

“Telling Stories of Welcome”

Isaiah 58:6-10

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Coralville, Iowa

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I can state with confidence that we are welcoming. When our denomination, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), began on the frontier, one of our principles was a pushback against institutions that declared some unworthy of communion, and we still embrace that conviction every time we say, “There’s room at the table for everyone.” But our welcome goes beyond our weekly communion table. “I feel truly welcome here,” is one of the comments often shared by visitors, whether they are here for a single service, a season or become an active part of our community. And that welcome is all you; the ways you seek people out to say hello and introduce yourself; the ways you gently explore points of connection and invite people into community.

Here at First Christian, we tell a story of welcome. This congregation has been intentional about welcoming those historically pushed outside the church — women, children, and people who identify as LGBTQ+. We not only welcome people, but we affirm who they are, as they are. We invite people to participate in every part of worship, in leadership of worship and our ministries, and into full communion and belonging. So, on this Welcome Sunday, let us celebrate the road we have traveled, the welcome we have extended, and the connections we have built. And let us also ask, where else can we expand the reach of our welcome?

One of the areas I’ve become interested in and began studying over the past couple of years is disability justice. Over the years, I’ve learned about neurodiversity and advocated for children in education systems, however it was my oldest daughter who pushed me to learn more about disability inclusion. In high school, she found deep and lasting friendships with peers who identify as people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Not only have these friendships endured time and distance (she’s now at school in California and many of them are in Iowa), but she found herself continually witnessing the many barriers to inclusion her friends’ experience. Those friendships and the experiences of her friends inspired her to become an advocate.

While her advocacy showed up at school, in social situations and in public spaces, it was also about creating a community of belonging. One example of this, pursued with a friend just as passionate, was organizing their interabled¹ friend group to attend their high school homecoming and prom dances. When navigating a restaurant was challenging for some, families hosted meals for the group before the dances. They had a classic high school experience – the girls would show up early to curl each other’s hair and put on make-up, while the guys came just before dinner and learned how to tie ties and pin a boutonniere on suit jackets. This experience, among others, mattered far beyond the friends in the group... because it was a picture of what belonging looks like when it goes deeper than surface-level inclusion.

¹ “Interabled” is used by some in the disability community to refer to relationships in which some have a disability and others do not. Adapted from: <https://cronkite.asu.edu/ncdj/disability-language-style-guide>

Through her college studies and summer work, my daughter has been focusing on disability justice and often offers me insight and counsel as I continue to learn. One of the statements she said to me...and I made her say it again because it struck me so deeply, that I wanted to write it down, “If not everyone can be included, is it really worth doing?”

One in five Americans identify as having a disability². Yet despite faith holding a prominent place in the lives of these families, they attend church at significantly lower rates than people without disabilities³. Which raises the question...why?

The answer is simple: many people with disabilities don’t participate in church because of physical and social barriers. The response of the faith community has been to focus on creating “accessible worship,” targeting three areas: architecture, attitudes and communication. Architecture addresses physical structures - ramps, elevators, space for someone using a mobility device to sit within the congregation. Attitudes address the views others hold about disability by raising awareness and changing mindsets. Communication addresses how information is shared in worship – preferably in multiple formats like braille, large print, electronic text, sign language, along with describing images and captioning videos⁴.

While dismantling these barriers are important, they are just the beginning of recognizing what keeps people with disabilities out of worship spaces. Research has identified at least twelve other dimensions of accessible worship that need attention including: a congregation’s willingness to adapt and be flexible, a sense of community, opportunities to share one’s gifts, spoken and unspoken expectations, presence of technology, quality of social interactions, availability of supports, attention to sensory factors, predictable liturgy and whether one can easily understand⁵. More and more, articles and books about disability note that while inclusion is good, it’s not enough. Those in the field of disability justice are moving away from inclusion as the goal, because **the goal is to go beyond simply including, the goal is full participation**. And full participation means more than getting through the door, more than having a place to sit, more than being able to hear or see or understand what happens. It’s about feeling seen. It’s about experiencing belonging. It’s about participating in the community.

Imago Dei, Latin for “image of God,” is the belief that human beings are created in the likeness of God. What comes with that is that all people have inherent value and worth – that includes people with disabilities. So, when we talk about full participation for individuals with disabilities, it means not only making spaces accessible, it also means making accommodations for all people to participate in ways they feel called to. It means altering our expectations, so they do not exclude people. It means recognizing the variety of ways that people move, communicate and experience the world, and to normalize that diversity.

² Taylor, D. M. (2018). Americans with disabilities: 2014. U.S. Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2018/demo/p70-152.html>

³ National Organization on Disability. (2010). Kessler Foundation/NOD survey of Americans with disabilities.

⁴ Carter, Erik. “Toward Accessible Worship: The Experiences and Insights of Christians with Disabilities.” *Journal of Disability & Religion* vol. 28, no. 2 (2024): 189–219.

⁵ Carter, “Toward Accessible Worship,” 196.

Full participation also asks us: Where are the voices of people with disabilities? If they are absent, why? Are we open to the status quo being challenged and hearing different perspectives? How might we invite people with disabilities into leadership, or create ways that everyone can share their God-given gifts? As many places continue to uphold a time of worship that caters to able-bodied and neuro-normative people, are we willing to reimagine worship, recognizing that our current ways of doing things excludes some?

In our scripture today, we heard the words of the prophet Isaiah, speaking to a people who thought they were doing everything right – their focus was on being faithful in worship, prayers and rituals. But God was still not happy. So, Isaiah reminds them that faithfulness is more than their religious practices, it's about “removing the yoke,” so all people can experience dignity and belonging in community.

A yoke is a wooden beam that joins two draft animals so they can pull a heavy load as a team - it's restrictive, and there for the driver's purpose, not the animals. When we talk about “removing the yoke” in the context of disability justice, it's important to understand that it is not about ‘fixing’ people with disabilities. Because the “yoke” is not a person's body, mind or way of being. Rather the “yoke” is inaccessible buildings and spaces, inflexible expectations, ableist⁶ assumptions, economic inequities and social exclusion. That “yoke” is our broader systems of oppression that continue to limit and hurt people who don't match the societal norms. In “removing the yoke,” Isaiah does not tell us to change the oppressed so they can fit the world as it is. Rather, **we are called to change the world that oppresses.**

We are good at welcoming...but we are called to go beyond invitations, friendly greetings, and welcome statements. **Genuine welcome** means removing barriers, dismantling systems that exclude, and creating communities where all people can participate with dignity; where all are encouraged to contribute their many gifts; where all can truly belong to a community that goes beyond, “you are welcome here,” to “we are not complete without you.”

The invitation for us is to wonder: **Where can we expand the reach of our welcome?** Who might we welcome more fully? Where might we listen for stories we have not yet heard, notice barriers we have not yet recognized, or make changes that allow our welcome to become more than words? May we keep asking these kinds of questions, not because our welcome is inadequate, but because there is always more welcome to offer and we are always learning what it means to welcome another well.

May it be so.

⁶ “Ableism/Ableist” refers to discrimination and social prejudice against people with disabilities. Ableism comes in all forms, from overt prejudice to more subtle microaggressions. <https://cronkite.asu.edu/ncdj/disability-language-style-guide>