

Varieties of Gifts - One Body, One Spirit

Exodus 4:10-17; I Corinthians 12:4-13

The scriptures chosen for this year's Access Sunday include profound insights that may be missed if they are understood only through the perspective of persons who are able-bodied. Each passage calls persons with disabilities to discern and to value their own gifts. Each calls the church to use the rich gifts offered by members who live with disabilities.

Removing architectural barriers is only the first step towards a fully inclusive church. Ramps and elevators are not enough. Those of us who have disabilities often discover new and creative ways to use our own gifts. Ask us! We may do things differently but we have much to offer.

Exodus 4:10-17 gives us a vivid illustration of interdependence. In the story, God called Moses to lead his suffering people out of slavery. Moses tried every excuse possible in order to avoid the call. (Exodus 3: 11,13; 4:1) When God refused to accept his excuses, Moses tried what should have convinced God that he was not qualified to lead his people. "O my Lord, I have never been eloquent ... I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." (Ex. 4:10)

But God was not moved by Moses' lack of ability to speak well. Instead God gave Moses a partner. Moses' talent was leadership and Aaron's talent was eloquence. Each had gifts to use and each had limitations.

The story gives a model for our service together in the household of God. We are not called to be "perfect." We are called to a shared ministry.

When Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, he addressed a community that was divided over the value of gifts possessed by its members. Did all gifts have value? Were some gifts more necessary than others?

The early house churches defied the rigid lines of separation dictated by tradition and by the dominant Roman culture. In those radical new communities, slaves and free people, Greeks and Jews, males and females had all been baptized into one body. (I Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:28) The gifts of all were to be valued because all were gifts of the Spirit.

But Paul never mentioned the gifts of people with disabilities. Since we were not named in his lists of those included in the body, was he excluding us? Certainly not!

Paul himself had some kind of disability. (II Cor. 12:7; Gal. 6:11) In the Corinthian church, there must have been many members who were living with disabilities. Inclusion was not an issue. Their gifts, not their disabilities, were what was important!

Here again, as in the Exodus story, we are called to interdependence and shared ministry. Whether we are disabled or are, for the present, able-bodied, we are not alone. We are members of the Body of Christ with gifts to be treasured.

Each of the following stories highlights gifts brought to the church by persons with disabilities. The churches they belong to are, in many ways, very different from each other. Westminster Presbyterian is a three thousand member congregation in downtown Minneapolis, Minnesota. The Kwanzaa Community Presbyterian Church is a small but growing community of African-American Christians in Minneapolis. North Como Presbyterian Church is a mid-sized congregation in Roseville, Minnesota. What the three churches have in common, however, is a commitment to include the gifts of all God's people in the household of faith, to "hear the voices of people long silenced." (Brief Statement of Faith, line 70)

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