eyes with the palm of his hand
Blind Bartimus saw like a natural man.
Repeat⁴



09 Blind Barnabas.mp3

V. Personal Lessons

- (a) I went to a county school in Southwest Georgia. My teacher was Mamie Daniels. One of my earliest memories of that time is of Joe Louis, one of the students who sometimes had epileptic seizures, which we then called “fits.” He was actually called an “epileptic” and, as such, his condition defined him in a specific group. This was not the case in our school. It was the late 1940s and school was one room of about thirty students in seven grades with one teacher. In the winter, the room was heated by a big pot belly stove. If this student had a “fit,” our teacher was trained to take care of him so that he would not suffer any injury. We were to be sure to keep him from getting to the stove—for in this state, he seemed to be

drawn to heat; ease him to the floor and get a wooden stick into his mouth to keep him from biting his tongue. I saw him have seizures many times, and also saw the larger boys get to him and keep him from getting to the stove and putting the wooden stick in his mouth and holding him strongly and gently until he was quiet again. This was an early example for me that one could be restrained without injury.

The first graders sat in the first row nearest the stove and I still remember my worry: if Joe Louis had a seizure and was headed for the stove, would I be able to get between him and the stove and hold him until help came. I was four at the time, and Joe Louis was big and strong and, when seizing, his strength was increased. I thought I could get between him and the stove and hold one of his legs until help arrived. I never figured out how I was going to get him to the floor to keep him from biting his tongue. Luckily for Joe Louis, my determination to serve in that capacity was never tested; the entire school was charged with being his partner and the stronger students were always there. When the seizure passed, we all settled down and the classes resumed. This was our “normal.”

- (b) I assisted in forming the first interracial folk festival tour to travel in the south in 1965. As an extension and expansion of the Civil Rights Movement, the Southern Folk Festival brought the traditional music of the South of black and white cultures to the concert stage. Off stage, we struggled with finding hotel space, traveling in cars as an interracial group, sometimes followed out of town by hostile whites. It was a courageous group of singers who took that first tour. Among them was a blind street singer, Rev. Pearlie Brown of Americus and Macon, Georgia. He was a fine singer and played bottleneck styled guitar. He was important for the soul of the tour because he was fearless and always ready to move forward. He had been a street singer for a long time and daily placed himself in the world offering his singing as a means of earning a living and carrying out his ministry. He taught me a lot about stepping outside of one’s safety zone. He also taught me the songs he had learned from his grandmother, who had been sold on the auction block in Americus, Georgia as a slave after being walked from Virginia. I heard him sing the spiritual Steal Away, and I traded in my singing and meaning learned of the song in elementary school for his, learned from his grandmother...

*My Lord he calls me
He calls me by the thunder.
The trumpet sounds within-a my soul...
I ain’ got long to stay here.*

The sound of his singing carried the power held within the lyrics. His grandmother told him about weaving branches to grow bush arbors in the woods where meetings could be held out of the sight and hearing of the plantation house...

Green trees are bending

Poor sinner stands a trembling
The trumpet sounds within-a my soul
I ain' got long to stay here.

- (c) My sister Mae Frances was the sickest of my mother's eight children and was diagnosed with an inoperable cancer in her early thirties. The treatment of the time, cobalt, greatly reduced the tumor, but also resulted in paralysis and she lived the rest of her life using a wheelchair for mobility. Part of the time she lived with me in Atlanta, Georgia until she moved into her own home. Eventually purchasing her own home, she also drove her own car. Trained as a sociologist, she was fierce about the rights of differently abled people. One day, I took her to the grocery store and she said to me, you can go in there, but I don't support places that keep me barred. I had never until that day, noticed the posts surrounding the opening to the large grocery store that would keep grocery carts from being stolen. In this case, these metal posts also kept wheelchairs out. From that day, with or without Mae Frances, I always checked to see if a wheelchair could enter a place of business before going in. She also taught me about taking risks. She said, if you don't risk failure you will never experience success. I carry her with me and, though she died in 1985, her spirit continues to flow strongly in my life.

VI. The American Disability Act (ADA)⁵

The following information is excerpted from the Core Curriculum developed by Adaptive Environments, Inc. for the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research. The ADA has been amended several times since its passage in 1990 and is undergoing continuous interpretation in the court systems.

General Definition

The ADA has a three-part definition of "disability." This definition reflects the specific types of discrimination experienced by people with disabilities. Accordingly, it is not the same as the definition of disability offered relative to other laws, such as state workers' compensation laws or other federal or state laws that provide benefits for people with disabilities and for disabled veterans.

Under the ADA, an individual with a disability is a person who:

1. has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities;
2. has a record of such an impairment; or
3. is regarded as having such an impairment.

Physical and Mental Impairments

A physical impairment is defined by the ADA as: "Any physiological disorder or condition, cosmetic disfigurement, or anatomical loss affecting one or more of the following body systems: neurological, musculoskeletal, special sense organs, respiratory

(including speech organs), cardiovascular, reproductive, digestive, genitourinary, hemic and lymphatic, skin, and endocrine."

Neither the statute nor the regulations lists all diseases or conditions that make up "physical or mental impairments" because it would be impossible to provide a comprehensive list, given the variety of possible impairments.

A mental impairment is defined by the ADA as: "...any mental or psychological disorder, such as mental retardation, organic brain syndrome, emotional or mental illness, and specific learning disabilities." Neither the statute nor the regulations list all diseases or conditions that make up "physical or mental impairments" because it would be impossible to provide a comprehensive list, given the variety of possible impairments. An impairment under the ADA is a physiological or mental disorder; simple physical characteristics, therefore, such as eye or hair color, left-handedness, or height or weight within a normal range, are not impairments. A physical condition that is not the result of a physiological disorder, such as pregnancy, or a predisposition to a certain disease would not be an impairment. Similarly, personality traits such as poor judgment, quick temper or irresponsible behavior, are not themselves impairments. Environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantages, such as lack of education or a prison record also are not impairments.

Example:

A person who cannot read due to dyslexia is an individual with a disability because dyslexia, which is a learning disability, is an impairment. But a person who cannot read because she dropped out of school is not an individual with a disability, because lack of education is not viewed as an impairment.

"Stress" and "depression" are conditions that may or may not be considered impairments, depending on whether these conditions result from a documented physiological or mental disorder.

Example:

A person suffering from general "stress" because of job or personal life pressures would not be considered to have an impairment. However, if this person is diagnosed by a psychiatrist as having an identifiable chronic stress disorder, s/he would have an impairment that may be a disability.

A person who has a contagious disease has an impairment.

Example:

Infection with the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is an impairment. The Supreme Court has ruled that an individual with tuberculosis which affected her respiratory system had an impairment under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.

Substantially Limits

An impairment is a "disability" under the ADA only if it substantially limits one or more major life activities. An individual must be unable to perform, or be significantly limited in the ability to perform, an activity compared to an average person in the general population.

The regulations provide three factors to consider in determining whether a person's impairment substantially limits a major life activity:

1. its nature and severity;
2. how long it will last or is expected to last;
3. its permanent or long term impact, or expected impact.

Examples:

A person with a minor vision impairment, such as 20/40 vision, does not have a substantial impairment of the major life activity of seeing. A person who can walk for 10 miles continuously is not substantially limited in walking merely because, on the eleventh mile, he or she begins to experience pain, because most people would not be able to walk eleven miles without experiencing some discomfort.

These factors must be considered because, generally, it is not the name of an impairment or a condition that determines whether a person is protected by the ADA, but rather the **effect** of an impairment or condition on the life of a particular person. Some impairments, such as blindness, deafness, HIV infection or AIDS, are by their nature substantially limiting, but many other impairments may be disabling for some individuals but not for others, depending on the impact on their activities.⁶

VII. Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) is the title of the law signed on July 26, 1990 by President George H. W. Bush and later amended with changes effective January 1, 2009. The ADA is a wide-ranging civil rights law that prohibits, under certain circumstances, discrimination based on disability. It affords similar protections against discrimination to Americans with disabilities as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which made discrimination based on race, religion, sex, national origin, and other characteristics illegal. Disability is defined by the ADA as "a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits a major life activity." The determination of whether any particular condition is considered a disability is made on a case by case basis. Certain specific conditions are excluded as disabilities, such as current substance abuse and visual impairment which is correctable by prescription lenses.

Expanding Protections

On September 25, 2008, President George W. Bush signed into law The ADA Amendments Act of 2008 (ADAAA). It was intended to give broader protections for disabled workers and "turn back the clock" on court rulings which Congress deemed too restrictive. The ADAAA includes a list of *major life activities* including:

Employment

Public Entities (and public transportation), Public Accommodations (and Commercial Facilities), Telecommunications (deaf/hard of hearing, etc.)

Major life activities

The ADA defines a covered disability as "a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits a major life activity." In 2008, effective January 1, 2009, the ADA broadened the definition and added examples of "major life activities" including, but not limited to, "caring for oneself, performing manual tasks, seeing, hearing, eating, sleeping, walking, standing, lifting, bending, speaking, breathing, learning, reading, concentrating, thinking, communicating, and working" as well as the operation of several specified "major bodily functions." The Act overturned a 1999 U.S. Supreme Court case which held that an employee was not disabled if the impairment could be corrected by mitigating measures; it specifically provides that such impairment must be determined without considering such ameliorative measures. Another court restriction overturned is the interpretation that an impairment that substantially limits one major life activity must also limit others to be considered a disability.⁷

VIII. Fannie Lou Hamer and Experiences While Touring

Fannie Lou Hamer, one of the fearless Mississippi organizer/leaders, was also was one of the first to run for public office as a part of the campaign to open voting to African Americans who were citizens in the state of Mississippi. Mrs. Hamer had suffered from polio as a child and it seriously impacted her ability to walk. She was also severely beaten in jail for her civil rights efforts; this worsened the condition. A powerful speaker and singer she always added this verse when leading us in singing Wade in the Water:

*Oh some say Peter and some say Paul
God's gonna trouble the water
There ain' but the one God made us all
God's gonna trouble the water.*

When I began to tour with Sweet Honey in the Rock, our concerts were often sponsored by local women's cultural groups. We were surprised and pleased to find that these producers had volunteer brigades to lift wheelchairs up steps so they could get into the performance spaces. These concerts also had childcare services so that mothers could attend these cultural evenings. This was also the first time I was asked to work with a sign language interpreter. The experience so impacted my life that our group began to travel with our own sign language interpreter, Shirley Childress Johnson, so that we would be accessible and invitational to the deaf and hard-of-hearing communities. With the American Disabilities Act, we also began to notice a major change in churches and their ministry outreach as we traveled.

The passage of the American Disability Act changed the architectural structure of churches. African American building projects for new or remodeled structures shifted to be sure their sanctuaries were accessible in as many entrances as possible. Older church buildings developed remodeling projects to be sure there was wheelchair accessibility.

Many churches also provided sign language interpreting for their services.

IX. From Ashes To Expanded Accessibility - Shiloh Baptist Church, Washington, DC

In 1991, a fire nearly destroyed the entire structure of historic Shiloh Baptist Church of Washington, DC, whose evolution spans more than 137 years. This tragedy took place only five months after installing a new pastor, Reverend Wallace Charles Smith. He then led the congregation to not only rebuild but to also use this effort as an opportunity to re-envision itself. The new sanctuary was more than double in size to allow for a growing congregation. The organ was refurbished, new panel windows gave tribute to the middle passage, African heritage, and the hands of the ancestors reaching up in prayer.

Special focus was given to the church's commitment to outreach to the differently abled. All doors are wheelchair accessible and there are no columns to create obstructions for worshippers. The adjacent educational building opens to the sidewalk; it was also built to be accessible to those with mobility challenges. Before the fire, Shiloh was a congregation that supported a Deaf Church ministry. The deaf congregants and hearing congregants worshipped separately except on first Sundays when they would share communion. During the renovation, they began worshipping together with sign language interpreters because of space constraints. When the renovations were complete, both congregations agreed to remain joined, worshipping together as one congregation.⁸

X. Concluding Song for This Lectionary Moment

These traditional song texts say that each of us is called into this life and each of us is worthy of respect (even if we are differently abled) as we search for our paths forward.

Lord! I got a right!
Lord! I got a right!
Lord! I got a right!
I got a right to the tree of life.

If anybody asks you
Who I am, who I am, who I am
If anybody asks you who I am,
Tell them I'm a child of God.⁹

Notes

1. "Disability." Online Etymology Dictionary. Online location: <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?search=disability&searchmode=none> accessed 15 January 2010
2. "Human Variability: A Brief Introduction." The Linux Information Project. Online location: http://www.linfo.org/human_variability.htm accessed 15 January 2010

3. Smith, Jack. "Is the Language Itself Disabled in that It Can't Fairly Define the Handicapped?" Los Angeles Times. 9 Apr. 1989.
4. Johnson, William. "Blind Barnabas." Golden Gate Jubilee Quartet: Complete Recorded Works in Chronological Order. Vienna, Austria: Document Records, 1996.
5. U.S. Department of Justice. "Americans With Disabilities Act." Civil Rights Division. Online location: <http://www.ada.gov/> accessed 15 January 2010; See also, "What Is the ADA: Definition of Disability." National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research. Richmond, Virginia. Online location: <http://www.adata.org/whatsada-definition.aspx> accessed 15 January 2010
6. "Substantially Limits." National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research. Richmond, Virginia. Online location: <http://www.adata.org/whatsada-definition.aspx> accessed 15 January 2010
7. Ibid.
8. Shiloh Baptist Church. Northwest Washington, DC. Online location: <http://shilohbaptist.org> accessed 15 January 2010
9. "Lord I Got a Right." Traditional Negro Spiritual