



Strength made perfect
Disability and the church

Session 4: Disability and the early church

Participant's handout

Welcome and time to reflect on the previous session

In this session we will explore what the Bible tells us about disability and the early church. Does this tell us that the church should be an experience in which disabled people can fully belong and participate and find freedom from marginalisation and restriction? Or should the church be striving for a perfection that does not include disability?

The Day of Pentecost

Listen to the recording of this section or read the text in the leader's guide

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

"In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.

And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'

Acts 2:1-4, 14-18, 21

Questions

1. We always talk about the Day of Pentecost forming a new, radical and diverse community of believers from all over the Roman world. Have you ever considered that this diversity extended to disability as well?
2. This multi-sensory Pentecost experience was accessible to all people regardless of their disabilities. Everyone was swept up in the experience. Do you think this challenges our idea of church today where intellectual and physical ability is required to fully engage and take part?
3. Disability is no barrier to the Holy Spirit. The prophetic voice and gifts of the Spirit are given equally to disabled and able. Do you think the church is equipped to listen to the prophetic witness of disabled people, or has the intellectual and cerebral experience that we have turned the church into silenced these voices?

We are the body of Christ

Listen to the recording of this section or read the text in the leader's guide

'The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ.'

1 Corinthians 12:12

Questions

1. The bodies of disabled people are often uncomfortable, sometimes dysfunctional and chaotic, for some, painful and ugly. What do you think disabled bodies and minds could bring to the Body of Christ in the church that could enrich our ministry and witness to the world?
2. We often strive for perfection in our worship, the music, the setting, the words and presentation. The involvement of disabled people may disrupt that perfection and bring something challenging and uncomfortable into our worship. Do you think this could be a good thing?
3. What do you think people with profound intellectual disabilities could bring to the church? People who struggle to understand (or do not understand at all) the basics of faith and yet demonstrate a love for God and the church community.

A thorn in the flesh - My power is made perfect in weakness

Listen to the recording of this section or read the text in the leader's guide

'To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Time to reflect

In a world where strength, wealth, power, achievement, status, authority and ability are celebrated and applauded, we as the Body of Christ in the church are called to look at things very differently. We are called to see that it is in weakness, poverty, impotence, loss, insignificance, service and disability that true power is manifest. The power that is made perfect in weakness.

What would a church that really understood this and acted on it be like?

What would have to change if we want to know the power that is made perfect in weakness?

Spend a few moments reflecting on this, then read Philippians 2:5-11

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2:5-11

Spend a few moments sharing your thoughts.

Pray