

The Word in Action

My brother Tony, age 31, recently joined the church he attends. This would not be so unusual, except that he has attended that same church just about every Sunday of his life. He was baptized there. He worships there. He brings his gifts there. But it took an interim pastor to ask the obvious question, “Why isn’t Tony a member of this church?”

Tony has Down syndrome. Combined with hydrocephalus at birth, he functions at a lower level than most people with Down syndrome. He learned to sit up on his own at the age of five, to walk when he was ten. He communicates in sign language, with a vocabulary of perhaps fifty words, most of which have to do with sports or food – his favorite topics. He loves to show people the many medals he has brought home from the Special Olympics – including a gold medal for bowling, and a bronze medal for the softball throw. Tony’s other event is the 50 yard dash. Unlike the other events, Tony has never won a medal for his racing skills; you see, whenever Tony hears anyone cheering for him as he runs, he stops right there and begins clapping for himself. Tony runs for the sheer joy of the running.

My brother and I could not be more different. He’s never learned to read or write, while I have earned my Master’s degree. I’m very seldom happy with where I am in life, always reaching for something more, another level of achievement. Tony is able to enjoy each day as it comes. I get caught up by all that I am unable to do – Tony celebrates everything that he is able to do. I am an ordained Minister of the Word and Sacrament, Tony just added his name to the membership rolls of his congregation. Unable to attend even a modified Sunday School class much less a confirmation course, Tony had never taken this official step. And so we celebrated when he stood in front of the congregation and signed “yes” to the question, “Do you love Jesus?” and another “yes” to “will you share your gifts with this congregation?” And so Tony became a member of his church, confirming his membership in the Church Universal all along.

My brother will never stand in front of a congregation as I do each week and interpret scripture. He has never read any of the great theologians, never studied Greek or Hebrew....but Tony’s life is his proclamation of the gospel: the love he extends to each person he meets, regardless of their station in life, the freedom with which he shares the love of the One who created him....this gives him his authority. Like Sign Language, he shows the word in action....and thus proclaims his faith in the Author of all life.

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