

Sermon: 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – Disability Awareness Sunday

Text: Luke 15:1-10 – The Parable of the Lost Sheep (v.4)

Theme: Every single person is important to God!

Goal: To show that God is a God that includes everyone, and doesn't exclude anybody.

Dear Friends,

Introduction: This text doesn't talk about disability or people with disabilities, as other texts present it. But it talks about God's love to ALL! God is a God of inclusiveness and not a God of exclusiveness. And this is the point I want to highlight today when we are celebrating this Disability Awareness Sunday.

I – Rejection

The Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law were not happy that Jesus was surrounded by other people than the “good people of the church”. They muttered and criticized Jesus because He gave attention to the outcast people of the society. *Jesus responded with a story that contrasted the love of God with the exclusiveness of the Pharisees.* (CSSB)

Looking back in the History, we can see that people with disabilities were often not considered as part of the normal society, they were shut out. In the very high developed Greek society in the time of the famous philosophers, where the body was “worshiped” in the Olympic Games, someone with disabilities was despised and even killed when they were born. Elderly and weak people were abandoned to their own fate to die far from the society.

*Neither the Greeks or the Romans had a word equivalent to 'disabled' but the term that they often use is 'teras' (for the Greeks)*

*and 'monstrum' (for the Romans)...A high percentage of children with disabilities were abandoned outdoors immediately after birth and left to die because many Romans felt it was pointless to prolong lives that could prove to be a practical and financial burden on the rest of the family...A child with a disability was often seen as a form of divine punishment upon its parents. (Google)*

This last though was common all over the ancient world. Even the disciples, when they saw a man blind from his birth, asked, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?" Jesus answered that the blindness was not a result of some specific sin of the blind man or of his parents. And Jesus healed the man. (John 9).

Even in recent history, totalitarian regimes systematically eliminated the disabled, because they were not able to work or to go to war.

It's terrible when we think about how many people were and are killed or put to death because they have some kind of disability, and how many abortions are done because the foetus shows some disability. But we have to know this reality to understand how far human practices go when someone doesn't have the right concern about persons with disabilities. And as Christians, we have to have a special concern about them, because God has concern about them and loves them the same way as He loves any person.

II – God loves all

This is the main point of the two parables of today's Gospel. While some people were despised by the high church society, Jesus gave them particular attention. "God so loved the world.." says the well-known text of John 3:16, and not just some people. Each and every life, each and every person is important to God. And He has a plan for everyone: An eternal plan and a plan for this life as well.

Moses, one of the most famous characters of the Bible, was a man with a disability. Have you ever realized this? And God chose just him to lead the Israelites out of Egypt and to give him the 10 Commandments. Listen to the dialogue between God and Moses, when God was calling Moses and Moses tried to excuse himself from that task: “Moses said to the LORD, “Pardon your servant, Lord. I have never been eloquent... I am slow of speech and tongue.” The LORD said to him, “Who gave human beings their mouths? Who makes them deaf or mute? Who gives them sight or makes them blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say.” But Moses said, “Pardon your servant, Lord. Please send someone else.” Then the LORD’s anger burned against Moses and he said, “What about your brother, Aaron the Levite? I know he can speak well... You shall speak to him and put words in his mouth; I will help both of you speak and will teach you what to do.

(Exodus 4:10-15).

Several laws in the Old Testament were given by God to protect people with disabilities. Jesus was always willing to heal people who were blind, deaf or impaired in any way. But not all of them were cured. God has His own plan for each person. The Christian Church has, among her charity agencies, the care of people with disabilities, on different levels, depending on the country and on the awareness of the people.

### III – Accessibility to all in the church

I’m happy that St. Thomas has some facilities for people with disabilities: Wheelchair users have access through the yard gate; reading text on the screen helps people who have hearing difficulties and even sight disabilities, like some elderly: it’s easier for them to follow the Order of Service, hymns and readings on the screen than on the paper. We don’t have Braille material for the blind, but if necessary we can get it from our sister church in America. They are very well prepared for any kind of disability.

When we built the church in my first mission in São Paulo, a ramp was constructed to permit people in wheelchair to enter and to worship. I had a nephew in wheelchair, member of that congregation. – The other church I ministered in Porto Alegre has a long staircase; they put a lift for the elderly and for people with disability. The current pastor has an 18 year old son with disability and a lift was put in the 2nd floor parsonage as well. – Another church has some pews with hearing devices. – A big school for deaf children was founded by a friend of us more than 40 years ago. How did it begin? One of the Sunday School children said to her teacher: I really wish that my siblings could learn these nice stories of Jesus as well. The teacher asked: why don't they come to the Sunday school?... Because all the three of them are deaf, and two are in wheelchairs... The teacher visited the family, began to learn sign language and founded a school for deaf children in the basement of her house. They have now nice facilities.

This is just to share some practical experiences. But, as I mentioned two Sundays ago at our Thanksgiving Service, “if I have not love, I gain nothing”. (1 Corinthians 13:3). The Body of Christ, the Church as Paul describes it in 1 Corinthians 12:12ff, is a unit and each member has to help the other, like one hand washes the other and both wash the face. We cannot ignore the other members of the body, whether they have disabilities or not. The love of God gives us unity and strength to support each other in our needs.

Conclusion: I like to say: As long as you have legs, walk to the church. When your legs don't help you anymore, the church goes to your house. This is the situation of the Laspes in the Old Age Home. I visit them once a month. Mrs. Vivian is now weak at home. - Don't miss the opportunity to hear God's Word and to practice God's love to all. May this Disability Awareness Sunday open our eyes to what more can we do to share God's love to all. Amen.