

Wall Street United Church  
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## Radical Belonging

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Giving all glory and honour to God.

Scripture Reading: Mark 5:21-43 CEB

The other day I was reading a series of posts on Facebook where a group of ministers were pontificating that preachers should not begin their sermons with a joke! There were reasons for their position, but I was thinking, *jokes in sermons, that's my thing! Don't take away my thing! I got nothing else!* Rev. Dr. Kimberly was up here last Sunday, talking about tree top trekking, and often she's talking about sailing. I can't do that. My wife and I are old disabled people. We don't have any stories that don't involve going to appointments at the hospital ... that's our whole social life!

So, I was pondering, not just humour in sermons, but what to preach on this morning. It's Canada Day weekend. On some Sundays close to Canada Day I have preached on Psalm 72, "*He shall have dominion from sea to sea,*" which is the source of the motto on Canada's coat of arms, "From Sea to Sea." And Psalm 72 is where the name Dominion of Canada came from. You know you're old when you can remember when July 1<sup>st</sup> was Dominion Day!

But the Holy Spirit nudged me — that's what the Spirit does. As Jesus says, it's like the wind, it blows where it wishes — into looking more closely at our reading for today, from the Good News According to Mark. So, this is a story about Jesus healing a 12-year-old girl who has died, or she is in a coma and people think she is dead. But, as we just heard, on the way to the girl's house, there is a woman who has suffered from constant bleeding for years. Mark writes, "*She had suffered a lot under the care of many doctors and had spent everything she had without getting any better. In fact, she had gotten worse.*" And can some of us ever relate to that. So, the woman gets up close to Jesus in the crowd so she can reach out and touch his clothing, and she is healed of her bleeding. She confesses to Jesus that she had touched him, and he tells her, "Your faith has healed you. Go in peace, healed from your disease."

This story of Jesus and the woman with the bleeding disorder is one of what are called the healing narratives in the Gospels. There are lots of these, for example, Jesus heals the man born blind, the man with a withered hand, the bent-over woman, the man with an evil spirit, the paralyzed man whose friends lower him through the roof.

I love the Bible! There are 66 books – 73 in some Bibles – and they have everything, from poetry to history to romance, and every emotion. People say to me, "The Bible is boring!" No way! The previous story to this one in Mark involves a herd of pigs running over a cliff into the lake. In the book of Judges, a king is assassinated while in the

bathroom. (It's like House of the Dragon!) The latest United Church of Canada faith statement, "A Song of Faith", says that the Holy Spirit breathes power into scripture, to make it our song for the journey, the living word passed from generation to generation to guide and inspire, that we might wrestle a holy revelation for our time and place from these ancient words.

We do wrestle, because scripture can be difficult. And unclear. And complicated. And these healing narratives in the Gospels, where Jesus heals a disabled person, are one part of the Bible that we have not been good at wrestling meaning from, not been good at interpreting for our time and place. In fact, in most United Churches, we have been pretty bad at this. And these stories have played a part in diminishing and excluding disabled people.

I am a disabled person. I have a chronic autoimmune disease called *ankylosing spondylitis*. This is a visible, physical disability. But, as you likely know, disability may be invisible, and it includes mental and emotional conditions as well as physical. And disability can be dynamic. It's an elastic category that people may join or leave at any time, so we can move back and forth on a spectrum of disability. One in five people in Canada aged 15 years and over, 22% of the population, have at least one disability. And yet, when the United Church of Canada conducted a national identity survey, only 5% of respondents identified as living with a disability! This may be affected by how the respondents viewed disability, but certainly tells us that we have a gap between what Canada looks like and the makeup of our congregations.

Why would this be? Because of barriers that our churches have in place, consciously or unconsciously — barriers of architecture and attitude. Barriers of architecture, physical obstacles, well, we know what a lot of those are – stairs, inaccessible washrooms, narrow doorways, but also projection that is difficult to see, bulletins printed in tiny type, lack of hearing loop systems, no live-streaming of worship, websites that lack features that allow screen readers to translate content for blind and low-vision users, no accommodation of service animals. We know about these, or can learn, and we can put in the money and effort to do something about them.

But we would still not have a fully inclusive and safe space for people with disabilities. Because less recognizable, at least to abled people, are barriers of attitude, which can make a fully accessible church building still unwelcoming and inaccessible to disabled people. These attitudes have their roots in the dominant way that our society views disability, as a flaw, and in terms of thinking about ability as a binary – you are either "normal" or disabled – rather than as a spectrum, and in how the church has perpetuated assumptions that are problematic.

Which brings us back to our story. One barrier of attitude that disabled people run up against in the church is how badly these healing narratives are often explained in our preaching and our liturgy. This is not the fault of the stories, which could be used to

foster visions of inclusion, but instead these healing texts end up being used to perpetuate destructive attitudes towards disabled people. They are frequently treated in a way that tells disabled listeners that their faith is lacking, because after all, as in today's scripture, the disabled person in the story is healed, so why aren't you?

I led work on disability theology and we asked disabled people to send in their stories of life in the United Church, and this was mentioned over and over again, how they were told this in sermons and directly by other people: "Jesus says, to the disabled people he has healed, '*Your faith has healed you,*'" and therefore, if you are **not** healed, if you are **still disabled**, your faith is the problem!" So this ableist thinking goes.

These stories are almost never preached from a disabled perspective, or with any recognition of why the Gospel writers included them in the first place. The healing narratives were not really meant to emphasize physical healing. They are much more about who Jesus is, what he demands of all of his followers, and how he removes barriers to belonging in order to restore community. These are indeed stories of transformation, but social as much as personal, made possible through the radical hospitality of Jesus. Jesus doesn't welcome and embrace and heal these disabled people, outcast from their society, to make them acceptable to God. He does it to show everyone that *God has already accepted them.*

The assumptions, the prejudices, which block the inclusion of disabled people are not just social, but theological — they are based on interpretation of scripture. So we need to re-read these healing stories, (and not just them but the entire Biblical text,) using the experience of disability as our lens. Then breaking down barriers to disabled people's full participation in our communities of faith can be rooted in an imagination that understands disability, *not as a defect, not as a departure from the normal, but as part of the variation that makes up our church.*

One illustration that can help us to imagine and do this is another passage of scripture, from the first chapter of the book of Genesis: "*Then God said, let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.*" All of us are created in God's image, whatever our ability, age, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, religion, or class, and we can welcome one another with the intent of honouring the unique and different ways that divine image is realized in each of us, including disability. We can look in scripture at Biblical characters who have a disability, like Moses, who has a stutter, Jacob, who limps, the Apostle Paul, who has what he describes as a thorn in his flesh, and how these great examples of faith are not somehow special or chosen because of their disability, but rather are examples of how God works through people who are at different places on the spectrum of gifts and abilities. And you know who else in the Bible has a disability? Jesus. This is a wonderful insight, that *when Jesus was raised from death at Easter, he chose to keep the disabling wounds of his crucifixion in his resurrected body.* Think of it. This is mind-blowing, that we have a disabled Saviour,

that one of the persons of our Trinitarian God is disabled. This can be a whole other sermon.

Being created in God's image means that the whole person has value and dignity, not because of society's list of abilities, but in relation to God, to others, and to the rest of creation. This can then lead us to perceiving disability as part of the natural limits and conditions of the created order, neither a blemish nor a blessing, but one of the diverse ways of being human.

Here at Wall Street, we have a vision of the church, the body of Christ, as the place where welcome, access and accommodation are central features of life together, through which divisions established by human attitudes are abolished, a safe space for all — where the gifts of all may be received, where all belong. When I chaired the work of the group that wrote the United Church's report on theologies of disabilities, we concluded with these words that are my hope for where this vision will lead us: *"Since God's image includes disability, and this image dwells in all human beings, the church is summoned into a radical kind of belonging, as if welcoming each other is to welcome the divine in our midst."*

Radical belonging! What Jesus practiced. What our church, and our country, should be about. May we dare to do so! Will you pray with me for a moment? This prayer comes from our partners in the United Reformed Church in Great Britain, and their Disability Task Group.

Living God, we come with our mixture of abilities  
and our limited understanding.

You know how people can be prevented  
from reaching their potential

- by expectations of what is 'normal',
- by the environment not being adapted to their needs,
- or by being isolated from support and encouragement.

Help us value each other as you value us.

Help us overcome isolation and prejudice  
to belong to your community of hope.

In Jesus, we see you being limited by others' reactions  
yet bringing life in all its fullness.

In the risen Jesus, we see the marks of pain and anguish  
but recognise love reaching beyond them.

Help us to know how precious we are to you.

Help us offer ourselves as signs of your love at work in the world.

Through your Spirit that connects and equips us, Amen.