



**“NORMAL IS A SETTING ON A DRYER” UCC Access Sunday, 10-10-2010  
Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7; Luke 17:11-19 (Proper 23-C) Rev. Janet Boyd Weidler, Pilgrim UCC**

Today is Access Sunday in the United Church of Christ. It's an opportunity to consider the challenges and gifts of persons with disabilities. In the United Church of Christ, we strive to be multi-cultural, multi-racial, accessible to all, just peace, and an open and affirming church. Being ADA - open and accessible to all people with all kinds of abilities and disabilities is vitally important. In so many ways, we live in an “us and them” kind of world that divides people into categories of normal or abnormal on the basis of sexual orientation, gender stereotypes, disability, body types, way of dressing, or any number of other qualities.

Sadly, there was an article in yesterday's paper about four teen suicides that happened within a short span of time in the same town in Ohio- a suburb near Cleveland. All the suicides were related to bullying- the most recent was a girl bullied because of her foreign accent; another was due to anti-gay bullying, and another was bullying because of a learning disability. The school system is being sued because of its alleged failure to stop the bullying. Us vs. Them, Normal vs. Abnormal kind of thinking leads to tragic outcomes.

In the reading from Jeremiah, we heard of the Israelites being in exile. In the gospel reading from Luke, the lepers were in exile from the rest of society, and the Samaritan Leper was in double exile- his illness as well as his unorthodox religion made him an outcast among the Jews of the time.

Being in exile is an experience many people many with disabling conditions can relate to. Persons with disabilities often feel exiled from the mainstream of society, cut off from others by physical or attitudinal barriers. Too often, we look upon someone with a disability, whether it's a mental illness or paralysis or deafness or whatever... as “other”, as the “Samaritan”, the foreign one, and in so doing, we are in effect putting that person in exile, and denying ourselves the privilege of enjoying the unique gifts that person has to offer. Sometimes the very words we use to describe a disabling condition reveal society's thinking - take the word invalid for example.

Tim had a great insight this week at a worship planning meeting.....in our background information, we read that one of our hymns for today was written by an invalid. He looked at the word invalid there in print, it suddenly hit him what that word meant if you just change the accent: invalid is also invalid- a subtle or not or subtle indication of how those with disabilities are too often seen or treated by others, or sometimes feel themselves.

Let's take a moment to listen to some experiences of people with disabilities. *(The 4 stories below are adapted from “Anybody, Everybody, Christ's Body,” UCC Disabilities Ministries)*

**“DEE” - (read by Melissa)**

My name is Dee, and I am a pastor. When my husband and I began a co-pastorate in Nebraska, we wondered how our congregation would feel about my traveling with a guide dog, wearing clodhopper shoes beneath my



clerical robe, extending a brace-covered hand, and using a jaw support when speaking. While I revel in the freedom these tools offer within the barbed wire fences of blindness, rheumatoid arthritis, and diabetes, would my congregation?

I chose to be straightforward; so did they. These independent ranchers and townsfolk know about partnership. They honor my physical challenges by recognizing my wholeness. Our shared acceptance of differences and gifts energizes this free-spirited, community-focused church. An unspoken rapport connects us, heart with heart and soul with soul. All three members of this pastoral team, each with a unique ministry, feel welcomed for who we are "inside." I rejoice in this partnership of spirit and in the gift of having been sent by a generous God to this particular congregation.

**“MIKE”- (read by Nathan)**

I’m Mike, and I have a mental disability. I want to tell you that I find it very demeaning when a person with a disability is called “Pal” or “Buddy”. Every person has a first and last name. My name happens to be Mike Cohn, not Buddy or Pal. People with disabilities deserve to be treated like anyone else. Don’t be afraid to ask questions- that’s how we learn about one another. Disabled people are like everyone else; some are very private about themselves and some are very focused on themselves. But most want to mix in with everyone else and contribute in whatever ways we can to the greater good of society.

**“ANDREA”- (read by Brandi)**

My name is Andrea. Last winter my doctor prescribed antidepressants for me. I felt so bad about being depressed, about having something wrong with my mind. I thought something must be wrong with my faith, too... like I wouldn’t be depressed if I truly had faith. Even though my life felt gray and lifeless, I did not fill my prescription for at least a month. One Sunday in the sermon our Minister talked about depression and put it in the same category as other kinds of physical illnesses. And I thought, “Surely if I had diabetes, I’d take insulin”. I filled my prescription on the way home from church.

**“RICK” - (read by Trey)**

My name is Rick. In the spring of 1977, I was struck by a hit-and-run driver while bicycling. As a result, I incurred a spinal cord injury that left me in a wheelchair. I’ve been able to return to my career, but have had to make many subtle adjustments in self-identity. I have written a book about my journey which explores the cultural and social aspects of disability. The book was also a therapeutic tool for me to come to grips with my new body.

...I compare incurring a disability to entering a foreign culture. We don’t travel there willingly, we don’t understand the language or customs of the natives of this strange land, and we grieve when we discover we’ve lost our return ticket back home to “normal.” But, if you keep your wits about you and look around to gauge the lay of the land before you panic, you may find that a strange sort of grace accompanies a disabling injury or illness.

Grace and beauty are surely present in the lives of all God’s children. Carol Schulz told me about a wonderful young man with Down ’s syndrome who used to be part of Pilgrim at the blue roof location. His name was Sadler Bell, and he was an important part of the community. Like the other active members of the



church, he had a job, a ministry- and that was being the acolyte in worship every Sunday. Not only did he excel at acolyting, but his love and friendliness and honest, positive approach to life endeared him to everyone. He went on to become an Eagle Scout, and his project was making some of the stepping stones at the labyrinth at the “Bluerooft Church” (Montclair Rd location.) Later, he and his family moved to Wisconsin, but we still have some of those stepping stones- right now they are out in the Meditation Garden.

Our hymns today were all created by people with disabilities. The music of “Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee” was composed by a deaf man, the great Beethoven; “Just As I Am” was written by Charlotte Eliot, who was struck by an illness at the age of 30, which kept her confined to her home. Fanny Crosby, who was blind from infancy, wrote over 8000 hymns, including “Blessed Assurance.” Even though these hymn writers were not able to participate in church life in the exact same way others did, they made very significant contributions to church & society.

Maybe we need to do some out of the box thinking and re-think our categories of normal and abnormal, normal and disabled, people with disabilities and people without disabilities.

Walter Wink, who’s the author of the contemporary reading we heard earlier, is a well-known theologian and Bible scholar. In the same article from which the contemporary reading for this morning came, he has some powerful words to say about the way we think about people with disabilities.

“In the popular mind,” he writes, there are two kinds of people: normal and abnormal, normal and deformed, normal and disabled, he writes. Some are OK, others are not. But if pressed, we soon discover that almost everyone has disabilities, and that we are not talking about an either/or, but a continuum that runs from slightly disabled to extremely disabled. For example, most people don’t think of me as disabled. But in certain ways I am. My feet have hammertoes..., I’ve had chronic back pains since injuring my back as a child...; I’ve had irregular heartbeats..., and I have hypoglycemia.... Minor things, all, but that is precisely my point. Press anyone who looks “normal” and you will probably find, instead, a person with disabilities. Yet such people do not define themselves as ‘disabled.’ They think of themselves as normal people with disabilities. The problem then, is not with those with disabilities, but with the very idea of “normalcy”. ... The idea of normalcy is not only at the root of the mistreatment of people with disabilities, it is a pathological notion that creates illness, persecution and the rejection of our God-given uniqueness.” Walter Wink gives us a lot to think about. (From an article by Walter Wink entitled, “Jesus Never Said Be Perfect,” in “Anybody, Everybody, Christ’s Body”)

I’ll never forget the remark a friend of mine once made: **“Normal is (just) a setting on a dryer!”** It’s very freeing when we can give up the illusion of “normalcy” and stop comparing others and ourselves to this false notion. Just as last Sunday’s lesson challenged us to give up the ideal of having perfect faith, this morning’s theme invites us to be liberated from the cultural ideals of perfection and normalcy.

The process of aging often involves incurring more disabilities than we’ve had before. These new limitations can be depressing, but we can find help and hope when we extend compassion and patience to ourselves and others as we struggle to live with the new limitations and as we open ourselves to what our disabilities and limitations can teach us.



In the same article I quoted from earlier, Walter Wink concludes that “..... the world is divided up into two groups after all. Not, however, the normal and the abnormal, or the able and the disabled. Rather the line is drawn between those who are aware of their disabilities and those who are not. Those who are more obviously disabled, or who have been forced by life to come to terms with their disabilities, have a prophetic task to play in awakening the rest of us to the uniqueness of who we are under God.”

Let us keep before us scripture’s teaching that there IS grace in the midst of exile. Hope can come when we are delivered from exile, when the barriers to full participation are torn down, but it can also come from learning a new way of living IN THE MIDST OF EXILE- living into a fuller trust that God is not just back home where it’s familiar, in the land of “normal” but in ALL the different places and situations in which we find ourselves. In whatever land of limitations we live in, and we all live there in some way, we are accepted, loved and cherished, where we are, as we are. Amen.