

Dr. Art Blaser Presentation

March 19th, 2023

If the technology's working okay, we're hearing something I prepared for today related to three closely-related topics I enjoy talking (and sharing ideas) about: politics, religion, and disability. I'm thankful to Pastor Dayna for giving us this chance, and to Lisa for exemplifying why and how people integrate a faith perspective with disability studies. As Pastor Dayna mentioned, the idea for today's program stems partly from Amy Kenny's book, "My Body is Not a Prayer Request" in which Kenny, a layperson, discusses today's scripture.

I'll begin with a caveat: People differ. Nobody is just one thing. Much as we may try to avoid politics, religion, or disability, ignoring them is to our detriment. So also with race, ethnicity, age, gender, genetics, sexuality, nationality, and many factors. None of us is just one thing, and identifying ourselves as "human" too often means erasing important similarities and differences. "Community" means appreciating those similarities and differences.

Lent is a time for exploring different approaches to puzzles in the scripture, and changing interpretations. They have implications for how we act as members of a church. Last

Sunday and the Sunday before, scripture didn't "speak for itself." Pastor Dayna provided some important context. Today's scripture is also one in which context is very important. Possibly Jesus had told the disciple "There's no such thing as a stupid question" partly because questions that reflect popular prejudices provide "teachable moments."

The question is a common one, even in 2023. Very similar ones are common, too. Back in the preceding millennium (1994, so pre-FCCO), my mother who was visiting from Seattle was asked by a home health aide (regarding me) "Have you taken him anywhere to be prayed for?" I don't think there is a good answer to questions like that one.

Probably the question presumed that a faith healer could provide me with a higher quality of life. Like the nameless blind beggar my only hope was to become someone I wasn't. But thankfully, family, friends, a dog, a job, assistive technology, and many other factors (many reflecting privilege) reflect the reality that although some things are persistent, others have changed.

One of the changes is awareness of "what it really means to heal" the title of an article a disability rights activist friend of Barbara's and mine since 1999, Cyndi Jones, now also a pastor

in San Diego. It was in a “New York Times” series. One tidbit: “Perhaps our prayers for healing might be not for miraculous ‘cures’ for individuals but for society at large to be more welcoming, inclusive and hospitable to everyone.”

It's tempting to view science and medicine, perhaps gene editing as a source of salvation, perhaps allowing people to ignore politics, religion, and disability. But far from eliminating disability, these tools enable some people to live longer, acquiring multiple new disabling conditions. If we're ignoring unclean water, malnutrition, losses to biodiversity, and climate change, we're not improving people's lives.

Today's Sunday school focused on another common nonanswer, “inspiration porn.” (The term was coined by Australian disability activist Stella Young.) We could tell blind beggars that they are “special” and “inspirational” because they have exceeded our low expectations. We don't need to think about housing, transportation, racism, sexism, ageism, homophobia, and certainly not ableism if we accept simplistic slogans like “The only disability in life is a bad attitude,” “Your excuse is invalid,” or “Before you quit, try!”

“Disability justice” is the answer suggested by Amy Kenny. It's become very widely discussed since 2005, especially by a group

of Bay Area queer disabled women of color. It's intersectional, meaning that ignoring the multiple forms of discrimination that confront many disabled people will only perpetuate ableism.

Kenny suggests that the church is too often complicit in this. Three of the gems from her book:

“Everyone loves disabled people until we stop being inspirational and start asking for our access needs to be met”

“Not all [disabled people] suffer from our bodies, but ‘all’ of us suffer from the way society mocks or limits those bodies.”

“The most harmful ableism I have experienced is inside the church....Many churches avoid the discomfort of a messy lived experience by constantly promising a completeness yet to come.”

But surely, FCCO is different. Unquestionably, we do a lot right. Having services online is a boon for many disabled people. The chancel's been accessible for about three decades and we now have automatic doors. We have assistive listening devices and large print programs. We aspire for all to mean all. We explicitly welcome the LGBT community, and are in the process

of becoming an antiracist congregation. (Although disabling conditions are present in every community, they're more prevalent in LGBT and Black communities).

But we can and should do better at welcoming people as they are, rather than communicating a perception that they need to be fixed. Will someone who values Deaf gain more than they fear hearing loss be welcomed? Will someone who is immune deficient in this time of Covid want a boisterous welcome? Will someone who is bent over (now many of us with age) feel accepted as they are? People differ, so sometimes the answer is yes. Other times, however it's no.

Barbara and I have been attending FCCO for almost two decades. Part of what's attracted us to the church is the widely-shared concerns with diversity and equity, and welcoming of what is new and different.

Assistive technology, such as the computer-generated speech you've been listening to, is among the reasons why many disabled people like me have other vocations than begging. It's been developed for and often by blind people. It's great for finding out when something's not spelled correctly.