

No Body or Mind Left Behind – Part 1

Luke 5:18-25

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Before I start, I would like to give a huge thank you as well as credit to Mary McClusky, who serves as FUMC's Access Team Coordinator, and who helped me prepare for this sermon. She has also been a friend who has spent time with me, graciously allowing me to look at theology and faith from her perspective and therefore has broadened my understanding of disability ministry. She tells me that I have done the same for her as far as racial justice goes, so iron sharpens iron I guess. The title of this two-part sermon series is "No Body or Mind Left Behind" For this first part, we will be looking at physical disabilities and differing abilities, and next week we will look at mental illnesses and chronic pain.

In the Scripture passage that we heard this morning, a group of friends have come to where Jesus is teaching carrying a good friend of theirs who is paralyzed on a mat. They are desperately trying to make their way through the gathered crowd so that Jesus can heal him. They are not having much success, but these friends are so determined to have their friend healed that they go up on the roof, break through the tiles, and lower their friend down into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus. I wonder what the homeowner thought of this. Jesus, however, seeing the great faith and determination of the friends, says to the man on the mat, "Friend, your sins are forgiven." Now this is a rather strange thing to say to a paralyzed man who has been lowered through the roof on a mat. And it also greatly disturbs the scribes and Pharisees, but for other reasons. But for me, to speak first of sin is a strange thing to say to someone who is physically paralyzed and is seeking healing. His sins are forgiven, but what sins? What did he do? What exactly is sin?

Getting a consensus on the definition of the word "sin" in Christian circles is challenging, if not outright impossible. So, going by my personal understanding, sin is something that separates me spiritually from God. It is not God that does the separating, nor does God judge, condemn, or withhold love from me for anything that I do or don't do. It's all me. When I feel guilty or ashamed about something, if I'm not careful, I tend to turn away or allow a separation or distance to develop between me and God. Challenges of any sort and the difficult emotions they bring up: grief, loneliness, hopelessness, anger, fear, frustration, despair, and so on, can have the effect of separating us from God. This makes me wonder what this man on the mat had been wrestling with, and for how long?

Mary McClusky has shared with me that very often people living with disabilities feel less qualified and not good enough compared to other people; that they ache to be able to do what others do and desperately want to be included. They feel separated. They feel self-conscious of their noticeable disability and feel like they have to apologize. Very often they feel, and probably are, discriminated against.

As Christians, we believe that we are all created in the image and likeness of God, but why is it that people with disabilities or differing abilities would believe that they are flawed or less than? Why would they experience shame or any of all those other oppressive emotions? Why do they feel separated? The answer unfortunately is us. As a culture we tend to value people by what they can do or produce, or how they perform, what disability justice advocates call “commodity relations and capitalist notions of productivity.” We have somehow created this idea of “normal” and when people fall outside of our perceived idea of what is normal, they become “other” or less than; inferior. Very often when we do this, it is not intentional. It all happens at a subconscious level; as implicit bias. When we make plans or decisions based on what works for us without considering the impact on those who have disabilities we can also effectively physically exclude them from our presence as there may be barriers to their participation.

Very often people with disabilities may also be facing other forms of oppression that just compounds their exclusion. Mary and I partnered up with Amy Kennedy earlier this year as we explored the concept of intersectionality and disability in a Disability Awareness Talk during Black History month. Intersectionality describes overlapping systems of oppression, for instance, being a person of color and being disabled, being a woman and being disabled, or LGBT and disabled or other combination of multiple marginal identities. This just magnifies the sense of separation as well as the discrimination. In a book that Mary McClusky and I read called *“Disability and the Church: A Vision for Diversity and Inclusion”* the author, Lamar Hardwick describes how we have two models for how we look at disability. We have a medical model for disability which primarily focuses on a person’s disability or impairment as the sole source of the person’s challenges. In this model, impairment is seen as a deficit that subtracts from the quality of life and needs to be repaired. This has the potential to create low expectations for those with disabilities. The social model, on the other hand, contends that the actual impairment is not what is most disabling. The social model asserts that society has structured itself in a way that is unfriendly to the disabled community. Hardwick adds that, unfortunately the church is often complicit in neglecting to engage in an understanding of the social model of disability. The impact is an eventual descent into a form of prejudice against disabled people called ableism.

God created all in God’s image and likeness and we’ve kind of messed it up with our standards of normal, not God’s, and our exclusions. When we go back to the Scripture account of the paralyzed man, I see Jesus telling the man “Friend, your sins are forgiven” and here is my paraphrase of this, “Friend, I have removed your sense of separation from God.” And then Jesus turns to the Scribes and Pharisees and says “Oh and by the way, I can do that.” And they are outraged. By telling him this, he is reinstating the man’s God-given image-bearer status, without changing his paralyzed condition. I wonder if Jesus sees this as more important than the physical healing that he then does. Lamar Hardwick believes that the primary goal of Jesus’ healing ministry was to establish a means for individuals who had been excluded to reenter the community that had isolated them because of their disability.

Many social commentators have observed that with the arrival of the pandemic and the stay at home orders all of a sudden there was radical accessibility. From our church’s perspective, we immediately switched to online services, sending our church to where people were. We

launched the Doorstep Disciples who checked in on people and made deliveries. We started Zoom happiness hours, and many other activities. We also became more careful, mindful and conscious of our vulnerable friends in this community. Beth Pascoe recently shared a podcast with me where Brene Brown interviewed Priya Parker on the topic, “*How we return and why it matters.*” In the interview Priya Parker urged us all to reflect on what we have learned during the pandemic about access and equity. How do we still include as part of our community those who choose not to physically return? Or who can’t return. This is something that we are currently thinking about and working on as a church staff. It includes maintaining digital ministry, offering hybrid participation in meetings and classes, as well as an intentional awareness and inclusion of those who have historically been excluded. How do we also connect with those who have felt disconnected from church life during the pandemic because of the challenges of technology? We want to be a community of hope, a place of radical belonging. We want to be good friends.

Here are some ideas for how we can do that. We have been offering our Disability Awareness talks for three years now and they will be returning this fall on the 4th Sunday of the month. Join us to discuss topics and issues that people with disabilities face. We will also be launching a book study this fall on the book I mentioned: “Disability and the Church: A Vision for Diversity and Inclusion” by Lamar Hardwick. Mary McClusky also said to contact her if you’d like to join the Access Team. As far as building accessibility goes, the major church renovations in 2000 as well as the changes done in 2016 based upon the accessibility audit have done much to improve the accessibility of the physical building, and we will continue to be mindful of more improvements. And with the move to worshiping outside Mary was able to give us guidance on potential accessibility issues. But we always need additional eyes and perspectives to help us see where there might be limitations or barriers. Help us with this. We also need to continually look to see who is missing and find out why. Then we can explore how we can fully include them in the life of the church. Their presence matters.

There is a great deal of forgiveness that we are in need of as a culture that prizes able-bodied people, for the way we have viewed and treated those who are different to us. It took a team of friends who saw and who loved the paralyzed man, who were prepared to break through a roof to get their friend to Jesus, for his healing to occur. They were determined that their friend would not be left behind. All of us are called to be those friends. There is a lot of work for us to do to change our culture so that our friends with physical and mental differences are fully accepted for whom and how they are without trying to change them.

Let’s be roof-breaking friends and make sure that nobody is left behind.