

Welcome to *The Party*

Resources for Inclusive Worship
2025



Table of Contents

Introduction	1
What Does Inclusive Worship Look Like?	3
Materials for Worship	5
Prayers & Readings	5
Poetry	12
Scripture Readings and Sermon Ideas	15
Sermon Prompts	17
Song Suggestions	25
Resources for Futher Learning	26
Community Resources	29
Contributors	30

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Introduction

Welcome to the Party: Resources for Inclusive Worship

"I wish I could go to church." – Natasha, parent of two neurodiverse children.

In a recent conversation, I mentioned to Natasha that Communitas was developing this worship material. I had hardly finished my sentence when she made the statement above. It made me sad. And it made me realize how timely and how necessary this material is.

Imagine yourself as a parent of a person who lives with a disability. Now imagine yourself in a typical worship service where most of the congregation knows How To Behave. We know when to stand for a song, to be quiet when someone is praying, to give our attention to the pastor as they deliver the message. Most children learn those skills over time, developing the attention span necessary to conform to the structure of a worship service. When a child or an adult is living with a disability, they may never have the capacity to fully engage with the service as it is delivered and are perceived to be a distraction. Many parents, not wanting to be a hindrance to others or not wanting their child to be the focus of negative attention, simply stop coming to church.

When King David invited Mephibosheth, the "lame" son of Saul, to dine at his table, to be part of his community, he did something extraordinary. That act of inclusion gave dignity and value to a person who was not welcome at the table.

When Jesus told the parable of the Great Banquet, he was telling listeners that God does not place a hierarchy on who can come to the party; it's an open invitation to anyone who will accept it.

What if we could change Natasha's quote above from "I wish I could..." to "I'm welcome to..."? What if we took inclusion seriously? What if we said "*all* are welcome here" and truly meant it? What if we said to people living with diverse abilities, "*come and worship with us, come show us how it's done...*" Imagine what *that* would look like! What a party that could be.

It is in that spirit that Communitas offers this worship resource. Communitas has served people living with diverse abilities since 1974. Our mission statement says: "Inspired by Jesus Christ, Communitas will be a place of belonging, growth and contribution." Our hope is that people of all abilities can participate fully in their places of worship and at the very least, we hope that this resource can start that conversation.

These materials include the things you might use in your own services: prayers, readings, call to worship, song suggestions, sermon prompts, children's features, poetry, and more! Everything here was written by people with lived experience: parents, siblings, caregivers, staff at Communitas, or people we serve who live with a diverse ability. There are also suggestions included to help us consider not only how our services might change but our *expectations* too. These resources are just a beginning. They are intended to help you as leaders in your congregations to explore what it means to be inclusive congregations where *all* find a place of belonging, growth, and contribution.

Let the party begin!



Angelika Dawson
Communications Manager
Communitas Supportive Care Society

What Does Inclusive Worship Look Like?

As you enter the sanctuary, you can hear the music and people are singing along – some more enthusiastically than others. There are several people in the band on stage, playing a variety of instruments and singing – some more skillfully than others. Some folks in the sanctuary are on their feet clapping along and dancing to the music – and when the music stops, they just keep going.

One fellow approaches another person, with his Bible open, pointing at a scripture verse and then at the person and back to his Bible again. “Read this, it’s meant for you,” he seems to be indicating. Judging from the tears in the person’s eyes, the fellow appears to be right.

Someone has asked for prayer and so that person is invited to come forward and others gather around to lay hands on the person and pray – some who come to lay hands are in wheelchairs, some can speak, others don’t but there is no doubt that they are praying.

Welcome to inclusive worship!

An inclusive worship service intentionally includes people of all abilities to participate fully in the many aspects of the service. They may participate on a music team, be invited to offer a prayer, read scripture, serve communion, maybe even deliver a sermon. It’s rarely polished but it is always heart-felt and Spirit-led.

“Inclusive worship is for people who don’t ‘do church’ well,” says Brian West, who leads worship at Circle of Friends, a weekly worship service for people of all abilities, organized by Bethesda, a Christian organization that supports people who live with disabilities.

Brian is very familiar with inclusive worship. Together with his friend Bradley Jerzak, they planted a church called Fresh Wind, a church that was inclusive of people who are typically on the margins of a traditional worship service: children, the poor, people challenged by homelessness or addiction, people living with mental health challenges, and people living with developmental disabilities. That all would be welcome to participate and lead in worship was a foundational pillar of their church.

“We knew that our friends with diverse abilities couldn’t be an add-on, they were seen as fully-functioning members of the body of Christ,” says Brian.

Services were lively – something both Bradley and Brian refer to as “holy chaos” and it required a sensitivity to learn how to respond to the different needs of those who were in attendance.

“It meant helping people understand boundaries in a healthy way and to create space for what people needed,” Bradley explains.

Although Fresh Wind folded in 2019, both Brian and Bradley reflect on their experiences with deep reverence for what they learned from the people they served.

“I continue to see that people with disabilities are not disabled in Spirit,” Brian says. “When I’m in that space, I know I’m in a ‘thin place’, and I’m always impacted by how God speaks to me through those around me.”

For church leaders who are looking for ways to become more inclusive – in any way – the key is to not have any pre-conceived notions of what will happen and to understand what you value.

“What you value is what you become,” Brian says. “Inclusive worship is not another program we do. People living with disabilities are a valuable part of the Body of Christ and as we honour them, God will honour us.”

Bradley agrees. It means walking alongside people, accompanying them on their journey so that you can all flourish. For him, it all comes back to the Great Commandment.

“Love God, love neighbour, love yourself. That’s what Jesus said was most important,” Bradley says. “It’s all about love.”

Things to consider for inclusive worship:

- Put your own agenda aside and ask Jesus to lead your congregation to what his heart is for people living with diverse abilities.
- Begin with Isaiah’s and Jesus’ vision, imagery and practice of God’s open banquet table (God’s table, not ours) in which he tells us (a) you are all welcome and (b) compel everyone to come (because some people might assume they’re not welcome.)
- Don’t treat others as a ministry or target group. That will always feel condescending. Instead, ask “what is it in *me/us* that needs to be trained or grown or healed that Jesus needed to send them here?”
- If the focus of the kingdom includes welcoming the stranger, then what’s going on with them may be more important than whatever you planned, so ask people to watch for it and let you know so you can respond.

Materials for Worship

On the following pages are several resources for you to choose from as you plan your worship service. Feel free to use as many of these as you feel will work in your context.

Prayers & Readings

Call to Worship Resources

Call to Worship 1

Leader: God of grace:
As David did for Mephibosheth,
you turn our isolation to belonging,
inviting us just as we are.

People: **May we put aside our fears
and accept your welcome.**

Leader: God of love:
You call us to a table that’s long and wide
with enough food for all to feast,
and space for all kinds of people.

People: **May we stop making excuses
and join the party!**

Leader: We worship you, God of the marginalized.

People: **Show us how to live compassionate lives.**

All: **Amen!**

› Rachel Navarro

Call to Worship 2

Leader: We welcome you, in the name of Jesus, to this place of worship.

People: **Welcome those who seek a place of belonging**

Leader: We welcome you in the name of Jesus, who sought out those on the margins and said “Come on down, I’m dining with you tonight!” May you find a place of belonging here.

People: **Welcome those who long for community**

Leader: We welcome you in the name of Jesus, who created community wherever he went saying “Come and follow me!” May you find your community here.

People: **Welcome those who who are looking for a place to contribute**

Leader: We welcome you in the name of Jesus, who said “what you do for the least of these you do for me.” May you find opportunity to use your gifts and talents with joy.

People: **Welcome those who who feel unseen**

Leader: We welcome you in the name of Jesus, who sees and loves us all, who sees and loves you, just as you are, who says “Come.”

So, welcome.

All: **Let us worship the Lord together.**

› *Angelika Dawson*

Communitas Beatitudes of Inclusion

Blessed are those on the margins
For they will find places of belonging

Blessed are those who overcome their fears
For they will show us what it means to grow

Blessed are those who have been told “you can’t”
For they will show us what it means to contribute

Blessed are those who live with disabilities
For they will show us abilities we did not know existed

Blessed are those who struggle with their mental health
For they will show us what it means to have hope

Blessed are those who live with a brain injury
For they will show us new ways of thinking

Blessed are the invisible
For they will be seen

Blessed are those who have been excluded because society tells them they don’t fit
For they will show us what true community is: a place of abundant life for all

› *Angelika Dawson and Brittin Oakman*

Divine Dance Litany

There is no exclusion
Only inclusion
And acceptance
And embrace
Around the table of Jesus
For the Giver of Life
Prepares a feast
For all to come
And be nourished
And satisfied

So come and be
Just as you are
And join in the divine dance
Of loving ourselves
And our neighbours into life

So as the Spirit guides

Our feet in the rhythm of love

May we take more notice

Where we are walking

And moving

And placing our feet

For all Earth is sacred

And welcoming us

To rest

And work

And play

And hold our sorrow and joy hand in hand

As we join in the Divine Dance of Love

For if all Earth is sacred

May we care for her

As she cares for us

And join in the Divine dance

Of Loving ourselves

And our neighbour

And all of creation

Into thriving, flourishing Life.

› *Esther Doerksen*

Prayers

Prayer of Confession

Loving Creator,

In the beginning, you created and created and created and then you called the whole thing very good. You made us with beautiful bodies, each one totally different and yet somehow all made in your image. Then you took on a human body and came to live among us.

And so, God, we lament how we have not always valued everybody like you do. We are sorry for all the times we've made someone feel unwelcome by choosing spaces, activities, and words that do not serve their image-bearing bodies well.

Show us how to throw great feasts, Jesus! Help us learn to fling the doors open, set out more plates, and search out those who normally don't get invited. May we be a community that shows

those around us what it looks like to follow a God who throws parties for the ones who are often left out.

Lead us in your ways, Jesus.

Amen.

› *Rachel Navarro*

Prayer of Confession

Creator God,

Give us eyes to see the gifts you've given each person you've created

Forgive us when we have overlooked someone because we have been unable to see each person as having gifts to offer.

Give us vision to create communities where all are valued for their gifts and are given opportunities to use them in meaningful ways.

Forgive us for the times when our doors have not been open to all, when our community has felt exclusionary, and when our efforts to include have been token.

Gracious God, give us open hearts so that we will accept and include people of all abilities in our lives, in our homes, in our church, in our communities.

We pray in the name of Jesus, who showed us the way of inclusion,
Amen.

› *Angelika Dawson*

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Thank you, God, for my family

Thank you, God, for the staff here who take good care of me

Thank you, God, for my roommates, Patty, Melody, and Susan

Thank you, God, for my health

In Jesus name I pray, Amen

› *A prayer from Nick*

Responsive Reading

Psalm 139

Reader one: Creator God
You have searched me and you know all about me

Reader two: You know when I sit and when I rise,
You know my thoughts from afar
You are familiar with all my ways

People: Your works are wonderful!

Reader one: Creator God
You created me, my inmost being

Reader two: You knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made

People: Your works are wonderful!

Reader one: Creator God
My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place,

Reader two: When I was woven together.
Your eyes saw my unformed body, you know me intimately.

People: Your works are wonderful!

Reader one: Ever-present God
You hem in, behind and before, you are all around me

Reader two: If I go to the heavens, you are there
If I go to the depths, you are there

Reader one: If I rise on the wings of the dawn
If I settle on the far side of the sea

Reader two: Even there, your hand will guide me
And you will hold me fast

Reader one: When I sleep you are with me

Reader two: When I wake, I am still with you

People: You are always with us!

Reader one: Creator God
You have searched me and you know me
I am fearfully and wonderfully made

Reader two: Ever-present God
You hem me in, behind and before
You are all around me

People: **Your works are wonderful! You are always with us!**

All: ***Thanks be to God! Amen***

› *Angelika Dawson*

Benediction 1

As we go from this place, may we go knowing that we are loved and valued by the God who created us.

Let this knowledge open our hearts to welcome others that we may create communities where people of all abilities can belong, grow, and contribute.

May we go now to love and serve the Lord.
Amen.

› *Angelika Dawson*

Benediction 2

Go now, into the highways and byways, inviting others to your table.
Go now, with an open heart, seeking ways to love and serve those who feel unseen and unheard.
Go now, to love and serve the Lord.

› *Angelika Dawson*

Poetry

Home

Home is where the heart is
Or so I've heard it said
Away from all the show biz
A place to lay your head

A place to fall to pieces
Or hold them all in tight
A place where panic ceases
Or stirs up such a fright

A place you're truly wanted
Or thrown out to the curb
A place you're often taunted
Or told you are superb

A place to be transparent
Or hide behind a mask
A place true love's apparent
Or just a daily task

A place where being's easy
Or trying to the core
A place you can be cheesy
Or just a plain ole bore

A place for family parties
Or dates for only two
A place for eating smarties
Or steaming veggie stew

A place for being lazy
Or working to the bone
A place for noise and crazy
Or reading all alone

A place to bask in sunshine
Or shelter from the rain

A place to feel the day's mine
Or fight the driving pain

A place to fete the living
Or long for one now dead
A place to be forgiving
Or filled with ire instead

A place with many voices
And just as many sounds
A place of making choices
Of living out of bounds

A place built out of people
Not just tin and wood
Your very own love steeple
Of those who with you stood

A place that's ever changing
As people come and go
A place that's rearranging
With those you come to know

A place that's so uncertain
Yet somehow just as sure
"To come"'s behind a curtain
"Once was" will ere endure

A place we're always longing
As everyday we look
To find that true belonging
Once written in a book

Until one day we're finished
time for us is through
Pain at last diminished
Eyes see what is true

This place is just a sample
A glimpse of what will be
An earthly taste just ample
Of home eternally

A place of love that's endless
Where tears will be no more
A place of Joy contendless
Where spirits daily soar

A place of full acceptance
Belonging without doubt
A place of no repentance
perfection all about

A place of striking beauty
Flowers, trees and sod
A place with but one duty
To be a child of God

A place of nothing trying
Nor sin from which to turn
A place of angels flying
And Jesus Christ's return

A place worth daily living
On distant sunny shore
A place worth ever giving
My life to Jesus for

A place of grasses greener
Of waters twice as cold
A place of senses keener
And never growing old

A place of no more masking
Or lies behind the door
A place set for the asking
God's gift forevermore

The home forever dreaming
The love we always sought
The place of our redeeming
That Jesus' life has bought

A place worth all the fighting
The pain of down below

A place of God's delighting
And ever present glow

So as each day you wander
Along life's narrow way
Take time to stop and ponder
The beauty on it lay

The way that it's reflecting
God's wonder from above
The beauty it's projecting
Of God's amazing love

The promise in it waiting
Of what is yet to come
The praises resonating
In nature's steady hum

Each creature He created
A nose, some eyes, a tail
The plan He has so fated
For every girl and male

Special friends and places
We get to walk along
Tempting little traces
Of heaven's mighty throng

Each a single chapter
Within a grand design
Each a partial capture
Of all that will be mine

For home is where the heart is
The place it comes to rest
I choose to trust the promise
Of one who knows me best

› *Grace Robertson*

Love and Faith

Love and Faith are verbs.
They must work, and do, and act.
Two words that need proof.

For without these proofs
a big house is not a home,
just walls and a roof.

› *a haiku by Joshua Ologani*

outside, weeding

my back is aching,
knees muddied,
deliberately cold.

it is spring. at long last,
I work my fingers deeply
into what my body will someday become.

I dream with faith as big as aphids
for the day the organic compounds,
once my body,
will be liberated
from their undulating quantum state.
when the epochal dance between living,
dead and living again finally tires;
a weathered spine succumbing to its own
weightiness. We will see with eyes long decayed
a new and youthful glory,
a great re-sowing when eye-like things
shed their blindness,
returning no longer
to the ground from which they came.

and it suddenly grieves me:
we are not earthly enough.
not until we become a grime
ordinary enough to heal blindness.
or until an ocean parts and we become
a land-bridge to freedom.
not until we place our ears to the forest floor
and hear subterranean rumblings,
quakings, yes, slow kingdoms
and offer our allegiance to the spry shoots
rising to take their place.

i am not yet as earthly as I might be,
but for now, my hands remember the soil,
the plants I nurse sway and reach:

sparse sunlight returns, smiling brightly
on this small earth.

› *Stephen McCausland*

Scripture Readings and Sermon Ideas

2 Samuel 9 – The story of King David and Mephibosheth

Mephibosheth was the son of Saul, described as “lame”, therefore an outcast in society, not able to worship in the temple. David brings him to his home, to his table, to his community and is “kind to Mephibosheth” – essentially recognizing that Mephibosheth is created by God and therefore is a person to be loved and valued.

Luke 14:7-24 – the Parable of the Great Banquet

A great companion reading to the story from 2 Samuel. Jesus tells this story – a story of inclusion – as a way to rebuke those who only invite people of prestige and prominence to the table. “Then Jesus said to his host, “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbours; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid.

But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

John 9 – The story of the man born blind

When the question is asked “Who sinned? This man or his parents?” Jesus takes the question and turns it on its head by turning the focus away from blame and celebrating the person he saw – a man made in the image of God. How often do we try to find fault rather than look for the good? We all live with disabilities of one kind or another, and yet God loves us just as we are.

Acts 8: 26-40 and Isaiah 23:1, 56:4&5

Philip had gone to Samaria, which would have been an anathema to most Jews, as Jews and Samaritans were not on friendly terms. On his journey, Philip proclaimed the good news of Jesus and many responded, were healed, or delivered from evil spirits. Shortly after this, the Spirit tells Philip to take the desert road to Gaza. As he does, he sees a chariot carrying the Ethiopian Eunuch who is reading from Isaiah 53 – the passage of the Suffering Servant. Philip nears the chariot and asks him if he understands what he’s reading. The Eunuch says he’s not sure and invites Philip to get in to his chariot, where Philip “began with that very passage and told him the good news about Jesus.”

1 John 3:1-12

This passage begins: “See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called the children of God!” What if persons with disabilities are exactly the way God intended them to be? How would that change how we see ourselves and how we see others? How would this affect how we perceive our after-life within the Kingdom of God?

Exodus 22:21-23

Justice is one of the major themes in the Old Testament. However justice in ancient Israel was different than what we call justice today. Usually when people speak of justice today, they mean punishment, people have to pay for their wrongs and justice is often spoken about as being blind. In the Old Testament, however, justice was not blind and though it sometimes had an element of punishment, the central theme of justice was shalom and renewed relationship. As we look at today’s short passage, we can see how providing all people (including people with so-called “disabilities”) with justice is not a privilege it is required.

Sermon Prompts

The following “Sermon Prompts” are designed to help those who are preparing a sermon for a service focused on inclusion.

Sermon Prompt 1 – by Army Froese

Title: Including the Excluded

Author: Army Froese, former pastor, current head of maintenance at Communitas

Text: Acts 8: 26-40 and Isaiah 23:1, 56:4&5

Introduction: One of the first converts to Christianity is the Ethiopian Eunuch, a person who was excluded from the temple but invited into the Kingdom of God.

Sermon Points:

- » **Overview**
 - Philip had gone to Samaria, which would have been an anathema to most Jews, as Jews and Samaritans were not on friendly terms. On his journey, Philip proclaimed the good news of Jesus and many responded, were healed, or delivered from evil spirits. Shortly after this, the Spirit tells Philip to take the desert road to Gaza. As he does, he sees a chariot carrying the Ethiopian Eunuch who is reading from Isaiah 53 – the passage of the Suffering Servant. Philip nears the chariot and asks him if he understands what he’s reading. The Eunuch says he’s not sure and invites Philip to get in to his chariot, where Philip “began with that very passage and told him the good news about Jesus.”
- » **Who is the Eunuch?**
 - The Eunuch was a member of the royal court in Ethiopia, and was coming back from Jerusalem where he had hoped to worship in the temple. He may not have been aware that eunuchs – emasculated males – are excluded from the temple (Deuteronomy 23:1.) How would one know if someone was a eunuch? If a boy were injured prior to puberty, the usual body changes that occur as he matured, would not happen. Lacking testosterone would mean that his voice would not change and his muscles would not have developed. Such a person would stand out and be identified in that way.
- » **Different culture, different significance**
 - In Ethiopia, the Eunuch was a significant person, serving in the Queen’s court as the royal treasurer. In Jerusalem, he was a nobody, an outsider excluded from the very place where he had come to worship God. It must have been a bitter experience.

» **Will I truly belong?**

- The fact that when Philip meets him and he is reading the passage of the Suffering Servant whose appearance causes him to be rejected, would be something with which the Eunuch could identify.
- Philip travels with him and tells him the good news of Jesus. When they come upon some water, the Eunuch replies, "Here is water, what is to prevent me from being baptized?" Perhaps he is wondering whether being a eunuch will exclude him from the Kingdom of God, like it has excluded him from the temple. It does not! The Kingdom of God is open to any and all who accept it. He moves from excluded to included, which is very good news!
- Isaiah also makes mention of this a few chapters later (56:4&5) "To the Eunuchs who keep my Sabbath, who choose to please me and hold fast to my covenant, to them I will give within my temple and walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters. I will give them an everlasting name that will endure forever."

Reflection Questions

1. Can you think of instances in which people are accepted and valued in one place but not another?
2. How does this story relate to people who live with disabilities?
3. Not all disabilities are visible (i.e. acquired brain injury.) Do we dismiss people who seem different, simply because we do not see their disability?

Sermon Prompt 2 - by Josh Willms

Title: Who is really blind here?

Author: Josh Willms, pastor Level Ground and Mennonite Church BC

Text: John 9

Introduction: When a man who was born blind is brought to Jesus, his disciples ask "who sinned, this man or his parents?" In classic Jesus- response, he turns the question on its head and challenges the disciples and those around him to see the man, not just his disability. Jesus' approach to healing is holistic: he doesn't just cure the man of his blindness, he seeks him out after his community rejects him a second time, and extends community to him. How can we do the same for people in our communities who live with disabilities but are not being seen for who they are?

Sermon Points:» **In Biblical times, what was their perspective on disability?**

- The disciples shared a common belief that disability and sickness are caused by sin but what they are really asking Jesus is: why would God allow a child to be born blind? They became so focused on the disability that they don't see the human being before them. Disability automatically excludes people.
- What about today? Do we see people with disabilities as lacking faith or holding onto unconfessed sin?
- This perspective is driven by fear. If the "worst" thing is to live with a disability, then we try to alleviate our fears by trying to understand why something so terrible would be allowed. Jesus has another perspective.

» **Jesus turns it around: What does this passage teach us about disabilities?**

- In classic Jesus fashion, Jesus responds by pointing out that they are looking at the situation from the wrong perspective: blindness is not a result of sin but an opportunity to encounter God.
- Hardship isn't evidence of God's punishment. It's also not that we should be thankful for painful or difficult circumstances. It is an opportunity to see that Jesus is with us, guiding us, holding us, encouraging us to move forward.
- It's an opportunity to see how God is unexpectedly at work in our world, setting things right.
- Jesus sees the man for more than his disability: he talks to him, touches him, sees him as being made in the image of God.
- Then he cures him – a miracle! This should be a happy ending! But...

» **Who is really blind here?**

- The religious leaders are so threatened by Jesus that instead of welcoming the man into the community with open arms, they get hung up on the technicalities of the Sabbath laws.
- When the man defends himself and defends the one who healed him, he is thrown out of the community that he had just entered for the first time.
- In the end, the threat to their power causes their own blindness – they are unable to unlearn and tear down the systems of oppression that they created.

» **Jesus heals holistically**

- Jesus doesn't just cure the man's blindness, his goal is always to restore people to relationship: with God, with self, and with community. The blind man is transformed physically and spiritually because he sees Jesus as Lord.
- People with disabilities face some of the same challenges today.

» **How do we change the narrative?**

- The answer lies in Jesus response: he healed the man, sought him out, and extended community to him
- Disability is part of our world – 25% of Canadians live with a disability, yet in a 2018 poll, 67% of respondents said they feel uncomfortable talking to someone with a disability.
- Our instinct shouldn't be to turn a blind eye, nor should it be to "pray it away" or judge a person's faith. Our response should be to open our eyes and see where God is being revealed in this person's life.

» **Welcome to the Party**

- In Luke 14, Jesus shows us that the Kingdom of God is like a party where people of all abilities are invited simply for who they are, showing us who it is that God honours at the table.
- As followers of Jesus, we can be a community that welcomes all to the table, we can see the person instead of just their disability, we can create spaces for all to belong
- Jesus is calling us to make the world an accessible Kingdom; how are we ensuring that our gatherings are welcoming to all?

Reflection Questions

1. Think of a time that you have felt welcomed and that you belong. What did that feel like?
2. How are you being called by Jesus to follow him in welcoming and including others at his banquet table?

Sermon Prompt 3 – by Rodney Wiebe

Title: Beloved Daughters and Sons of the LORD

Author: Rodney Wiebe, Director of Family Support at Bethesda Christian Association

Text: 1 John 3:1-2

Introduction: Many persons with disabilities have expressed their concern with well-meaning Christians who gather around them and say, "Oh you poor thing. Let me pray for your healing."

In his book, *Adam*, Henri Nouwen shares the following story:

I still remember a woman visiting the New House, walking right up to Adam, and saying, "Poor man, poor man, why did this happen to you? Let me pray over you so that our dear Lord may heal you." She motioned the assistants to make a circle around Adam to pray. But one of

them gently tapped her on the shoulder and said, "Adam doesn't need any healing; he is fine. He is just happy that you came for dinner. Please join us at the table."
{Nouwen, Henri J. M. *Adam: God's Beloved*. New York: Orbis Books, 2009, p. 68.}

What if persons with disabilities are exactly the way God intended them to be? How would that change how we see ourselves and how we see others? How would this affect how we perceive our after-life within the Kingdom of God?

Sermon Points:

» **We are all beloved children of the LORD**

- Our passage states that we are all the beloved children of the LORD. This is a promise that we, as Christians, claim. How arrogant it would be of us to claim it for ourselves while denying it to someone else, especially if we do so because they have a "disability"
- What if we all saw people with disabilities as our beloved brothers and sisters?

» **Where does the disability lie?**

- Does the disability lie with those whom we have labeled as having disabilities, or does it lie with those of us who are unable to understand. It has been said by some, that people with disabilities will not have those disabilities in heaven or in the after-life. It is true that we get a new body. It is also true that scripture says there is no more pain in heaven. But what if the things we call "disabilities" are still present, but we are now able to understand, listen, and love those with these so called, "disabilities?"
- What if we, so called "neuro-typical" people are actually the ones with the disability?

» **Do disabilities need to be healed?**

- While it's true that much of Jesus' interactions with disabilities ended in healings, does this mean that disabilities always need to be healed? Often, Jesus' healings result in a deeper lesson that is easily missed. For example: Jesus heals a blind man, but at first he only sees trees, much like the disciples who continue to be blind to Jesus' teachings (Mark 8:14-26), Jesus heals a deaf man, but the disciples still do not hear, and Jesus' teaching over and over is that those who have eyes, let them see and those with ears, let them hear. In fact scriptures speak widely about the need for eyes that see and ears that hear (Deut. 29:4; 2 Kings 19:16; Isa. 6:10; 30:30; 42:18; Jer. 5:21; 23:18; Ezek 12:2; 40:4; Luke 10:24; Acts 28:27; Rom. 11:8) but none of these are referring to the physical healing of blind or deaf people.

Reflection Questions

1. See the questions included throughout this sermon prompt!

Sermon Prompt 4 - by Rodney Wiebe

Title: Justice for All

Author: Rodney Wiebe, Director of Family Support at Bethesda Christian Association

Text: Exodus 22:21-24

21 "Do not mistreat an alien or oppress him, for you were aliens in Egypt. 22 "Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan [fatherless]. 23 If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. 24 My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless.

Introduction: Justice is one of the major themes in the Old Testament. However justice in ancient Israel was different than what we call justice today. Usually when people speak of justice today, they mean punishment, people have to pay for their wrongs and justice is often spoken about as being blind. In the Old Testament, however, justice was not blind and though it sometimes had an element of punishment, the central theme of justice was shalom and renewed relationship. As we look at today's short passage, we can see how providing all people (including people with so-called "disabilities") with justice is not a privilege it is required.

Commentary/Exegesis:

- » The Hebrew word that is translated as "orphan" or "fatherless" is Yathom. It occurs forty-one times in the Old Testament and can be translated as either fatherless or orphan. While the context often becomes more meaningful when the word is translated as "fatherless" (as in Psalm 68:5), either translation is sufficient as one dictates that the child is without a father and mother, while the other dictates that the child is without a father. It is the loss of the father that becomes paramount in these passages (see below).
- » The fatherless, generally associated with the sojourner and the widow, is the object of special concern. The quality of one's devotion is measured by how one treats the widow and the -fatherless. Justice is especially due them (Deut 24:17); if not, the curse of God comes on the congregation (Deut 24:19). Although they have occasion to mourn, they are not excluded from the pilgrim festivals. They are invited to join and rejoice as are all the sons of Israel (Deut 16:11-14). A corrupt society extorts the sojourner, wrongs the fatherless and the widow, and expresses contempt for father and mother (Ezek 22:7; cf. Isa 10:2). E.g., they drive away

the fatherless' donkey and take the widow's ox in pledge (Job 24:3). Those who mistreat the fatherless and the widow are paralleled with adulterers, sorcerers and perjurers in Mal 3:5. But God himself provides for the basic needs for these (Deut 10:18) and is known as the "Father of the fatherless" (Psa 68:5 [H 6]). This fact is reflected in the laws that forbid picking up fallen sheaves, or regleaning the vine or the olive tree (Deut 24:19ff). Also they along with the Levites receive a portion of the tithes of the produce given every third year (Deut 14:28ff). {From the Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, ~Aty" (y'tôm) orphan, fatherless.}

- » Why are the widow, fatherless, and alien grouped together so often? Because in a male dominated ancient Israel, none of them had a male to speak for them. Like it or not, in that day and age, if a child lost his/her father, if a wife lost her husband, they no longer had a voice in society. An alien or foreigner would be in the same situation. As an outsider, he would have no voice in society. These three groups of people would only have the justice that society would offer them.
- » Those with Disabilities are very much the modern day equivalency to the widow, fatherless, and alien of Israel's ancient society.

Sermon Points:

- » **Who in our society have a limited or no voice?**
 - There are a lot of groupings of people that could fit into this category. Unhoused or homeless would fit in this category among others. However, today we want to focus on those who have disabilities, many who may literally not have a voice, but most who metaphorically have a limited voice in our society at best.
 - We are called to be amplify the voice of those in our society whose voices are not heard.
 - To do anything less would be to call down the LORD's wrath upon ourselves (Deut. 27:19; Malachi 3:3-5)
- » **How is our congregation recognizing the voice of those with disabilities? And could we do better?**
 - This will look different for every congregation. Acknowledge and celebrate where this recognition is happening. Be honest about the efforts that have been made and rejoice.
 - Also explore the possibilities of doing more if there is capacity to do so.
- » **Hear the Voices**
 - Is there someone in our congregation who has a disability of some sort (actually, we all have our own disabilities) who would be willing to share about their experience with your church? Whether the experience be positive or negative, this could be a very powerful way to hear the LORD's voice through this person.

Sermon Prompt 5 – by Aften Thiessen

Title: Eyes to See: Reflections on John 9 + People with Disabilities

Author: Aften Thiessen, a member of Ross Road Community Church

Text: John 9

Introduction: This is an opportunity to look at the beautifully intricate story from John 9 in relationship to people with disabilities. It gives some pointers to help us along the way on our path towards including those with disabilities.

Sermon Points:

» Acknowledge the Death of Expectations – or Grieve with Those Who Grieve

- The parents in this passage in John 9 surely grieved – their son would be a beggar not a productive member of society. In this passage the disciples use this man as a way to launch into a theological debate – who sinned this man or his parents? And it was a theological debate (and even can be in ours) probably because when bad things happen we want to know why. Surely this bad thing happened because the man himself or his parents were bad. We want to live in a world that makes sense. You do good – you get good in return. You do bad – you get bad in return. But that’s not the world we live in.
- When there’s an accident or an unwanted diagnosis or a disease strikes – there is a grieving that has to take place because many hopeful expectations are now gone – and yet that person still needs you to care for them – to love them!
 “Welcome to Holland” by Emily Perl Kingsley
 <https://www.emilyperlkingsley.com/welcome-to-holland>

» See the God in Them

- John 9 opens with “As he (meaning Jesus) went along, he saw a man blind from birth.” **Jesus saw him.** Saw him as a man – a man created in the image of God – a man who despite being blind was fearfully and wonderfully made. God still had a purpose for this man – in this case to heal him, which would lead the man to faith in Jesus and show that the Pharisees were the truly blind ones.
- See the person first not the disability. Don’t get caught up in labels because although a label might pinpoint some things, it will fail to grasp the uniqueness and beauty of the individual.

» See the Disability in Yourself

- One of the greatest gifts loving someone with a “disability” can give you is helping you to realize that you are not perfect and yet you are worthy of love. We are all deficient in one way or another – and yet God says He loves us and that we are worthy of love.
- And to get even more serious, loving people who are disabled has made me realize how disabled I can often be in the areas of patience, kindness, forgiveness, forbearance, and faith – and I think those are the things that seem to really matter to God.
- It even seems to be one of the points Jesus is making later in John 9 – that it is actually the Pharisees – the guys who are supposed to be the religious teachers – the ones who “know God” – who have it all together. It’s the Pharisees who are blind to see God right in front of them. And it is the blind man who sees and believes in Jesus.

Reflection Questions

1. How do we avoid having pre-conceived notions about other people?
2. What would you consider to be your own disabilities?
3. What can we as people and as churches do to help people feel seen, heard, valued, and loved?

Song Suggestions

Songs recorded by people we serve at Communitas:

- Karin and Connie sing Mercy is Falling - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9MukXJeUVoA>
- Karin, Connie and Nick sing How Great Thou Art - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g14f-GVZAGM>
- Everett sings his original song: Life Song – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E3zpG3zMax0>
- Curby sings his original song: Salvation in the Sun - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1a2QVBjCdu4>

Songs from other sources:

- Selections from: Voices Together – © 2020 Menno Media, Harrisonburg, Virginia
- VT #10 - Here in this place (Text and Music: Marty Haugen © 1982 GIA Publications Inc)

- **VT #513 – When hands reach out** (Text: Carolyn Winfrey Gillette © 2001 Music: Ludwig van Beethoven, adapt. From Symphony no. 2, 1802)
- **VT #582 – My Love Colours Outside the Lines** (Text and Music: Gordon Light © 1995 Common Cup Company; arr. Andrew Donaldson; Benjamin Bergery © 2019)
- **VT #751 - There is in every person capacity for love** (Text Adam M. L. Tice © 2015 GIA Publications, Inc. Music: Benjamin Brody, 2015 © 2017 GIA Publications Inc)
- **VT #802 – Draw the Circle Wide** (Text: Gordon Light © 1994 Commu Cup Music Society; Music: mark A. Miller ©2008 Abingdon Press)

Other sources:

- **Big House** - Audio Adrenaline (Songwriters: Kelly Nickels / Mick Cripps / Philip Lewis / Steve Riley / Tracii Gunns Big House lyrics © Capitol CMG Publishing, Songtrust Ave, Universal Music Publishing Group)
- **Many Gifts but the Same Spirit** – Text and Music: © 1977 Patricia Shelly accompaniment © 1989 Marilyn Houser Hamm
- **No Longer Slaves** – This song is a favourite of the people who live at one of our home living options on Vancouver Island. Text and music: Jonathan David and Melissa Helser © 2014 Bethel Music
- **We Cannot Measure How You Heal** – Text: John L. Bell © 1989 WGRG, Iona Community Scotland, GIA Publications Inc

Resources for further learning

Below is a list of resources for all ages including books, blogs, podcasts, and more!

Adult Reading

The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability

by Nancy L. Eiland, Abingdon Press, Nashville c1994 ISBN 0-687-10801-2

My Body Is Not A Prayer Request: Disability Justice in the Church

by Amy Kenny, Brazos Press, c2022 ISBN 9781587435454

Children's Reading

Everybody has a body

by Molli Jackson Ehlert; illustrated by Lorian Tu, 2023 Feiwel & Friends ISBN 9781250854445

God Made You Special (Bernstein Bears) by Mike Bernstein, 2014 Zonderkids, ISBN-13 : 978-0310734833

Image Bearer by Ellie Sanazaro and Madison Kay, 2021 ISBN-13: 978-1736679913. Find more resources here <https://www.imagebearerbook.com/>

It's Hard Not To Stare: Helping Children Understand Disabilities by Tim Huff, Castle Quay Books, Compassion Series book 2, 2013, ISBN 978-1-927355-29-9 EPUB

Just Ask by Sonia Sotomayor, illustrated by Rafael Lopez, 2019, Penguin/Random House Canada, ISBN: 9780525514121

Just Because by Rebecca Elliott, 2010, Lion Children's Books, ISBN-13 : 978-0745964607

We Move Together by Kelly Fritsch, Annie McGuire, and Eduardo Trejos. 2021, AK Press, Find extra resources here <https://wemovetogether.ca/>

When God Made the World by Matthew Paul Turner, illustrated by Gillian Gamble, 2020, Penguin/Random House Canada, ISBN: 9780525650669

Not So Different, what you really want to ask about having a disability by Shane Burcaw, 2017 MacMillan Publishers, Roaring Book Press, ISBN 9781626727717

When Charlie Met Emma by Amy Webb, 2019, Beaming Books, 978-1506448725

Zoom by Robert Munsch, 2003, Scholastic Canada, ISBN 9780439523493

Magazine Articles

My Disabled Son is the Image of God – by Greg Harris, in Christianity Today, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2024/march-web-only/1p36-down-syndrome-theology-disability-child-image-of-god.html>

Websites, Blogs, and Podcasts

Amy Kenny – My Body is not a Prayer Request episode on “The Bible for Normal People” podcast with Pete Enns, PhD. <https://thebiblefornormalpeople.com/episode-205-amy-kenny-my-body-is-not-a-prayer-request/>

Emmett’s Journey – blog by Joshua and Alicia Willms – this blog follows the experience of the Willms family and Emmett’s journey with Spinal Muscular Atrophy. Josh Willms is a pastor with Mennonite Church BC and a contributor to this material. <https://emmetts-journey.com/>

The Additional Needs Blogfather – a blog by Mark Arnold, father to James, who lives with autism, epilepsy, learning difficulties, and anxiety. This is an example of one of his blogs, which includes information and questions for reflection: <https://theadditionalneedsblogfather.com/2019/09/05/six-disability-allies-in-the-bible/>

Greg Harris – pastor, father, writer, passionate about the “spiritually forgotten” <https://www.gregharris.ca/>

Jewish Disabilities Resources

Seven heroes with disabilities
https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4321466/jewish/Seven-Heroes-With-Disabilities-in-the-Bible.htm

How to make your place or worship more inclusive
https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/3588810/jewish/How-to-Make-Your-Synagogue-More-Inclusive-at-No-Cost.htm

Community Resources

Looking for a speaker to bring a message to your church?

Communitas Supportive Care Society has several staff with pulpit experience who are willing to preach on a Sunday morning or speak to a small group mid-week. Contact Angelika Dawson with your request: adawson@communitascare.com

Organizations supporting people with Developmental Disabilities in BC

Most organizations who support people living with disabilities require referrals from Community Living BC (CLBC) <https://www.communitylivingbc.ca/>

Faith-based Organizations

Fraser Valley

Communitas Supportive Care Society – providing services for people living with developmental disabilities, mental health challenges, and acquired brain injury across BC since 1974. In the Fraser Valley, we support people with disabilities in Abbotsford, Aldergrove, Chilliwack, and Langley <https://www.communitascare.com/>

Bethesda Christian Association – providing services to people with diverse abilities and their families throughout the province. Based in Abbotsford. <https://bethesdabc.com/>

Imagine Kids Ministry – provides one-on-one support in an adapted church service for children and youth living with diverse abilities. This is part of Northview Community Church in Abbotsford. <https://northview.org/imagine/>

North Vancouver Island

Communitas Supportive Care Society - providing services for people living with developmental disabilities on north Vancouver Island since 1994. On the Island, we support people in Campbell River, Courtenay, and Comox <https://www.communitascare.com/>

Providence Farm – providing nature-based therapeutic care to people living with disabilities in the Cowichan Valley <https://www.providence.bc.ca/>

Contributors

Thank you to all who contributed to this material! You have made this a rich and meaningful resource.

Esther Doerksen – Esther hails from Abbotsford BC and is currently a graduate student in theological studies. Esther is a sister to five siblings and of the five, three live with special needs.

Arny Froese – has a Master’s of Divinity from Regent College. He has served as a pastor but most of his employment has been in the construction industry as a finish carpenter. He will retire from his role as maintenance coordinator at Communitas in spring 2025 after 25 years of serving with the organization. He attends Ross Road Community Church.

Bradley Jerzak – Bradley is Principal of St. Stephen’s University (NB). For 10 years, he planted and co-led Fresh Wind Church, whose first pillar was people with disabilities, who made up 1/3 of the congregation.

Rachel Navarro - Rachel is the family pastor at Emmanuel Mennonite Church. She is passionate about creating safe spaces for all at church, where the marginalized are welcomed and centred as Jesus welcomed and centred them.

Brittin Oakman - Brittin (she/her) supports pediatric mental health through health promotion and literacy at BC Children’s Hospital. She previously worked as a Supported Independent Living Mental Health Worker at Communitas.

Karin Olsen - Karin Olsen began her passion and work in supportive care as a result of the influence of her earliest childhood friend, Christa, who lives with developmental disabilities. At a young age Christa taught Karin about talking with Jesus like He was a friend sitting right beside her, and singing praise to Him with abandon. Karin has since incorporated simple faith in God, celebrating each person and the uniqueness He created in them, and singing loud and with her whole being, as she works supporting those living with disabilities. This work fills her with Joy and LIFE to the fullest.

Aften Thiessen – Aften Thiessen lives in Abbotsford and is a member at Ross Road Community Church.

Brian West – Brian is a singer/songwriter, worship leader, pastor, chaplain for Circle of Friends. He is involved in Pastoring Pastors in many different churches.

Rodney Wiebe - Rodney Wiebe is Director of Family Support at Bethesda Christian Association. He holds a couple of degrees and has served as Associate Pastor in two churches, but more importantly, he and his wife are parents of three children, two of whom have Fragile X Syndrome

and live on the Autism Spectrum. His role at Bethesda gives him the privilege of supporting families who have been touched by disabilities.

Josh Willms - Josh is a Pastor at Level Ground Mennonite Church in Abbotsford as well as the Youth Director for Mennonite Church BC. His son, Emmett, lives with Spinal Muscular Atrophy type 1. For more information about SMA or to read Emmett’s story, please visit: <https://emmetts-journey.com>

Connie – Connie lived in a Communitas home for decades. She had a deep and abiding faith and was known as a prayer warrior. She loved music, especially the song “Jesus loves me.” Connie passed away in spring of 2024.

Nick – Nick lives in a Communitas home. He grew up attending church with his family in Chilliwack where he loved to sing – something he still enjoys today. Nick is working on a book about the life of the apostle Paul, which he is typing out on his manual type-writer.

Angelika Dawson – Angelika is a writer, editor, and communications manager for Communitas. She attends Emmanuel Mennonite Church in Abbotsford.

Poets:

Grace Robertson – is a poet living in Chilliwack and is an alumni of Communitas Transitional Living Program

Joshua Ologani – serves as a Support Worker with Communitas

Stephen McCausland – is a former staff person at Communitas, having worked in our CommCrew landscaping social enterprise

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