



Strength made perfect Disability and the church

Session 6: An inclusive church

Leader's script

Welcome and time to reflect on the last session.

In this final session we will be imagining a model of church and community that might enable us to be the truly united and inclusive church that we are called to be.

The Limits Model

In the first session, we spent some time looking at what are called models of disability. The medical model, social model and minority model. Each tries to define a disabled person's relationship with their own impaired body and with society. You may remember that there was one significant problem that we highlighted with all of these models. They all rely on a definition of difference to have any substance. In order for the models to stand up, they need a category of 'disability to be defined, and to do this it is necessary to define 'nondisabled' or 'normal' in order to work out what characteristics and traits make people disabled. This immediately makes disabled people different. It makes them 'outsiders' and puts them in a place of deficit. It puts disability in a negative category and encourages the stereotyping and judgements that are so damaging and diminishing for disabled people.

The economy of grace that we explored in the last session though is an economy in which all are equal. Equality that is founded in God's equal love for all people. In the economy of grace there is no difference. There are no insiders and outsiders, no able and disabled, no normal and abnormal. There is just us in all of our loved and glorious diversity. What we need to find is a framework that helps us understand how we might create a community like this. We need a model that demolishes the dualistic definition of able-disabled and unites all of us in an experience of diversity and fellowship. The model I want to explore that can help us do this is called the 'limits model.'

The limits model is proposed by Deborah Creamer in her book 'Disability and Christian Theology – embodied limits and constructive possibilities.' In this she sets out a proposal to develop what she calls a 'limits' understanding of disability within a Christian theological framework that counters the 'deficit' model of disability. Seeing disability not as a negative experience or absence of a skill or ability that others might possess, but rather as a positive part of the experience of limited diversity that is at the heart of human existence. Her proposal is that we should regard limits as an unsurprising element of our human experience, something that we all share as human beings, whether regarded as able bodied or disabled, and therefore as a common experience from which to build understanding of difference and diversity. This is not regarding limits as deficit, but rather looking at the variety of limitations that we all have as gift within the landscape of identity, which through the lens of Paul's vision of the church as 'the body' in 1 Corinthians 12, then fit together to compliment and enrich each other, creating a new vision and experience of wholeness. Creamer writes:

'The limits model challenges the deficit model, suggesting that disability is not something that exists solely as a negative experience of limitation but rather that it is an intrinsic, unsurprising, and valuable element of human limit-ness..... A limits perspective, rather than leading us toward fragmentation or universality, can instead offer a common ground for conversation and become a productive datum for theological reflection.'

(Deborah Creamer, Disability and Christian theology, P96)

The limits model demolishes the dualism by seeing all people as sharing a common experience of limits. Limits are intrinsic to being human, but, far from being points of deficit, our limits are what shape us to be unique people. Unique people each made in the image of God who together in fellowship can bring that image to life. In this, the limits model demolishes the dualism, not by expanding the paradigm of normalcy to contain those currently categorised as disabled, but instead by expanding the concept of disability into the paradigm of what I will call 'limitness.' A paradigm that embraces all those who are judged to be disabled and all those who regard themselves as able in a single and common experience of limited human diversity.

Theologically, the limits model allows us to see the full variety of the human experience and all forms of embodiment as part of the variety that lies at the very heart of creation. Creation that the creator has declared to be 'very good' (Genesis 1:31). The process of creation is consistently presenting a vast variety of possibilities through the repeated cycles of reproduction and development that are intrinsic to the ongoing movement of the created order. Within the vast variety of life that has arisen from this, sits the full breadth and variety of embodiment that we experience as human beings. Whether what is judged by society to be disability is as a result of genetic anomalies, illness or accident, it all springs from the possibilities that God has sown into creation. The range of possibilities that is uniquely mixed in each of us and determines that no two human beings will ever be the same, physically or psychologically. In the limits model there is no such thing as deficit but only diversity. Diversity in which and through which we can glimpse something of the rich diversity of God, and diversity which is both blessed and declared to be sacred as God pronounces creation to be 'very good.'

That is not to say that disabilities are part of God's plan for us or the world. No, God does not control the evolutionary processes that are at work in creation like a cosmic conductor or factory manager. Instead, God has created a universe of infinite possibilities and ordained that every outcome of those possibilities has the potential to be sacred. In God's pronouncement that creation is 'very good,' he was enduing every future possibility and outcome of creation with sacred potential. Giving everything that has flowed from those first moments of creation the potential to become part of his divine and glorious purpose, even the experience of disability. The church's mission is to realise that sacred potential for all people. To bring all people into an experience of community that releases that sacred potential and brings the economy of grace to life.

Questions

1. In what ways are you limited and what do you think about your limitations? We often think it is our gifts that bring sacred potential into our lives and to the church. What do you think of the idea that your limits could also offer sacred potential?
2. Has there ever been a time when a limitation you experience has sparked an encounter or relationship that has been unexpectedly fruitful? If you are disabled, can you remember a time when your disability has been the catalyst for an encounter when God has been revealed?
3. What difference do you think it would make in your church and/or in society if people were willing to own and share their limits and limitations and allow them to be places of social and sacred encounter?

The limitness paradigm

I want to lead us on from the limits model to what I call the paradigm of 'limitness.' The limits model stresses that limits are an unsurprising element of our human existence. The human state is a limited state. We are limited by our embodiment, by the laws of nature that govern our planet, by the partial nature of our understanding of the world, and by our own individual anomalies and quirks. Our lives are contained within what I will call an experience of 'limitness.'

'Limits' describe the restrictions that are or become evident as we explore the nature of our human embodiment and interactions. Limits are the concrete restrictions that we can identify both in each of us as individual human beings and in all of us as members of the human race. Limitness on the other hand describes the place or experience from which these limits are shaped and through which they continue to exist. As human beings, our limitness is expressed in an infinite variety of ways. Some, as in the case of disability, more obvious than others. The key to human flourishing is to learn to flourish in our place of limitness. To flourish with our limits. The concept of 'limitness' gives space for what Deborah Creamer calls 'the fluidity' of limits. Transforming 'limits' from being rigid and restricting and allowing them to be ever changing and stretching and morphing into new possibilities.

Our limitness I suggest is in a way the shape of our lives. A shape that changes and expands and contracts through the course of our lives and is unique and personal to each of us. We are born into limitness as helpless dependant beings with no capacity to think rationally or meet our own human needs. We develop skills and explore limits, both the limits of our embodiment (what causes pain and what gives us pleasure) and the limits of the material world we live in (cause and effect, action and reaction, the laws of nature and the effects of time) throughout our childhood and into adult life. We discover limits as adults and learn how to live within them and how to expand them through our relationships with others. And we experience increased limits as we enter older age, maybe, in the case of dementia, returning to the limits we were born with as the capacity to think rationally and meet our needs is lost, before experiencing the final limits of our human existence at the moment of death. Our lives are shaped by limits that come together to create a unique and personal place and experience of 'limitness,' but, as Deborah Creamer suggests, this need not be seen in the light of deficit, but rather within the landscape of gift and creativity. This, I believe, is realised in relationship, when individual limitnesses interact and inform each other, forming new shapes in relationship that can expand the limits and possibilities of individuals and communities.

When limits are viewed as part of the natural human experience, we are able to take the step of viewing them not as deficit but as gift. For each of us it is the unique landscape of our limits, the totality of our limitness, that creates the ground from which we each have a unique personality and perspective on life. It is then the interaction between our perspectives that becomes the place of creativity in which new perspectives and understandings are forged and allowed to live. What the limitness model demands is that we all explore and come to know our limits. That is not to say that we must necessarily develop a passive acceptance of our limits. No, it is important to recognise that disabled people have the right to live in an incongruous and hostile relationship with their impaired bodies and the consequent limits they experience. But whether our limits are something we can come to accept and be at peace with, or whether they will always be a place of anger and struggle, it is important we learn to inhabit our limits in order that they can be released to become a place of creative sacred potential.

Disability demands that people live at and own their limits and gives no opportunity to retreat and hide. Visible disabilities clearly do this, but hidden disabilities do as well. They are ever-present, often elements in a person's life that touch every aspect of the way a person lives and understands themselves. A disabled person cannot retreat from their disability. They cannot ignore it. They cannot pretend it doesn't exist and in this, disability challenges all those who regard themselves as able to explore their own limits and see what gift might be lurking where once they thought there was only deficit.

Your limitness is the shape of your life, and if you are going to realise the full sacred potential that God has blessed you with, you need to learn to fully inhabit your limitness. That means that each of us need to learn how to live at our limits rather than living our lives only in our comfortable centre. Disability means that people have to live at their limits for much of their lives. Their disability, their limit, is an ever present experience that they

cannot escape from. The thing is though that our limits are the place of divine sacred encounter, not just for disabled people but for all of us. It is when we walk at our limits, when we inhabit and expose our limits to each other that we find the sparks of God begin to fly. It is our limits, or the interfaces and interactions between each of our limitness shapes, that creates the ground and potential for divine sacred encounter.

Fully owning your limitness is making yourself vulnerable. It is exposing your weaknesses. It is throwing off the masks you wear and the protective layers you hold so tightly to. And it is in that vulnerability that God seems to show up. Our God in the risen Christ holding out his wounded hands and exposing his wounded side. Our God in all of his disabled vulnerability saying: 'Come to me.'

In the limitness paradigm, disability offers a prophetic witness and challenge to all people. Visible disabilities expose a person's limitness. They lay us bare and expose our vulnerability and dependence. Which means that disability models the way of holiness. The way of vulnerability. The way of sacred encounter. The way of the cross. .

The paradigm of limitness draws everyone onto this way. It says: 'Disability is not deficit.' 'Vulnerability is not weakness.' 'Limits are not failure.' Because God's strength is made perfect in your weakness and his ability is made perfect in your disability.'

Questions

Can you relate to your life being an experience of 'limitness'? Do you think your limitations could be a catalyst for God to be revealed in you and others?

Has there ever been a time when you have been vulnerable but found that this was an opportunity for the work of God to be displayed in your life and the world? If you are disabled, has your disability brought about encounters in which you have felt the presence of God?

What do you think a church built on the paradigm of limitness might be like?

If these sessions have inspired you to want to explore how your church can reflect on aspects of accessibility and inclusion, you can look at the '360 Accessibility Audit' that can be downloaded from the Diocese of London Disability Ministry webpage. You will also find theological resources with suggested books and online articles and links to organisations that work in many different areas of disability.

Conclusion

These six sessions have only been an introduction to thinking about disability and the church. They are not an end in themselves but only have any worth if they have sparked in

you an impulse to discover more. They have only been of any worth if they have left you knowing that it is time for the church to both reflect and change the way in which disabled people belong to and participate in the life and worship of the church.

For too long disabled people have been marginalised and viewed as needy by the church. Their prophetic call and witness to the radical, counter-cultural kingdom that is founded in the economy of grace has been ignored. For too long the church has run after power and status and influence rather than recognising that weakness is the route to real power. The power of God that is made perfect in our weakness. For too long the church has been buying into the secular economy of exchange and mirroring the cult of normalcy that rejects so many people.

The paradigm of limitness creates a framework to counter all of this. It demolishes the dualism that is at the heart of the economy of exchange and the cult of normalcy. It has the potential to be the foundation of a truly counter-cultural church that brings the Kingdom of God alive afresh for this generation.

Spend a few moments in silence

Some words of blessing

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

Romans 15:5-7

Share the standout thoughts and ideas you will take away from these sessions.

What will you do with them?

Pray