

DISABILITY AWARENESS SUNDAY

26 AUGUST 2018



SERMON IDEA: JOHN 9:1-38

"Who sinned?": Jesus Restoring Dignity to the Man Born Blind.

While this passage may be long, it is well worth telling the whole story. Perhaps break the reading up as you speak about different sections or tell part of the story without actually reading it.

For Disability Sunday 2018 we are looking at the human dignity of persons with Disability. The most beautiful story of this in the Bible is Mephibosheth being welcomed at King David's table in spite of a physical disability. (See 2 Samuel 9)

A key verse to also consider would be Genesis 1:26; acknowledging the fact that ALL people have been created in the image of God and this in and of itself affords us all dignity and worth regardless of what state the outer shell – our bodies – may be in.

John 9 looks at human dignity from a different angle. It will compare how Jesus treats a man born blind as opposed to the Pharisees. There are so many rich gems to pull out of the passage that I will only touch on a few ideas.

Firstly: Jesus.

The passage begins with the disciples asking the question which betrayed the common thought of the time (and still sadly a belief held by many today...) "Who sinned?" For someone to be disabled someone must have done something wrong. Disability is therefore a punishment and people deserve it.

Jesus corrects this very directly. No one sinned- "this is so that the works of God may be displayed in him." Many people think of this line only in terms of his healing. But is it not also possible that the works of God can be seen through him even when he was blind? Does blindness preclude you from doing Kingdom building? Very definitely not. Paul, possibly the greatest missionary of the early church and author of much of the new testament, appears to have had an eye impediment – perhaps a lingering reminder of when he was struck blind at his conversion. (2 Cor 12:7-10, Acts 23:5, Rom 16:22, Gal 4:13-15). Isaac had lost his eyesight in his old age – and he is subsequently tricked by his son - but even so the blessing he pronounced over Jacob lost none of its spiritual power and the prophecy he spoke over him did come true. (Gen 27)

Jesus affords a great deal of dignity to the man born blind while correcting his disciples. He also allows for his healing to happen privately – to the point where the man isn't even sure of who it was who healed him.

Do we afford people in our own communities with disabilities the same level of dignity? Do we realise that they can serve and show the glory of God as much as an able-bodied member can? Do we give them opportunities to use their God-given gifts to build up the body of believers?

And do we then expect to be seen as 'Saviours' or perhaps even as 'such good people' when we do include people who are different to us? Do we deserve thanks or praise? Or is this perhaps just an obvious outworking of our belief that all people have dignity?

Secondly: The Pharisees

An incredible contrast here. They speak to the man with such disdain, they call him a sinner, they discount his version of the story. It gets to the point where they actually call his parents in to speak on his behalf. (vs. 18-19)

What an insult. And yet this is one of the things that those with disabilities struggle with – people believing that they don't have a voice and that they cannot speak for themselves. We talk *about* people with disabilities instead of talking with them. How can we do this better as the church? How can we listen in a way that people are afforded dignity? How can we ensure that we do not value one perspective over another – and this reaches beyond disability to all the aspects that make us different. Do we listen to someone's story more sceptically because they are poor? Do we expect different behaviour from someone because they have different skin colour? Do we patronise those who are old or those who are young because of their age?

The previously blind man retorts with such wisdom and clarity (vs 30-32) that the religious leaders can no longer argue so they use their power to kick him out of the temple.

Conclusion:

In the end Jesus meets with this man again – and asks him a straightforward question, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" Here again he does not impose his views (which are truth) or even outright tell the man who He is - which would have created an imbalance of power. Instead he simply gives the man the choice to believe.

And the man takes it.

Are we giving people with disabilities the choice to believe? Or are our attitudes, actions or words creating barriers that are keeping them outside? How can we live out the truth that human dignity belongs to all humanity?

Galatians 3:28 *"There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."* Neither disabled or able-bodied for you are all one in Christ.

This sermon-idea was prepared by Jackie Barker, assistant minister at Emmanuel Presbyterian church in Pretoria.