Everybody Belongs
(1 Corinthians 12:12-27) Sermon Notes

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We encourage you to personalize this message as you are able. Make it your own! To begin, use an illustration or story that helps people feel a sense of what it’s like to not fit in or of being rejected. Here is an example.

Introduction

Think with me about a time that you just didn’t fit in. An experience for some that still may prompt a cold sweat is the memory of elementary school gym class. Team captains are picked – and the selection of teammates begin. The popular and athletic get snapped up quickly. As the selection dwindles, you remain. The dread of being picked last starts to set in. Being the last one chosen is traumatic, especially when you’re the only one left and the captain is still hesitating to call you to their team.

Let's press this example further. What if it’s not just a team in gym class where you are picked last? Because of differences in the way your body looks and navigates the world or the way your brain and mind processes information, you are constantly overlooked, bypassed or judged. Your entire life feels a bit like this school gym experience. You are waiting at the margins, hoping that someone will extend an invitation to belong.

We don’t have to look far into the New Testament to encounter people who were “different.” Because of these differences, they were pushed aside by their society.

- In Mark 2, it takes four friends to help make way for a paralyzed man to see Jesus.
- A man born blind in John 9 was thought to be cursed somehow by the sin of his parents. In turn, he was considered undeserving and cast out from society.
- A hemorrhaging woman in Mark 5 was seen as “unclean” and therefore untouchable and not worthy of human compassion.
These are not just ancient accounts of people with disabilities, however. Experiences of denied access, of prejudiced views and derogatory remarks may be current realities for a child with autism, a young person who has Down syndrome, or an adult with spina bifida.

Over the last several decades we have seen significant gains in society regarding accessibility, employment, and human rights. However, attitudes of discrimination and ridicule still prevail. We live in a world where high-profile politicians mock disabled reporters, where many “accessible” buildings really aren’t accessible, where pregnancies are terminated every day because the child would be born with a disability. To provide a specific example, in June of 2017 Toronto police officers pulled over a car as part of a routine traffic stop. One of the passengers was a girl with Down syndrome. The in-car recorder captures these two police officers joking about her being “disfigured.” “Artistic” will be their new code word to describe people like her, they decide. This is a real example of what people continue to experience.

Disability and the Church

So why are we talking about this as a church? These pervasive attitudes about people with disabilities are unfortunately not only found in isolated incidents. They saturate our culture, and all-too-often churches have failed to address the pain that these attitudes have caused. Today, December third 2017, is the United Nations Day of Persons with Disabilities. It falls on a Sunday this year, and what a great opportunity for churches to focus on how we are and are called to be places of welcome and belonging for everybody!

Statistics Canada reports that 1 in 7 Canadians aged 15 years and older have a disability that in some way impairs their daily activities.¹ This translates to 3.8 million Canadians, a population approximately the size of Los Angeles, California! Current statistics also indicate that 1 in 4 households are impacted in some way by disability. We are reminded by disability advocates that this is a minority group that any of us could join at any point in our lives whether due to age or other life events.

It is our hope, however, that this becomes more than just a day of awareness or information. Today we hope to highlight the gifts and abilities of people with disabilities in our own community. We must also acknowledge that there are people with disabilities at the margins of our church communities who need to be welcomed fully into the Body of Christ. These are people with gifts and talents who, if given the opportunity, can become part of our community where their God-given gifts are valued and respected.

People with disabilities and their families don't only need a day of welcome; they need a lifetime of belonging. We're not talking here about a special need, or an exceptional need. We all have a deep need to belong, to be loved, to be valued. We want to be included not because it is “a right,” but because we are loved and appreciated.

Laws like the AODA (Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act) have done a lot of good in helping our world to be a more accessible place. But there's something that the law can't do, something that it takes a loving community for, and that it is to be a place where everybody belongs. Scottish theologian John Swinton observes,

To belong, you have to be missed. There’s something really, really important about that. People need to long for you, to want you to be there. When you’re not there, they should go looking for you... Belonging should be the goal of all communities. Particularly religious communities. The law can build up structures to protect people with disabilities and enhance life, but it can’t make people care for one another. That seems to be a primary thing religious communities can do: create spaces where people can learn to care for one another, even if people are quite different, in some respects, from yourself. And it’s not just for people with disabilities or people with dementia. It’s for all of us; we need to be missed.²

We all need to belong, and to be missed when we're not here. This goes deep to the heart of what it means to be a human being. We have been created in God's image to belong to Him, and to belong to one another. Is it no wonder that Christ summarized the law and the prophets with the command to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind” and to “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt 22:27-39, NLT).

1 Corinthians 12

One of the most powerful passages in scripture that speaks to the importance of belonging is 1 Corinthians 12:12-26. Today we will be exploring Paul's words on what it means to be the Body of Christ.

1. The Body has many parts

12 Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. 13For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. 14Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.

² http://www.ucobserver.org/interviews/2013/02/john_swinton/
The Apostle Paul here draws a powerful analogy between our individual bodies and the one body of Christ. The question that arises is, “what if a body part takes a different form than is expected?” What about the ear that does not function in the typical way of an ear? Or an eye, hand, or a foot that requires adaption, or accommodation to accomplish its task? What about a mind that does not process or communicate information in a ‘usual’ way? Should these factors jeopardize or minimize the place and value those parts have within the body? The answer from scripture is a resounding “No!”

Even a cursory reading of the Bible demonstrates God's heart toward those the world would consider weak or vulnerable. Where society looks upon weakness or vulnerability with disdain, as God's children He calls us to the complete opposite.

Paul himself was a well-educated public speaker in a time when culture placed great emphasis on human beauty and bodily perfection. In The Corinthian Body, Dale Martin writes that for the Greco-Roman culture, “strength and beauty of body are reflections of nobility of character.”3 For Paul to tell the Corinthians that he came to them in “weakness, fear and trembling” is to make a profound political statement.4 It is likely not just a figure of speech, Martin writes, but “we would do well to assume that Paul is here referring to an actual condition: a physical deficiency that adversely affected his rhetorical performance.”5 In opposition to the culture of his (and our) time, in Christ’s body, it is those who are deemed “weak” who play pivotal roles in advancing God’s Kingdom. As Paul expresses it, “I will boast all the more gladly in my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest on me... For when I am weak, then I am strong.”6

This is the story that we read throughout the pages of scripture.

- From the first pages of Scripture, we read that “God created human beings in his own image.”7 Each of us is part of that reflection of the divine. The Psalmist echoes this when he proclaims “I will praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.”8
- In Leviticus, God commands “Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind, but fear Your God.”9

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4 1 Cor. 2:3, NIV
5 Ibid.
6 2 Cor 12:9-10, NIV
7 Genesis 1:27, NLT
8 Psalm 139:14, NIV
9 Liviticus 19:14, NIV
In Isaiah, He proclaims, “I will go before you and make the rough places smooth.”

In Christ’s example of throwing a dinner party, he commands that we “invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.” Christ’s Kingdom brings those on the margins into the centre of His mission in the world.

In Hebrews, we read, “Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. ‘Make level paths for your feet,’ so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.”

Throughout God’s Word, we find a witness of Christ’s proclamation that “the last shall be first, and the first last.” The Good News is that the “favourable year of the Lord” begins now, as we invite God’s Kingdom to come. The question that we must ask is, “How does this Kingdom shape the way we live, today?” I think that Paul’s words here in 1 Corinthians start to give us a sense of how we can manifest this “good news” as Christ’s Body, together.

2. There are many parts but only one body

Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

At first, this seems like a bizarre conversation with between one’s body parts wrestling with whether a particular part may or may not belong. Theologian and father of a son with Down syndrome and autism, Brian Brock, writes that this is not as unusual as it might first seem. “Tales of conversations between individual body parts were standard fare in the ancient world, as was their deployment to illumine aspects of political relationships.” What is unique about Paul’s approach is his emphasis on the “sheer

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10 Isaiah 45:2, NASB
11 Luke 14:13-14
12 Hebrews 12:12, NIV
13 Matt 20:16, KJV
givenness" of Christ's body. Each part is interwoven and interconnected in a way that can't be “torn apart.” This is not some future hope, that Christ's body is united. Paul's point is that Christ's body is always already made up of all of us. The question becomes how well we are connected with one another. The literal translation of verse 18 reads something like, “God put into place the members in the body, each one as he chose.”

For many of our church communities, this is something to which we must constantly return. Too frequently the place of people with disabilities in the Body is questioned or limited because of their difference. Paul emphasizes that difference is not disqualification. When an eye doesn't walk, or a foot doesn't hear, or an ear doesn't see, would it for that reason cease to be part of the body? Notice that the onus for belonging is on the Body, not on the part. It is the task of the Body to recognize the place of belonging of each part. When we expect every “part” to act in the same way, or contribute the same abilities, we impede the functioning of the whole body.

Disability advocates urge, “we are not looking for things to be done “for us”, but “with us” and even “by us.” Being part of a body means that you are not just a recipient of grace but also a contributor to grace. Not just being ministered to, but ministering to others. Rom 12: 3-8 tells us that God gives everybody a gift that has a function for the edification of the Body. Each member in the Body has both responsibility and opportunity. By marginalizing or refusing to embrace the gifts that God has given each one, we refuse to embrace the beauty of Christ's Body in its fullness. God's imparting of gifts is not contingent on ability, but on grace; not demonstrated in strength, but made perfect in weakness. The part does not have to push its way in and convince the body it belongs; rather, the Body in love and grace honours all parts and ensures each part finds and shares its gifts.

3. The Body needs all its parts

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.
If we believe everybody belongs then we will, like the four friends of the paralyzed man in Mark 2, find the practical things to do to “pick up our corner of the mat.” This is going to be different for each person and each situation, and we must work together to overcome the barriers that are encountered. We will not rest till a way is found for everybody to encounter the presence of Christ, and to participate in the Eucharist together. It is here that we hear the words, “This is my body, broken for you.”

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It is interesting to note here that Paul himself uses the phrase “seem to be weaker” and “we think are less”. In his writing on weakness and honour, Paul doesn’t minimize the “givenness” of our bodily limitations. We each have weaknesses and strengths. Christ’s power shines through our unique physical makeup. Yet, Paul deeply challenges the honour or stigma that we ascribe to bodies based on society’s perception of them.

Should the inclusion of my body be in question as a part of the Body of Christ because society judges it has as having less honour? By no means! These are human judgments. The Kingdom of God is the place where these attributions of honour and stigma have no weight. Jean Vanier, founder of L’Arche communities, observes that we must move from the place of generosity to meeting as equals. “When you’re generous,” he says, “I’m above, you’re below… there’s something else. It’s a meeting. And a meeting implies ‘I’m not better than you, you’re not better than me, we’re just children of God.” The Body of Christ is that place where we meet one another, not in our own power but in mutual vulnerability and weakness.

4. Towards a community where everybody belongs

So how might we keep moving toward being a community where everybody belongs? What if we were to reverse the story we started with? Think of a time when you felt needed. Think of a time when you felt missed. Think of a time when you felt loved, and included. What made that experience so rich for you? Now, what if we were to start to have these conversations with one another. If we were to find out from people in our community who experience life differently what helps them to feel like they belong? We don’t need to have all of the answers, we simply need to start asking the right questions. The question is not “Are people of all abilities part of the Body of Christ?” The question is how we recognize the gifts and abilities of every body who is part of Christ’s Body.
As we close, I want to point towards the research of Erik Carter out of Vanderbilt University. Carter suggests that there are ten dimensions of belonging. As we think through these, which ones do you experience? How might you extend this experience to others? People feel a sense of belonging when they are:

1. Present  
2. Invited  
3. Welcomed  
4. Known  
5. Accepted  
6. Supported  
7. Cared for  
8. Befriended  
9. Needed  
10. Loved

This is a sense of what it might look like to be a church community everybody belongs. It begins with engaging in conversations, listening, and understanding the experiences of those impacted by disabilities in our communities. We ask “what does our belonging look like from your perspective? How might I be a part of that experience for you?”

Ultimately we know that this is only possible because of Christ. As Paul writes in Galations 3:28, “You are all one in Christ Jesus.” We are the Body of Christ, baptized by one Spirit. As we have experienced this deep sense of love and belonging in Christ, may we extend it to those whom we have marginalized. It is only then that we will truly be the expression of Christ’s Body to the world in which we live.

Let pray and ask for God's guidance as seek to fulfill Christ’s call to “Love one another, as I have loved you.”\(^{15}\)

### 5. Closing prayer

Father, we are here, together, humbled by the love that Christ has shown to us in his life, ministry, and death on the cross. We pray that we would allow Christ’s example to draw us together. We pray that we would be a witness of Christ’s love on earth. We pray that we would welcome people of all abilities into a shared experience of your grace. We praise you for the gifts you have given every body. We praise you for the ways you continue to work through our strengths and our weaknesses. We pray, “Come Lord Jesus, Come.” May we live in the beauty of a community where every body belongs, and everyone has the opportunity to contribute their God-given gifts in serving one another. We thank you for today, and for this opportunity to consider what it might look like to live out your love more deeply in our community.

In Christ's name, Amen.

\(^{15}\) John 13:34-35, NLT