

Seeking the Welfare of Others

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

Accessibility Sunday, October 16, 2022

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I find that some of the most profound statements in my heart are ones that were said off-handedly or in passing. One such saying that shifted my worldview several years ago was this, “We are all temporarily able-bodied”. I don’t even recall who said it, but I felt that deep truth to my core, in my bones. “We are all temporarily able-bodied”. At some point in nearly all our lives we will all experience unexpected limitations or inability to do something that we once were able to do or become acutely aware that we are different or seen as less than by others. Some limitations are temporary or correctable with medical intervention but many of us are either born with or develop such restrictions that permanently alter our daily lives. These differences may be physical, cognitive, emotional or neurological in nature, sometimes hidden from others. Let’s just admit it, no one can escape this very human condition. Even if it is not us personally today, we have people close to us who do face such difficulties. And yet it seems like society is mostly ordered around the idea that everyone is able-bodied.

The history of our cultural view and treatment of people with Disabilities is really ugly. In fact, the “unsightly beggar ordinances” of the 1700s were dubbed Ugly Laws. Such ugly laws criminalized poor and disabled people for being seen in public whether they were seeking assistance or not. There was a strong tendency toward an “out of sight, out of mind” approach to caring for the severely disabled. These city ordinances were on the books in the United States up to the 1970s.

From a legal perspective, a profound and historic shift in public policy toward disability communities occurred in 1973 with the amendment of Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act. Section 504 banned discrimination based on disability by recipients

of federal funds. For the first time, the exclusion and segregation of people with disabilities was viewed as discrimination and deemed prohibited on a federal level. Prior to this there was great economic and social pressure to institutionalize people with severe physical and developmental disabilities. This was just fifty years ago. Prior to this such Rehabilitation Laws were limited to war veterans to receive special accommodations following World War I.

The next twenty years were full of incremental advances and setbacks as business owners and public officials resisted the need for accommodation in things such as public housing, building accessibility and so forth. Finally in 1989 new broad sweeping legislation known as the ADA or Americans with Disabilities Act began to gain traction and hold hearings on the bill. A grassroots movement advocating for this legislation mobilized people from around the country. People across the country submitted diaries to their legislators, documenting the daily accessibility struggles and discrimination they were facing. Testimonies from average citizens, veterans, school administrators and even legislators gave personal testimonies and advocated for the importance of the ADA.

According to The Disabilities Rights Education and Defense Fund website (DREDF.org), “The ADA is based on a basic presumption that people with disabilities want to work and are capable of working, want to be members of their communities and are capable of being members of their communities and that exclusion and segregation cannot be tolerated. Accommodating a person with a disability is no longer a matter of charity but instead a basic issue of civil rights.”

Likewise, during these years religious institutions including the United Church of Christ worked with disability activists to gain support for such monumental changes in our laws and society. Churches, like East Church, worked to educate members and correct these wrong practices of shunning and isolating members of our society and congregations. East Church has a rich history of working on accessibility needs of

people in Grand Rapids. The installation of the elevator, the loop hearing system, live streaming, large print materials, onsite counseling support and full inclusion of members with autism and other neuro-divergent needs, are just some of the ongoing work we are doing to be more and more accessible to all. I am especially proud of the ongoing work we are doing to love and support our members who live with Autism. Bren Elliot's expertise in this area has been especially enlightening for me and many. This is an area of ongoing learning for me, and I am grateful for her mentorship. I am sure later this week she will help me to correct my language and understanding on such matters.

You see all this work comes from a fundamental faith principle that we are all created in the image of God and deserve to be loved and embraced within the Body of Christ and within society as we are. We are learning to rethink of the Body of Christ as differently abled – Physically, emotionally, and intellectually. We are learning that healing societal disabilities is, in many ways, more important than seeking the healing of the individual. For too long we have lived under the false belief that perfection is the ideal and most godly form of being. In reality, we are all just temporarily able-bodied. When we can embrace this truth, we are then able to embrace our full humanity and focus on creating a more accessible and inclusive community for all.

In today's readings from Jeremiah we see the people being taken away from their homeland and forced to live in a strange and hostile environment. Yet Jeremiah's word to them was to fully integrate into this new society and live their lives to the fullest. Verses six and seven ends with this admonishment, "multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare."

"Be fruitful and multiply, do not decrease" harkens back to the Garden of Eden and the paradise of creation. We all think that somehow our lives are somehow diminished when it is not like paradise. But here God is reminding us to make the most of where

we find ourselves. To seek the welfare of all and in doing so we too will prosper. The Hebrew word here for welfare is Shalom. Shalom does mean so much more than just peace, it also means wholeness, restoration, integration and contentment.

On this Accessibility Sunday let us remember that we are all temporarily Able-bodied and are fully and completely loved by God and one another just as we are. As a congregation our commitment to this is found in our Open and Affirming Statement.

In 2002 this congregation engaged in discussion and study and declared itself to be Open and Affirming. The following is from our Open and Affirming Statement.

We celebrate the diversity of God's creation and affirm that each person has special worth as a unique creation in God's image. All are welcome to worship here and to come into relationship with the church's life and work. We thank God for the blessing, the challenge, and the joy that we experience in both our unity and our diversity.

We acknowledge that, historically, many Christian churches and societies have excluded people for a variety of unjust reasons. Among these are race or ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, economic class, physical or mental abilities. We affirm that all people are embraced with the family of God.

We affirm that the full fellowship of East Congregational Church (all rights and duties, benefits and responsibilities as defined by our constitution) is open to all who seek a relationship with God through union with this congregation in Christ. We affirm that all members of East Congregational Church are called to share as fully as they are able in the worship, fellowship, and leadership of our congregation.

As we journey together as a community of faith, we are called by God to seek justice for all people. We, therefore, call ourselves to make a continuing effort toward inclusiveness, standing against all forms of discrimination. Therefore, we declare ourselves to be an Open and Affirming congregation.