

Making Room at the Table by Rick Barr  
Damascus United Methodist Church, October 23, 2011

Good Morning. It is always a privilege to address the congregation of Damascus United Methodist Church, my church, the church that has given me and my family so much over the past two decades. In May, I was able to represent the church at the Baltimore-Washington Annual Conference held in Baltimore. I was deeply moved by one of the speakers, whose name I cannot remember, who proclaimed with the passion of a true believer in Christ that in His church and in the United Methodist Church specifically, there is room at the table for all. If taken literally, one could understand her proclamation as referring to the United Methodist policy of having no restrictions on participation in communion, which is true; we have no restrictions other than the sincere desire to gain a more intimate relationship with Jesus Christ. Our table is open. For the poor, there is room at the table; for the sick, there is room at the table, for the young, there is room at the table, for the old, there is room at the table. Of course, she was also referring to the table metaphorically; representing the life of the church in general. What she really meant was that the church, our church, Damascus United Methodist Church, has room for all within its family.

During breaks at Annual Conference, we were encouraged to visit the Cokesbury display of books for sale and, as anybody who knows me will tell you, I have a weakness for books and religious books on sale at 70% off are like honey to a bear. And after all, you always have room for just one more book, don't you? So I looked around and found a book by Erik Carter called Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities. I did purchase the book... at 70% off and as I perused through the pages I got to thinking... "It is wonderful that our church has room at the table for everyone, no questions asked but what if a person can't get to the table? What if a person has disabilities, physical, cognitive or emotional that make not only the taking of communion difficult but even participating in the life of the church a challenge? Of course, we have been addressing issues of physical access for years. We have ramps and elevators for those who have difficulty in navigating steps and stairs, we can provide sound amplification for those who have trouble hearing and we visit those who are housebound to ensure that they know we still count them as part of our community.

More challenging are those disabilities that are not so apparent to the naked eye. Cognitive and emotional disabilities are not challenges that can be spotted just by looking at someone but in many ways present a much greater challenge than the physical disabilities just mentioned. Autism and its cousin, Aspergers, anxiety, depression, dyslexia, attention deficit and hyper-activity are terms for these hidden challenges that have been added to our common language over the last two decades as we discover more and more how brain function, mind, and spirit are intimately connected.

We need to be generous, compassionate and kind for those among us who have disabilities... it is our calling as Christians to do so. However, this morning I wish to highlight that we, the “non-disabled”, we the church, we that are Body of Christ, need those whose brains, minds and souls are different and unique. We need them for our health, our growth and fullness. To support this claim, I would like to make three observations. First, people with disabilities have gifts and talents that are a result of those disabilities, not in spite of them. They are different but not inferior.

Perhaps the most well know and outstanding example is Temple Grandin. Temple Grandin is a Doctor of Animal Science at Colorado State University, an expert in the care and treatment of livestock and listed in Time Magazine’s 100 people who most affect our world. She is the subject of an award winning movie with Clare Danes playing the role of Temple. She also has Asperger’s Syndrome, a type of high functioning autism where deficits in social skills and abstract thinking affect their ability to develop relationships and interact with others. Persons with Aspergers have trouble thinking abstractly and instead focus on the literal details of the moment. Grandin attributes this ability to focus on the fact in front of her, as she says, to think in pictures, as the gift that has enabled her to become so accomplished in her field. But as she points out in her book The Way I See It, she has trouble with abstractions and sermons such as this one, would not make much sense to her. Terms such as sin, grace, and hope separated from concrete examples, concrete pictures, would go right over her head. But she says, “A nice positive approach for a Christian upbringing would be to give a child one of the WWJD – ‘What would Jesus do?’ necklaces or chains. Then teach the child concrete examples of what Jesus did or would do, in various situations”. I think we could all learn from this insight. In Temple Grandin we have an example of

where her weakness in social skills and abstract thought promotes unique abilities that benefit all of us.

We all experience the world in unique ways. This is true for people with disabilities as well. In some cases, they get it right when the rest of us get it wrong! In the book Now You See It: How the Brain Science of Attention will Transform the Way We Live, Work and Learn, Cathy N. Davidson describes a lecture she attended on attention blindness. The lecture began with the speaker requesting the audience to view a video where six people were passing a basketball back and forth. There were three in white shirts and three in black shirts. The objective was to count only the passes between people in white shirts. About thirty seconds into the video, a gorilla enters, walks around, stares at the camera, hits its chest and then walks off. All the while, the six people continue to pass the basketball between themselves. When the tape stops, the speaker asked how many people counted at least a dozen passes between white shirted people. Multiple hands go up. How about thirteen? Fourteen? Fifteen? Fifteen was it. Then the speaker asks, “Who saw the gorilla?” Only one person raised her hand, the author, Cathy Davidson. You see, she saw the gorilla because she was not able to do the counting; she has dyslexia and knew when the task began that she would not be able to focus on white shirted players passing to white shirted players. So when the gorilla came out, it quite literally stared her in the face, while everyone else, all those with normal abilities, focusing on the predefined task, missed it. By seeing the world differently, people with disabilities can provide missing perspectives and experiences missed by the rest of us. In this way, they can help us get things right.

I want to highlight an article written by Robert Ellsberg in the Huffington Post on June 27<sup>th</sup>. Ellsberg was the editor at Orbis Books of the famous spiritual writer, Henri Nouwen. In 1987, he became Nouwen’s editor, though he had worked with Nouwen ten years earlier, while Nouwen was a professor at Yale Divinity School. In 1986, Nouwen had moved to the L’Arche Daybreak Community in Toronto. Daybreak is one of the communities founded by Jean Vanier where people with developmental disabilities live with those who provide assistance. Ellsberg noticed that Nouwen “had always been an exceptionally restless and anxious person, struggling to find his place in the world and to discern where God was calling him. Gradually he came to realize that Daybreak, living in community with handicapped adults, was that place. There his search, his gifts and his needs -- both to give and to receive love -- finally came into harmonious focus.”

Years later, Ellsberg saw Nouwen again and noted that “Henri liked to travel with other Daybreak community members, and I could see how relaxed he was in their company. In earlier years our relationship had come under strain, in part because of my resistance to his gaping neediness, his constant desire for affirmation and his frustration that I was not more available as a friend. But this dynamic had changed. He seemed content and at peace with himself. And this was reflected in his writing, as well. Now, when he wrote about community or peacemaking or discipleship, there was nothing abstract or impersonal about it; he wrote about what he had seen and known firsthand.” In Nouwen’s case, the teacher had become the student and the Daybreak community, those persons with disabilities had become the teacher and the transforming presence in Nouwen’s life. Having read a number of Nouwen’s books, I can attest to their power and sincerity. It is also clear that the Daybreak Community was the key to unshackling the spirit that was Henri Nouwen.

By being open to the special needs of those with disabilities we are making room at the table and enabling all to come and partake of the blessing of Christ’s Church. In this we all benefit. Those with disabilities bring unique talents and abilities to the mission of the church, they bring perspectives that help us see what we have missed and finally, by being present, help us to be transformed by Christ’s spirit both individually and the church as a whole.

In Paul’s Epistle to the Thessalonians, he professes that he came to share the Gospel message with no strings attached. He did not come to manipulate through flattery or appeal to greed or to gain praise. He did not come to be a burden or take advantage of their hospitality. And then Paul says: **“As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.”** Here Paul states that each person, individually, like a father with his child is urged, and encouraged. A relationship of love is developed. The specific needs and abilities are accounted for and the message is tuned so that all, one at a time, will be encouraged and enabled to lead a life worthy of God. For God invites everyone to the kingdom table, making room for all and enabling all to participate in the body of Christ.

We are called to make room at the table for all who wish to come and share what Paul called “Life in Christ”. But how should we answer this call. How should we do it? I don’t have a simple answer. I do know that our church is already doing much to enable persons with disabilities to participate more fully in the life of the church. We have a vibrant Stephen’s ministry and have developed mentoring programs. We have elevators and ramps. We have counseling and support services. But we can do more. We must all become more aware, more informed and more open so that when we are called, we will hear and be able to respond energetically and effectively.

In closing, please stand and pray together the Prayer for Enablement which can be found on the back of the Lectionary Text sheet.

I Thessalonians 2:11

“As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.”



Autism Poster by Kevin Barr, 2009

Prayer for Enablement:

Dear God, we give thanks for our ability to be here today  
to address you in prayer and participate in your church.

We recognize that many in our community struggle with disabilities  
that make participation in the life of the church difficult.

Help us be aware of their struggles, to see their need  
and to creatively respond in ways that will enable them to  
more fully participate in the life of the church.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.