

Surprising Gifts

For just a moment, we're going to do something different. If you are able, stand up. If you aren't able to stand up, then set your feet firmly on the ground. Pay attention to your body. Breathe in, not just through your nose, but deeply, all the way down to the bottom of your lungs. Breathe out. Breathe in – Breathe out. As you continue breathing, pay attention to your body – to your feet firmly planted on the ground – to the legs supporting you – to the joints in your legs, your ankles, then move up to your knees – now to your hips. Pay attention to your torso – to your spine providing structure – to the organs in your body – is your stomach growling? – to your lungs as you continue to breathe with the air pumping through your body – to your heart as it solidly beats without any conscious control at all. Now move your attention to your shoulders – roll them a little to release any tension you might be holding there. Lift your arms – out to the side if there's room, then stretch above your head, feeling the muscles move as you stretch. Let your arms come to rest at your side and pay attention to your hands, moving each finger, aware of each sensitive finger tip. Move your attention to your neck as it supports your head, then to your head with all its wonderful sensing organs – ears that hear – listen – eyes that see – what do you see – a nose that smells and breathes – a mouth that tastes and speaks. This is your body, and all its many parts. A part of the way God created you, with many different parts that all have to work together to make it work well. Take a moment, and just pay attention to your body.

Now, if you are standing, you may sit down. When you are in a comfortable position, pay attention to the little toe on your left foot. Feel it as a part of your body. Notice that it's there. If you're like me, unless you're wearing uncomfortable shoes, most of the time you barely even pay attention to that little toe. It's just there, hanging on, but it's still part of your body. When you stub your toe, it hurts, sending off alarms to your brain and the rest of the body. And I am told that if you lose your little toe – if by some accident it is cut off – it makes

more of a difference than you would think. The loss of that one little toe throws off the whole balance of your body. Without it, you have to learn how to walk in a different way so you can be steady on your feet, and you are never entirely as steady and strong as you were before you lost it.

In the passage Kate read this morning from Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth, Paul talks about the church as the body of Christ made up of many separate individual parts, each part having its own role to play in the operation of the whole. He talks about the fact that not everyone can have the same ability – the whole body can't be an eye, because how would it hear? Then he moves his attention to the parts of the body we usually downplay or ignore, reminding us that those parts are important too, as important as the ones that are more visible or who considered to be more central to the operation of the whole.

Over the last couple of weeks, we've been reflecting on the core beliefs of our disability ministry at Tree of Life Church. First we told the Tree of Life story, and talked about the image of the Tree of Life with deep roots in faith and bearing many kinds of fruit. Last week we talked about how important it is to believe that you and every other person is made in the image of God. Today, we move on to the conviction that God has given each person gifts to be used, shared and celebrated.

That's a starting point a lot of us take for granted. Next week, as we ordain and install officers, we'll begin with the words from 1 Corinthians we used as our call to worship this morning: "There are varieties of gifts, but the same spirit. There are different ways of serving God, but it is the same God we serve. ...To each is given a gift of the Spirit to be used for the common good." For people with disabilities, that's not something they expect others to take for granted. They're used to having people see only their disability and not look beyond that to see what they have to share. Adults with disabilities want to be treated as adults first, adults with the ability to participate in decision making

and be seen as having abilities as well as disabilities. To be constantly overlooked is demeaning and frustrating and dehumanizing.

I've learned this at Our Community Cup Coffeehouse, especially as people get to be regulars and feel like they are part of what's going on.. Some folks come in and enjoy being treated as guests. But others want to have ownership in the program. They want to be treated as adults with abilities, as part of the body, not as objects of charity. They teach us what it is they have to give. Some folks help us take down tables and chairs every week. Others bring food. Over the last year when most of our contact has been over Zoom, we've had some great ideas for activities suggested. And the two times when we've done Outside Open Mics and Talent shows, the variety of talents shared, the amount of creativity on display, was pretty amazing. The gifts are there, yet so often they are over looked. At Our Community Cup we're learning how to make a place where everyone can share their gifts. How can we bring that spirit into our worshipping community as well?

Right now is an especially important time to be asking that question as we come out of COVID and move into the world of what's next. It is a time of continuing adaptation to new realities, of thinking about things like how to have a congregation that worships both in the sanctuary and virtually at the same time. Folks with disabilities and their families by necessity are some of the most adaptive people I have ever met – the royalty of figuring out ways to make it work. They have lifetimes of experience behind them at figuring out how to do things people told them couldn't be done.

Rabbi Julia Watts Belser, who goes through life in a wheelchair, talks about how she had to claim her own integrity by learning two different postures toward the world – elbows in and elbows out. Elbows in means she goes through the world tucked into the boundaries of her wheelchair. Elbows out reminds her that she doesn't give way, that other people move. Physically the difference is only about two inches, but the mindset affects the way she moves

through the world. Belser says, "So when I move through the world with a person who is not a wheelchair user, - with a "Strider" They don't go first. They don't "move with" enough. They're always worried to make sure I keep up. I'm like, no, no, get out of my way. I'm going first and you follow after. They're always trying to clear a path. I'm like we're going, we're moving, and space will get made." With the "elbows out" wheelchair user, the strider encounters space in the crowd, space that is opened up in a new way, offering new ways of encountering the world.

This is a very concrete way of describing what I've seen a lot of folks with disabilities and their families do, opening up new ways through a world that is constantly throwing up barriers. The documentary movie "Crip Camp" shows this attitude in action. Starting with a camp for youth with disabilities in the Catskills in the 1970's where the young people began to find their own voices and their own ways of living, the movie follows several of the campers through their lives, through the Disability Rights movement of the '80's and 90's with sit-ins and congressional hearings, to the adoption of the Americans with Disabilities Act and up to today. Their refrain was "nothing about us without us", meaning the voices of people with disabilities need to be heard when others are making decisions that affect their lives.

"Nothing about us without us". As we move into this next phase of our church's life, that's a phrase we need to pay attention to. Our brothers and sisters with disabilities are a part of this body of Christ. So often they've been seen as the little toe, that part of the body that you don't even notice until it hurts. But the reality is they have varieties of gifts just like everybody else, abilities as well as disabilities. And it is very likely that in this new season where we are right now they can help us find new pathways forward by the different ways of being and thinking they have already discovered as they make their own ways through a world that in many ways was not built with them in mind. It may be

that our disabled friends and members are the adaptive left hand for our body right now rather than the forgotten little toe.

How do we discover and use the gifts that each person has to offer? There are two starting places that I've learned the hard way – by making lots of mistakes when I didn't do these things. The first starting place is to listen. Sometimes this is harder than it sounds if you're dealing with folks for whom the spoken word is difficult. Take the time to really listen and understand. Find out if there's another mode of communication other than spoken word that works better for them. For some people it's writing in a chat space or texting. For others it's some form of body language. And sometimes it is made harder because the people you're listening to aren't used to having someone pay attention so they are slow to express their ideas. But over and over again, I've found that when you take the time to listen, there's something there worth paying attention to.

The other way to allow gifts to be used is simply to say "yes", no matter how strange the gift being offered might seem to you, or no matter how it doesn't fit into the original plan. Sometimes it takes a little work on both sides to make the gift being offered work, but it's worth adapting the original plan and seeing what new thing springs forth.

"There are varieties of gifts, but the same God who gives them. There are different ways of serving God, but it is the same God we serve."

"Now You are the body of Christ, and individually members of it." Amen and amen.

I think it's safe to say that the apostle Paul found the congregation in Corinth challenging to deal with. We know more about his relationship with them than any of the other churches he wrote to, mostly because we have a more complete version of his correspondence with them. You find the correspondence in 1 and 2 Corinthians in the Bible, but it's really more than two letters since almost everyone agrees that 2 Corinthians is actually made up of parts of three or four letters put together. He loved them and struggled with them, blessed them and yelled at them and taught them. One of the biggest challenges he faced was that there was an ongoing argument in the church about who was the most spiritual and who had the best spiritual gifts and who therefore was most important and should be listened to.