

SUGGESTION FOR A SERMON:
DISABILITY AWARENESS SUNDAY
2016



Dr Frederick Marais (jfm@sun.ac.za)

Translated from Afrikaans to English by Janie Fourie

Bible Passage: 1 Cor. 12:12-31 – focusing on verses 22-27

A short background on the text and on people with disabilities

The entire chapter and verses 12-31 in particular, form part of Paul's corpus on the Church as a body. Historically the explanation of Scriptures concerning the Church as a Body overemphasized the functioning of the Church or the body of believers. The emphasis focuses on the diversity in gifts and functions given to the Church by the Spirit. This approach is logical, of course, but there is also another possibility, namely the exceptional nature of the relation amongst the different parts of the physical body. Thus, this sermon will focus on the so-called "being-functions" and not on the "doing-functions". Although both approaches are legitimate, it should be noted that both functions could really be comprehended when the "being-functions" and the interdependence of the parts are understood.

The Greek-Roman society, in which the congregation of Corinth lived, was constituted mainly according to hierarchical structures, which determined the rights and privileges given to people according to their position in the community. These hierarchical structures also determined the inclusion in, and exclusion from society. Of course, mainly slaves and women had been affected by these structures in the community.

Although we live in a country with a constitution based on a charter of human rights, (therefore we fortunately do not have these mechanisms of exclusion by virtue of position, gender, or race any more) it does not mean that exclusion is absent in our society. We know that in our market-directed economy the opposite is true. Your worth and dignity are determined by the worth you add, your functionality and your productivity. This approach mostly affects people with disabilities; therefore, we find that they are almost deemed as a burden in our society. Consequently, they are relocated into centres where they are cared for.

In a community where people in general, including people with disabilities, are being cared for by means of the welfare functioning of the church and government, people with disabilities are not necessarily included in general society. In reality we often exclude people with disabilities from our so-called

normal society by means of our type of caring. Caring is, intentionally or unintentionally, excluding when we judge the human dignity of people who are different to us, according to the criteria of functionality.

In the concept of the Body of Christ, as Paul explained in 1 Cor. 12, we find another appreciation of human dignity. Here vulnerability and dependence are given as preconditions to humaneness.

INTRODUCTION TO THE SERMON

When Christ spoke to his disciples about the final judgment day, He probably surprised them, because He did not refer to their religious life, but to the way in which they looked after those who did not have food and clothing, those who were sick, strangers and prisoners. However, when the surprised disciples asked Him: "But when were you without clothes, or without food, sick, a stranger, or in prison?" Then He answered: "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." (Matthew 25:40 New International Version [NIV])

On this Disability Awareness Sunday we could probably add: But when were you blind, or deaf, or intellectually challenged, or ...? Then comes the answer: Whatever you did for one of the people with disability in your community, you did for me.

By error we could be thinking that a day like this could be meant for people who have family members and friends with disability. However, our Scripture reading says the opposite.

Congregations could easily be thinking: Well, we do not have many people with disabilities in our congregation or community, so why should such a day be important to us?

The most humble are central to the Body of Christ

As Christ emphasises caring for the most humble in His Kingdom, Paul explains that those who appear to be the weakest in the Body of Christ, are essential. The ordinary mindset stating that all who are weak are cared for by those who are strong, is being turned around here. The most essential are not the strong, rich and the powerful, but those who are weak and who need help.

Paul explains in 1 Cor. 12 how the Body of Christ functions. In the first eleven verses he elucidates how in the Body there is a variety of gifts given by the same Spirit for the same purpose. From verse 12 onward he explains that the variety forms part of the one body. In this body the variety of gifts is both important and equal. One cannot tell another, "I do not need you".

Up to this point it is not difficult to agree with Paul. The power of the body lies precisely in its different body parts. Oh yes, we know that all of us have been saved by grace; therefore we are all equal in Christ. Our gifts are gifts of grace and we do not earn them.

But then, all of a sudden, from verses 22-26, Paul takes another stance. Beneficial and indispensable are those who are not able, not those who are

able, but those who are not able to cope on their own. The Body is not there, so to speak, to care for the weak, but to learn from them, to get to know what life and community really entail.

Dignity implies more than what I can do

The necessity of those who appear to be the weakest sounds like a preposterous argument. How can weakness be necessary? It can be valid only if necessity in life does not mainly entail what we can do or produce, but when it is about who we are. – Not our 'doing', but our 'being'. In our life with Christ we do not gain value after we have done something, but we are worthy because we have been created in God's image.

Therefore, value is not attached to production, but is inherent to humanity.

The vulnerability of people with disabilities liberates us

In our association with people with disabilities we can be liberated from the obsession to produce.

In keeping company with people with disabilities, life becomes slower and more tranquil. I discover joy in simple things of life - a blind person's ability to smell, a deaf person's ability to feel, a person with intellectual disabilities to be able to hug someone, saying without words: I love you.

In this way the persons with disabilities become to us the necessary links in the Body that enable us to discover our own humaneness in dependence on others. When I am not able to do something, my contribution is in the fact that I cannot live without you; thus I discover my own dependence on others.

Eventually all of us are confronted with our own vulnerability. For each one of us the day will come when we become less able and more dependent on others. The Gospel says that that day is not the beginning of a lesser life. This is the day when I discover that life is about much more than just being able to do something (competency).

Spend time with people with disabilities

Do spend a day with an elderly person who cannot get up by himself anymore, or with a person with intellectual disability. You will find how much of life is being returned to you.

Henry Nouwen, the famous Catholic priest and author on spirituality, suddenly ended his successful career and joined Daybreak, a centre for people with disabilities. There he took care of Adam, a person with intellectual disability. He said that from Adam he learnt what humility, vulnerability and gratitude mean. Adam could do almost nothing for himself, and was fully dependent on his caregivers. Amongst others Nouwen says about Adam, "Adam is the most needy of all of us, but he is also the strongest cord amongst us. Because Adam is so dependent, there is always gratitude in his presence."

CONCLUSION

Precisely those who appear to be the weakest, are necessary, because they deliver us from the necessity to achieve; and liberates us towards human dignity within and amongst us. Could this be the reason why Christ had to hang helplessly on a cross; thus delivering us from our fear of vulnerability?

Further reading:

Adam: Gods beloved by Henry Nouwen.

See also the following video clip about what Adam meant to Henri Nouwen:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UlxXIY2r1yQ>

