

Unexpected Guests

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Luke 14:16-24

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I've recognized the importance of churches being accessible to people with disabilities for quite a while, but I didn't spend a lot of time thinking about it. I didn't completely understand, until my car accident and subsequent brain injury and disability in 1996.

A quick word about the ranking of disabilities. One's disability may be different from others', but all those with disabilities know what it is like to feel separate from the rest of the world. To "not fit in." A ranking of disabilities is a distraction from what's really important to understand.

I was unaware until recently that 54 million people in the United States today – twenty percent of the population – have disabilities. My lack of knowledge of the extent of disability is not uncommon in the church. I think that deep, down, inside, unbeknownst to me, I had a fear that I could receive a disability, so I didn't want to think too much about it. Now I think a lot about it.

Brett Webb-Mitchell wrote a book called *Unexpected Guests at God's Banquet: Welcoming People with Disabilities Into the Church*. In it he says that Jesus borrows the image of the banquet feast from his Jewish heritage. In the Jewish community, the metaphor of the banquet table refers to the past leaders of the children of Israel, gathered together around the special religious Messianic banquet.

At that time, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets, will come together with all the children of Israel, with Yahweh as the host. New Testament commentary writers and theologians agree that the host of this banquet meal is God. As at other banquet meals, the host is in a powerful position, able to persuade people to come and remain a part of the scene.

Metaphorically, the servant in this story is Jesus. The guests also serve an important role, for there can be no festive banquet without them. They are needed to show support, and to renew neighborly bonds with the host.

So in this story, three prominent people are invited, but they are all too busy to come. This was seen in Jewish society as a serious breach of friendship. The invitees struggle with the good things in life – namely property, occupation, and family – that often crowd out the claims of God upon their lives.

The host-God, angry at the response of the three invited guests, sends his servant out to do something unheard of. "Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, those who have disabilities, those who have visual impairments, and those with physical impairments."

At this table are guests that you would probably not invite to dinner. The unexpected ones. Webb-Mitchell writes, "One's presence in the Reign of God is not determined by what we do or how we look to others. One's presence is determined by whom God invites and who kindly and graciously accepts the invitation."

God doesn't say, "Oh yes, she is a cute little girl, but she cannot control herself. She will burst out in song at the oddest times. What if she sings out when someone is saying the blessing! We don't want a child singing out any old time! This is a church service."

God doesn't say, "Bring her to dinner, but her table is over there in the other room, away from the rest of the party! She needs to be here at this party to learn about my forgiving love, but we don't want her to eat here with us. Besides, her speech is unclear, so she probably doesn't hear us anyway."

And God surely doesn't say, "He has difficulty hearing, and we don't have a speaker system. He may not hear what I say. He should stay home and watch those church shows on television, where he can turn the volume way up."

No. God welcomes everyone to this celebration.

So if God welcomes those with disabilities to the table, why don't we? One reason might be that we are afraid. If people with disabilities aren't around, we don't have to think about us maybe one day having one.

I'm a person who likes to use as few words as possible. I could never understand why someone would say "a person who has a disability," rather than simply "a disabled person." But then a friend of mine who was worked with people with disabilities told me about "people first language." This is language that puts people before their disability.

So I tried using it. Instead of saying, "she's in a wheelchair," I said "she uses a wheelchair." Instead of saying "she's autistic," I began to say "she has autism." Even though I didn't really understand completely why I was doing this, with some practice at it,

my whole attitude about people with disabilities changed. I began to see them – to see us – as people with our own power.

This idea helped me understand my own discomfort with the term “brain damaged.” I hate this term. It focuses on my brain and not on me. I am more than my injured brain. I love the beach. I’m married and have two little dogs. I work with polymer clay, am a member of the Health Adventures Clown Troup, and I have a brain injury. It’s one part of who I am.

A person I know said, “This type of language blurs the distinction between people with disabilities and me.” Yes, it does. And this scares us. Perhaps we don’t want people with disabilities at the table because we are afraid.

We live in an individualistic society. This is opposite to how we in the church are supposed to act. Paul calls us to be the body of Christ, in which each person has a role to play. But in our society, people are out for themselves.

Perhaps this is one reason our society is so car-oriented. We want to leave when we want to leave. We don’t want to depend on anyone else. Recently, a woman was telling me how important it is to have two cars in her family, even though there are only two people living in her house. She couldn’t imagine having to depend on anyone else for a ride.

I couldn’t help thinking about my own situation, and how I don’t drive at night or on most highways. I constantly have to arrange rides, and I hate it. In our society, we are independent and don’t rely easily on others. So I often put it off until the last minute, as I did several weeks ago when our series on death and dying began here in Sunday school. I waited too late to secure a ride, so I had to miss the first session.

Something that people with disabilities can teach the church is that none of us is completely independent. I value the many conversations I’ve had with everyone who’s given me rides to this Circle. We need each other. We are called to need each other. Whether we have a disability or not, none of us can serve God alone.

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Now, it’s easy to say, “My church is accessible to those who have a disability because we have a ramp into the sanctuary,” and then forget about it. Including all people in the church is not a one-time thing.

I think of Mary Margaret Hastie. She lives at A. G. Rhodes Nursing Home in Atlanta. At six months of age, she was diagnosed with spastic paralysis. She uses a wheelchair and has limited use of her arms.

Mary Margaret is the fourth-floor representative at the nursing home. It is very difficult to understand her speech. Well, just like Aaron spoke for Moses, God makes a way. Shelly, the social worker there, can understand her, and she speaks for Mary Margaret at the meetings. Mary Margaret is at the table, and she is able to serve.

Including people with disabilities in our church may mean helping someone share a prayer concern, or standing and speaking up when sharing one so all of us can hear. It may mean offering a ride to someone who doesn’t drive at night so they can get here. It may mean always repeating what’s on the page when leading worship so those with visual impairments understand what’s going on. But most important, it means staying in dialogue with people who have disabilities to see what they need to worship here.

Often, changes we make to help those with disabilities help others as well. A few months ago, I told Susanne Walker Wilson that, due to my brain injury, I can meet someone fifty times and it’s not unusual for me to forget their name. She asked if nametags would help, and I said definitely yes. Others said the same thing, so we started wearing them. Something that is crucial for me helps others as well.

When Mary Margaret first moved to Rhodes, she lived on the second floor, where residents with Alzheimer’s disease live. When a room became available on the fourth floor, she moved there. She continued to ask others to bring her to the Alzheimer’s floor so she could attend the devotionals there twice a week.

One morning she noticed that one of the residents with a deep bass voice, who always sang all the songs, was missing, so she asked about him. I told her he had to go to the hospital, but he should be

back soon. This is an example of her concern for others. She prays for the residents there, and she makes a point to speak to them, even when they cannot communicate back with her.

One thing I've learned about visiting people with Alzheimer's is that they may not remember my name, or that I came by just yesterday, or even an hour ago. But if I come regularly, they remember my presence, and they feel God's presence in our interaction. They might not have known Mary Margaret's name, but they felt God's presence and God's love when she was there. This is another way for her to be at the table.

In an article in the *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* called "When the Bough Breaks: A Father's Story," Robert Naseef describes his transformation and growth as the father of a child with autism. He had visions of playing baseball and building model airplanes with his son Tarique. But then something went wrong. Tarique got sick with a virus and ended up with an ear infection. The infection went away, but he never got better. He stopped playing like other children, and he never spoke another word. He was diagnosed with autism.

Naseef writes:

Children like mine and others with various special needs are a spiritual catalyst. They challenge and sometimes force us to look at ourselves. They help us to accept our own imperfections and the imperfections of others. In that sense, my son Tarique is not damaged in the least. He is perfect as he is. Along with other children and adults with disabilities, he bears witness to the diversity of the human condition and the resilience of our collective spirit.

He could have said this about Jody Roberts [who has Down Syndrome], or even about me. I know he could have said this about Brian, a TBI [traumatic brain injury] survivor who lives in Atlanta. He uses a wheelchair and, like Mary Margaret, has limited use of his hands and is difficult to understand. But he is a whiz on the computer, and he has the most wonderful sense of humor.

One night in a support group meeting that I was attending when I lived in Atlanta, things got very tense. Leaders of a new statewide brain-injury group were trying to explain to our group why the Georgia association had stopped being a member of the Brain Injury Association of America. Many of us in the group were angry at this turn of events and were trying to understand the reasons. Voices were raised, people started talking over each other, and no one could be understood.

Suddenly there was a loud sound, almost like a groan. Everyone stopped talking so they could figure out where the sound was coming from. It was Brian, trying to get everyone to be quiet. After a great deal of labor on his part, we understood his words: "We're all on the same side. Stop fighting!"

There was silence. No one said a word. Everyone knew that he was right. Brian has a resilient, courageous spirit. He is at the table, and he is able to serve.

As I look back on my life prior to my brain injury, it seems as if I accomplished so much. I always had a committee meeting, a report or sermon to write, a person to visit or some function to attend. Now, like many people with disabilities, I have to plan ahead to do everything. As a result, it seems as if I am not accomplishing nearly as much.

I'm reminded of a quote by former vice president Hubert Humphrey: "Oh, my friend, it's not what they take away from you that counts. It's what you do with what you have left."

So, is my service to God not as valuable now as it was before my brain injury? This is the wrong question. When Jesus saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury, he watched as a widow put in two copper coins. He said she put in more than all of them, because she gave what she had.

People with disabilities have gifts to offer. Brian can speak the truth courageously. Tarique shows everyone how to be resilient. Mary Margaret brings God's love to those around her. And I and other brain injury survivors offer the gift of resilience and planning ahead.

All of us are a part of the body of Christ. The church – the body of Christ – is different from the world. Our value as people isn't determined by what we do. Our value is determined by God. And God wants all of us here to share together in the work of the reign of God.

This is the reason to include folks with disabilities in the church. They – we – are part of the body of Christ. The body is not complete without us.

Amen.