

Fourth Sunday of Lent
March 30 & 31, 2019

Kathy O'Connell MS, CRC, LMHC
All Saints Church, Syr. NY

“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

The beginning of ableism. Ableism? What exactly does ableism mean?

The Center on Disability Rights has, in my opinion, the best definition of ableism, which is “a set of beliefs or practices that devalue and discriminate against people with physical, intellectual, or psychiatric disabilities and often rests on the assumption that disabled people need to be 'fixed' in one form or the other.”

Before we believed that people with disabilities needed to be “fixed,” we believed they needed to be forgiven - for surely they did something to create this horrible fate of living in a body that is not fully able.

Jesus, like on everything else, got it and was a millennia ahead of his time. That's why the Pharisees feared him. He brought vision and equality to the world, but the world wasn't ready for that.

Quite frankly, it still isn't.

Why is that?

Why is it still hard to believe Jesus' words - “Neither he nor his parents sinned; it is so that the works of God might be made visible through him.”

Now when we see a blind person navigating a busy street, hear a person with autism process the world through verbalizing sounds, rather than words, or see a person using a wheelchair, trying to get through a snow covered Syracuse sidewalk on a frigid January day, do we think, “Oh there's God's work made visible”?

Probably not.

Could a wave of pity wash over you? An instantaneous run through your mind the phrase, “Oh, for the grace of God, go I.” Or you may have an urge to help the person, to take what you perceive as a struggle away from them? Maybe all of the above, plus a ripple of fear.

And if you feel all of this, you're human.

Is feeling this way also ableistic?

Well, yeah, it is...but I too am I'm grateful that I don't use a wheelchair for mobility, that I can drive, that I can use my voice to get someone's attention, that I can see my son's face change as he grows.

We all have our isms as I'll get to in a moment.

But first the fear.

Fear is what we've been addressing as a parish this Lent.

Fear because you know an illness, car crash, fall that causes a concussion, or the natural process of growing old can put you in the demographic of a having a disability.

We love to say, "You can join us at anytime." And we mean that - literally.

Disability touches our fear in ways that probably remain deep in our subconscious. Disability touches our fear of vulnerability, being exposed to not being able to do as others and needing help from others.

Ableism is alive and well when we pity, try to take away the assumed struggle without asking, and pursue a fix for a flaw that just isn't there.

As a parish, we talk a lot about racism, homophobia, and xenophobia.

We don't, however, talk about ableism.

Why is that?

I don't know, but allow me to ponder with you for a moment.

I could certainly be wrong and God knows I've been wrong one or two...thousand times in my life, but...could it be that if we talk about ableism, do we somehow feel the conversation then diminishes or negates how inclusive and welcoming we have been to people of all abilities?

If we search our hearts, do we feel this way about all the “isms” we may have? Our isms evoke fear because they’re created out of fear. Fear of difference, fear of what doesn’t fit our norm, fear of being challenged to think differently. This fear, though, has transformative power if we allow it.

Which brings me back to the blind man. Now, I have to tell you, I would be perfectly fine with the blind man remaining unable to see with his eyes. That would’ve put things in a nice, tidy bow. But you ever notice how Jesus doesn’t roll like that?

Because He knows it’s in the mess we find meaning. Why did Jesus heal the blind man to only send the misconstrued message for millennia to come that the only way to “heal” from a disability is to be “fixed” from it?

You ever imagine Jesus shaking His head and saying, “No, no, you didn’t get it. That’s not what I meant.”

I think that’s the case here.

Rather than focusing on Jesus restoring the man’s eyesight, we should focus on Jesus’ final words of the gospel, “I came in this world to divide it, to make the sightless see and the seeing blind.”

Division, breaking up things, disrupting what is - as a disability can do - often brings our lives back together stronger than they were before.

Healing and transformation is not in the body or mind. It happens in our hearts when we heal the fear that is at the root of any ism - racism, homophobia, sexism, ableism - we become stronger and better than before.

Now, the charge...

Ableism remains very present in our culture. Two thousand years ago, it was believed the blind man or his parents sinned to caused his disability.

Two years ago a graduate student who writes for my blog and lives with cerebral palsy had this encounter -

“I was walking across campus to an appointment when I was stopped by another student. He very confidently turned to me and said ‘Excuse me, what is wrong with you?’

I am a Christian. I noticed you limping and wanted to know why so I could pray for you to get better.”

Ableism - call it out, talk about it, transform the fear to receive all the lessons differences offer our hearts.