

Life Sunday Sermon 2019

Isaiah 46:3-4 “From Age to Age the Same”

Rev. Steve Leinhos, Ministry Consultant, Bethesda Lutheran Communities

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Dave (name changed to ensure anonymity) was baptized as an infant in a German Lutheran Church. His family was one of the founding families of a Lutheran church in California in the 1940s. He was raised in a Lutheran home, went to Lutheran Sunday School and confirmation classes, was confirmed as a junior high student, and took part in the local Walther League. He attended a Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod college and seminary. However, Dave decided to work in financial services and utilize his knowledge and expertise to benefit Lutheran churches and ministries. One of them was Good Shepherd Lutheran Home of the West in central California, which provided housing and holistic services for over 270 people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

In Dave’s own words:

“I was asked to help with a fundraising effort on behalf of Good Shepherd Home. The campaign went well, and I learned a lot about the mission and ministry of that organization. The turning point in my spiritual life came about through a visit to the home in Terra Bella, California.

“Given my background and educational experiences, I had a pretty good ‘head’ knowledge of Lutheran Christianity and thought I was doing ‘it’ right—choir, worship, teaching, being an officer in the congregation, helping with this fund drive, and so forth. Was I a believing Christian? I thought I was, and I was quite satisfied with the way I was going. Then came the trip to Terra Bella.

“I thought I was well prepared to visit the home and take a tour of the various parts of their facility. As it turned out, God had a different ‘tour’ in mind for me. At Terra Bella, I found I was not prepared to see God in action with these people who were, as we said then, ‘retarded.’ I

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just could not see how God had let them be what they were. Where was He in these people who just could not function the way I understood people were supposed to function? I dropped out of the tour and just went outside to wait until everyone else finished so then we could drive home and, hopefully, I could get them out of my mind. As I was sitting there, a young girl, maybe early teens, came up and sat down beside me. Looking at her I could see that she was one of the people living there whom I saw as 'incomplete.'" (Later we'll hear Dave continue the story.)

Even though this is one person's story, Dave's candid honesty reveals the reality of our sinful human nature. It shows immature and possibly even harmful thinking, attitudes, words, and actions regarding people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Ignorance and Doubting God's Perfect Will, Love, Wisdom, and Creative Power

In Dave's words: "I just could not see how God had let them be what they were ... Where was He in these people ...?"

Disability confronts us with unanswerable questions like: "Why did God create people with disabilities?" or "Did God intentionally will a person to have disabilities?" We believe and understand that God, who is perfect, loving, and all-powerful, created all people, but the reality of disability and its hardships does not seem to harmonize with our belief and understanding of who God is. Two possible responses to the question "Why do bad things happen to good people?" are that God is either not all-powerful or not all-loving. This is a false alternative. In our pride-induced quest for answers and knowledge apart from what God says and does not say in His Word, we try to dismiss or ignore human culpability for the cause of imperfection, disability, and suffering in the world. Instead, we doubt God's perfect will, wisdom, love, and power and conveniently blame Him for what we perceive as mistakes or lack of caring.

Diminishing Value of Human Worth Based on Standards of Doing and Self-Reliance

Dave said: “These people were, as we said then, ‘retarded.’ [They] could not function the way I understood people were supposed to function.”

The general word “disability” and the specific terms “mental retardation” and “intellectual and developmental disabilities” are labels to describe conditions of people with limitations and impairments of abilities. It is natural for us to focus on what people *cannot* do. Because “those people” cannot work or serve or contribute in typical ways—especially in ways we think have greater value—we tend to perceive them as less significant, as if they have little or no value to the Church and society. Along with this mindset is the notion that people with developmental disabilities are to be treated as objects of pity—like “charity cases”—and that they are only on the receiving end of help and services. Because they have more needs—which can be difficult and challenging to meet—we sometimes even consider them as burdens to families, the Church, schools, and society.

Self-Consciousness about One’s Own Discomfort and Anxiety

It is typical for some in our society—and even in our churches—to feel uncomfortable being with people with developmental disabilities. While this can be partially due to unpleasant experiences, it is natural for many people to be more self-conscious of their own anxiety and conclude “those different people” are causing them to feel uncomfortable. Perhaps the issue is more about ignorance and negatively biased perceptions.

Avoidance, Separation, and Apathy

Dave continued: “I dropped out of the tour and just went outside to wait until everyone else finished and then we could drive home and, hopefully, I could get them out of my mind.”

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Deliberate avoidance of social contact and meaningful interaction with an apathetic attitude is a vicious cycle. The old saying “out of sight, out of mind” can be applied unlovingly to people with developmental disabilities. There are churches today that prefer to almost completely segregate “special needs” individuals, groups, and ministries rather than fully or even partially including and integrating them in the life of the congregation. Sometimes the attitudes of fellow church members are the most challenging barriers to accepting and including individuals and families affected by disability.

De-Humanizing Judgmentalism

Dave said: “I could see that she was one of those I saw as ‘incomplete’ people ...”

When we focus on a person’s deficits and on what abilities people do not have, it is tempting to judge the person with disabilities as being less than fully human.

Skepticism and Doubt about God Working with and through Developmentally Disabled People

Dave said: “I was not prepared to see God in action with these people.”

A natural mindset is that people with developmental disabilities, especially those with severe and permanent impairments, are so limited that we don’t expect God to act with them or through them in any significant way. In the Church, we may even assume that they do not have or use spiritual gifts as “typical” people have and use.

Dave’s candid honesty prompts us also to be honest. We must repent for our lack of faith, our pride, our doubts, our uncaring and hurtful attitudes, and our uncaring and hurtful behavior toward people with developmental disabilities. If we are honest, we will admit that we have our own disabilities, perhaps more severe—including blindness and deafness of the mind and spirit.

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We may experience God leading us on a “tour” by bringing people affected by disability to us so that He may open the eyes and ears of our minds and hearts. As Dave said, “God had a different ‘tour’ in mind for me.

As I was sitting there, a young lady, maybe early teens, came and sat down beside me. She just sat there for a while and then turned and asked me why I was so sad. Before I could think of an answer she said, ‘Don’t you know Jesus?’ What was I supposed to say? I could go through all the ‘stuff’ I learned in Sunday school, confirmation class, and three years of pre-seminary preparation, but that didn’t seem to be appropriate. How could someone I was so much ‘smarter’ than be putting me in a position where I didn’t have an answer about my faith? I’ll admit, I just stumbled around with an answer that didn’t satisfy her or me. She moved a little closer and put her little hand on my shoulder and said, ‘That’s okay. Jesus loves you even if you don’t know how to love Him.’”

Into one man’s momentarily joyless spirit and uncaring heart; into his prideful, doubting mind; into his ignorant, distorted perceptions; into his demeaning attitudes came God’s grace! As with him, so with us. Together we can testify to the truth of the words the Apostle Paul was inspired to write: “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Romans 5:20b).

In His abounding and enduring grace, God infinitely *values* all people whom He has created in His image and likeness, whom He fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139:14). No one is insignificant to Him. God declares His constant tender care and provision to His own, “who have been borne by me from before your birth, carried from the womb” (Isaiah 46:3b).

In His abounding and enduring grace, God determines the identity of all people He has wonderfully created and saved. God said, “I have called you by name, you are mine” (Isaiah

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43:1b). Our most important identity is found in Him as His own children and, for Christians, in our redeemed life and faith relationship with Jesus Christ. We need not seek our identity in worldly labels, categories and levels of intelligence, abilities, education, or achievements. One whom Dave initially saw as a disabled and “incomplete” person was revealed to be a child of God, a sister in God’s family, and a believer witnessing to Jesus and His love!

Dave asked, “Where was God?” For him, God communicated an unexpected, surprising answer, “Right here—in a teenage girl with disabilities. And now I’m right here with you!” In His abounding and enduring grace, God is present in the hearts of those who believe and love Him. He pursues those who have withdrawn in spirit, gently bringing them closer to Himself.

In His abounding and enduring grace, God loves all and, through the Gospel, communicates His love—the eternal, unconditional, and life-changing love of Jesus Christ demonstrated by His sacrifice on the cross. Through Jesus’s death in our place, God the righteous Judge and merciful Father, forgives us and frees us from the guilt of our sin and pardons us from eternal punishment and separation from Him. “This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:9-10 NIV). In telling the parable of “The Great Banquet,” Jesus said, ““Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame’ ... ‘compel people to come in, that my house may be filled’” (Luke 14:21, 23). Jesus is describing how the Father, in His amazing grace demonstrated through the humiliation of His Son, welcomes and accepts people whom typical religious Jews rejected, including those with disabilities.

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In His abounding and enduring grace, God gives us His love for us to fearlessly love others—whether we are comfortable or not. “There is no fear in love ... We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:18a, 19).

In His abounding and enduring grace, God, with whom nothing is impossible, works through the people and the means He chooses and empowers to show that He is all-wise and all-powerful and that what He does is for His glory. Jesus when telling His disciples about the man born blind said this happened, “that the works of God might be displayed in him.” (John 9:3). In the Church of Jesus Christ, His body, He has created and placed every member, some who are stronger, some weaker. The Apostle Paul wrote: “the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable” (1 Corinthians 12:22). In Dave’s situation at that moment, he, the apparently “stronger” one, needed the girl with developmental disabilities, the seemingly “weaker” one. “Stronger” members in Christ’s Church can discover that they are blessed by God in wonderful ways as He works through “weaker” members to reveal Himself, His love, and His purposes! God can work through the seemingly “incomplete” people to “supply what is lacking in your faith” (1 Thessalonians 3:10). Dave painfully but honestly acknowledged that: “Someone I was so much ‘smarter’ than was putting me in a position where I didn’t have an answer about my faith!” God can work through intellectually disabled people to “teach” all of us that we may grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18): not to be merely “head” Christians, but also “heart” Christians.

As Dave said in his story about the girl: “She sat down beside me. She asked me why I was so sad. She moved closer to me and put her little hand on my shoulder and said, ‘That’s

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okay, Jesus loves you even if you don't know how to love Him.' She got it right—it wasn't what I knew, did, or worked at. He loves me, so what else was there to do?"

This teenage girl, a child of God, was a living example of extending God's care and mercy. We, too, can extend this care and mercy, especially to people whose spirits need comfort, joy, and encouragement. This teenage girl, a believer in Jesus, was a living example of witnessing to Jesus's love. We, too, can share this witness, especially with people spiritually disabled by unbelief, ignorance, and pride. We can share this witness with them because they need to humbly believe in Jesus as their Savior. We can share this witness with them so that as they receive, know, and are transformed by Jesus's unconditional love and truth and power, they may be spiritually whole and complete in Him. This teenage girl, a sister in God's family, became a living example of sharing life in Christ. We, too, can experience that shared life together in Christ, especially with those who need authentic Christian community. In God's abounding and enduring grace, He blesses that fellowship which, along with mercy and witness, is the means by which the Holy Spirit creates and renews faith and love.

In finishing his story about God's different "tour" for him, the one that was the turning point in his Christian spiritual life, Dave described how that God-led "tour"—all about Jesus and His love for him—strengthened his faith in God and Christ-like relationships with others: "From then on I have learned to take God at His Word, realizing what His Son has done for me and how He still loves me, no matter what good or bad I do. All I can do is show that love for others around me and let them know why—and just by being there, with that hand on the shoulder and the words, 'Jesus loves you even if you don't know how to love Him.'"

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In His abounding and enduring grace, God transforms human hearts and minds to believe His Gospel promises; to receive the gifts of His forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life; and to know His Son, Jesus Christ. God leads us on grace-revealing “tours”—not to passively watch but to renew our faith and actively share with others the love and life of Christ who said, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10 NIV). God calls us to join Him in His work in ways we don’t plan for and with people we may not naturally expect or relate to: those who are different, those who are seemingly “weaker” in the body of Christ, those who have spiritual disabilities—that we all together, by God’s grace, may have full life in Jesus and full love for Jesus, now and forever. To our God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be all the glory. Amen.