

Welcoming Unexpected Guests to the Banquet

Brett Webb-Mitchell

Devereux Hospital & Children's Center of Florida, Melbourne, Florida

The focus of this article is the challenge of discovering the place of people with disabilities in the life of a congregation or parish. The article's message is appropriate for such occasions of the church's life as Christian Family Sunday in May, or Access Sunday, or Ability Awareness Sunday, in which the gifts of all people, including those with disabilities, is emphasized. The names are fictitious due to confidentiality.

It is a cool summer morning in the hills surrounding Montreat, North Carolina, as parents gather together to share something they have in common: a child with a disabling condition. The topic of discussion for this gathering has to do with how their individual congregations first responded to the presence of their child with a disability. The parents' responses echoed one another as they told of congregations who, though scared at first, learned to at least accept that the couple had a child with a disabling condition. Most of the parents learned how to work with their churches so that their child had a place in Sunday school, youth groups, and worship. Karen, whose two children have cerebral palsy and developmental problems, shared that her congregation has grown to accept her children and involve them in the life of the church. But Joy, whose son has Down's syndrome, said that the support was fragile at best. She handles the fragile support by no longer expecting much from the church but expecting much from God to care for her and her family.

Other parents of children with disabilities and adults with disabilities have experienced the church's fragile support. Many people with disabling conditions are angry at their church for what feels like a lack of caring support, a feeling that carries over to their relationship with God. Some people with disabilities feel that "if a healthy child is a perfect miracle of God, who created the imperfect child?"¹ For the writer Bern Ikeler, the whole family questioned and cried to the Creator: "What is happening to us?" Born with cerebral palsy, Bern's birth was the death of the family's dream child. Unlike a child's physical death, a disability is a death that happens hundreds of times each day, as the child is unable to do what "normal" children could do.²

It isn't only those intimately connected with a person's disabling conditions who have felt the fragility of support. Church leaders have also admitted that their support is fragile. Many say they don't know what to say or do for the family of the person with a disability. Continually afraid of saying something offensive at the wrong time, offering help not needed, some choose to say and do nothing at all. Practical signs of support are absent, the comforting words of care needing to be expressed are rarely heard, and the gift of being present in the challenging times in a disabled person's life is withheld.

This reaction is not isolated to churches. We live in a society which has created a mistaken belief that shapes our collective perception, or misperception, of disabled people. We have been lured to believe that having a disabling condition means one is less than fully human, regardless of what combination of gifts and talents a person might have; people focus on one's physical, mental, or sensory limitations. The person with a disabling condition is a provocative, painful sign of our own mortal condition and something that we'd rather deny than accept.³ As the theologian

Stanley Hauerwas writes, the natural response to the misperceived stereotype that people with a disabling condition are in pain is to get away from the person as quickly as possible.⁴ Such pain, or illusion of pain, is a threat to our communities.

Misperception of people with disabling conditions in congregations is not an individual problem, but is a dark, knotted disturbing thread that runs throughout the richly textured fabric of congregational life. The challenge for the church is to rightly perceive that some people have physical, mental, or sensory conditions that naturally impose real limitations in terms of what some can and cannot do in life. Members of Christ's community are to look *through* and *beyond* one's abilities or disabilities into the heart of the other person as we come to be with another person, whether in times of exuberant celebration or righteous anger. We are called to live with one another as a sign of God's grace.

The gospel message affirms this message of grace in Jesus' call to love God with our whole being, and to love one's neighbor as yourself (Matt. 22:39). Overt exclusion of another person in God's family, regardless of one's abilities or limitations, hurts and offends everyone in the body of Christ. Jesus emphasized that Christians share a spiritual bond of loving care with one another that transcends our own precious, natural kinship network. Jesus points to the existence of a spiritually ordered community of neighbors, where we view ourselves as selves-embedded-in-community, rather than disconnected individuals living in the selfish and unjust order of the scarcity paradigm.

The anthropologist Richard Katz wrote that the scarcity paradigm assumes we live in a world of scarce, nonrenewable resources, and only those who are rich or powerful enough may accumulate and control the distribution of these resources. Such resources include items like oil, water, and health care provisions for people with disabilities.⁵ Whatever truth there may be in a scarcity of natural resources, the paradigm can be used to distort important elements of human life. Some, for example, perceive of love as a scarce resource, fearful that they may squander it in the wrong places, thus using it all with no love left in reserve for an emergency. They are not aware that this is backwards thinking as, in reality, the more we share love with one another, the more we have of it.⁶ The scarcity paradigm is a justified description of our contemporary American culture, and from such cultural pressures, none of us are exempt, including those of us who consider ourselves members of Christ's body.

Juxtaposed with the scarcity paradigm as applied to culture is the alternative spiritually ordered community of caring love found in Jesus' vivid description of God's kingdom. Throughout the gospel accounts, Jesus keeps pointing his disciples to the powerful reality of God's kingdom, the embodiment of a paradigm of abundance. The theologian Lesslie Newbigin suggests that the church on earth, called into existence by God in Christ, is a signpost on the arduous journey of faith, pointing the faithful followers of Jesus to the eventual, glorious destination.⁷ Yet Jesus' vision of God's kingdom is more than our final destination. Instead, it is a different lens on reality, a new spiritually ordered lifestyle that we should be committed to living out in this time and place. The Church is called by God in Christ to live life on earth with an eye on this kingdom whenever we pray the Lord's prayer: "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10, RSV).

In telling his followers about God's kingdom, Jesus used many parables, metaphors, and analogies. One powerful parable that reveals the inclusive nature of God's kingdom is found in the parable of the "Great Banquet Feast" (Luke 14:15-24, NIV). In this parable, Jesus takes the Old Testament image of the messianic banquet,

which is prepared and hosted by Yahweh, surrounded by the leaders and prophets of the children of Israel, and uses this banquet as the symbolic metaphor for God's kingdom, with God as the host and Jesus as the servant.

To summarize the story, the host has invited three prominent, wealthy men, and probably their families, to come to a large banquet he has prepared, but they all refuse him: they are all too busy with their ordinary lives to take time to accept the gracious invitation of the host to this most delicious love feast. The claim of God, the host, upon their lives was crowded out by the things of this world. The host, angry at such a response, tells the servant, "Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor and maimed and blind and lame" (vs. 21). This most likely included the outcasts of Jewish society, like those people from the leper colonies, those who sat at the city gates and begged for money, and those who stole from others along the dark alleyways of Jerusalem to support themselves. At first, many probably stalled because they did not feel worthy and, in feeling unworthy, declined the invitation. The host then tells the servant to *compel* the people to come "that my house may be filled" (vs. 23).

In verse 24, the host is telling the servant the theological point of the story: None of those who were first invited will taste my dinner. But this isn't by God's choice to exclude them for the invited guests excluded themselves from the banquet. Instead, these vacancies have been filled by those seen as the most unlikely, unworthy, unexpected guests at this feast: the poor, disabled outcasts of Jewish society. By turning to these rejected, disabled citizens, those who hid along the highways and the hedges, God transforms them from unwanted social outcasts to wanted, honored, though unexpected guests in God's kingdom.

Are those who are disabled in this story symbolic of only those who are obviously disabled in our time and place? I think not. Those who are disabled in this story represent all of humankind. The people who are disabled represent all who come before God every Sunday, all too aware of wounds and brokenness, filled with the painful knowledge that God knows the sinful condition of their lives, aware of their human limitations and inadequacies, yet who still dare to come and share in the love feast presented before us by the Creator, our all-forgiving host.

This simple yet profound parable of God's kingdom has important theological implications that may enable congregations to learn how to invite, welcome, and accept all who wish to enter the church, regardless of their abilities or limitations. To begin with, we need to remember that the good news of this story is that the invitation to God's banquet table is not based upon our human good works, nor dependent upon our money and fame. Instead, the invitation to this banquet is the gift of salvation extended through God's gift of grace. We are invited because God first loved us. The only way one can remain outside and away from the banquet is by consciously turning down the invitation. The New Testament theologian Joseph Fitzmyer writes, while we cannot save ourselves, we can very well damn ourselves.⁸

This idea of grace runs contrary to the implied message of the scarcity paradigm that suggests that such love and attention are limited resources. The scarcity paradigm is overtly and covertly communicated to many people with disabling conditions and their families. Many leaders in congregations determine whether disabled persons may attend worship or other activities by asking the narrow question, "What can they *do* in worship?" as if God values us only for what we can do, not for who we are.

Nowhere in Scripture is it written that one has to be able to *do* certain things in

order to worship God, or that one must have a specific I.Q., or behave in a socially appropriate fashion. It has been said by many who worship with those who have been labeled severely or profoundly mentally retarded that the greatest gift they give is the understanding that God values and enjoys *who* we are, as a child of God's, rather than what we *do*. What one finally gets out of worship is, most likely, between the "invited guest" and the "host" of the banquet.

Another important lesson is the realization that God's banquet table is big enough for all who are invited to sit at it and enjoy the meal. There is no sense in the parable that the banquet room was not big enough or overly crowded. There was so much space left over at one point that the servant was sent out a second time to bring in more people. Each person has a special place at God's table at this love feast. No one is shunted away from the feast.

This lesson from God's banquet table runs contrary to some congregations which may resemble a family reunion. When I grew up, dinners at the family reunions were in two different rooms. In the dining room was the adult table, with china, crystal, the best silver on an Irish linen tablecloth, with a floral bouquet, and candles in the center. Meanwhile, the kitchen was the room for the children with a rickety card table, folding chairs, plastic-ware, and no flowers. This room was child proof.

Many churches have opted for this family reunion paradigm for worship. Some churches have set aside a separate chapel, sometimes called the "Weeping Chapel," located off of the main sanctuary for those with disabilities to sit in along with nursing mothers and their crying, babbling babies. Others, like those with a hearing impairment, are tired of feeling closed out of the hearing-centered parish during worship and have established their own churches for the "deaf community" in their denominations. This parable raises a question for our churches: Is this banquet table symbolic of our gathering, willing to welcome all who wish to enter?

The final lesson is remembering that each person who was invited and came to the banquet had this one, essential characteristic in common: they probably had never seen themselves as members of a community of love. Each person had seen themselves as disconnected individuals, with long forgotten family connections, isolated from the Jewish community. They were hiding in the alleyways because they were lonely outcasts.

Being brought together through the host's gracious invitation, gathered around a common table, they began to see that they were more or less like the other invited guests: they saw other poor strangers transformed, unexpectedly, into invited, honored guests. Who would have thought that the one with leprosy, the outlaw, the disenfranchised, the undervalued, would be God's welcomed guests? All it took was accepting the invitation to come to God's feast.

What is moving in this story is that not one of these people could ever repay the host in kind, for none of these individuals had ever tasted or seen such splendor as was found at this feast. They simply accepted God's invitation to "taste my banquet." And in accepting this invitation, their lives were forever changed.

The challenge for the church is to break away from the dominant culture's misperceptions which keep those who have a disabling condition on the disenfranchised, undervalued margins of our society. Jesus' parable establishes a vision of God's kingdom that gives those who are disabled a place not only close to God's heart in God's kingdom, but more importantly, the realization that the one with a disabling condition has an invaluable place in the living body of Christ. But Jesus' parable calls for nothing less than a conversion of the church's collective heart in inviting and

welcoming all who wish to worship God. To God, people with disabling conditions are not just another special interest-social action task force and project for our churches. This is more than social posturing; this is kingdom of God ethics ruling.⁹ People who, by the way, have some real limitations and unique gifts, have been invited to have a seat at the finest meal at God's love feast.

The reason that Jesus told the parable is so that we have a practical, concrete vision of the loving nature of God's kingdom in our churches. Such love, writes the social critic Wendell Berry, is never abstract: "It does not adhere to the universe of the planet or the nation or the institution or the profession, but to the singular sparrows of the street, the lilies of the field, 'the least of these my brothers and sisters.'"¹⁰

Jesus is calling the church to live its life according to this alternative vision of God's kingdom. We are to move over on the pews and discover that God wants all who wish to enter our sanctuaries to worship God to be free to do so. Christ's body is made of those who think they are able and those whom we have labeled "disabled," who appear less fortunate, broken, and wounded. We need these "unexpected guests" to be invited in order to be reminded that it is God in Christ alone who can heal the wounds deep within, and mend the broken hearts, because we are God's children. God's banquet table is a place for all Christians, upholding the common good of all members of Christ's body, on earth as it is in heaven.

NOTES

¹ Helen Featherstone, *There's a Difference in the Family* (New York: Penguin Books, 1980).

² Bernard Ikeler, *Parenting Your Disabled Child* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986).

³ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973).

⁴ Stanley Hauerwas, *Naming the Silences* (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990).

⁵ Richard Katz, "Empowerment and Synergy: Expanding the Community's Healing Resources." Unpublished manuscript, Cambridge: Harvard University, 1984, p. 1.

⁶ This perception of love came from conversation with Stanley Hauerwas.

⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, *Sign of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980).

⁸ Joseph Fitzmyer, *Anchor Bible Commentary Series: The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV* (New York: Doubleday, 1985).

⁹ John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

¹⁰ Wendell Berry, *Home Economics* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987).