

FIVE

**BUILDING A
LEARNING CULTURE**

When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path.

MATTHEW 13:19

A seed is not responsible for not producing. The environment must be right in order for the seed to grow. This is also true with disability inclusion in our faith communities. It is time for the church to take ownership and create the type of environments that attract and nurture the gifts in the disability community. Building a learning culture is essential to creating that environment.

There are three key ideas that Jesus presents in the parable that we must take into consideration. One, there is a lack of understanding. This is defined by a disconnection between what is heard and what is understood. Learning must first begin with listening. Second, unlike the other barriers, there

is profound spiritual opposition at work. The “evil one” comes only to this group, creating a significant challenge for the seed. What we can learn from this observation is that the “evil one” has a target. Building a learning culture will require targeted action. Finally, we see as a result of the “evil one’s” target, the heart is left empty. Building a learning culture will require filling the void left by a lack of understanding by using actionable intelligence. If the church has no heart for the disabled, there will be no home for them either.

The type of learning that is needed to make real change in our churches is not necessarily the learning that most churches and their leaders are used to. This is probably most true in our current culture, where social media has challenged our ability to empathize. The parable of the sower points out a serious flaw in our discipleship process. People hear but don’t understand. If you take a close look at the parable, the group that does not understand represents 25 percent of the problem. While the parable is not meant to be a mathematical equation, I can’t help but notice that Jesus gives only four possible responses, creating a form of abstract data that can be quite insightful. As we begin building a learning culture, let’s begin with some important definitions and data that relate to disability and the church.

DISABILITY DEFINED

Since historical records from ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt provide our earliest written references to people with disabilities, it is appropriate to begin a “rethinking” of disability in biblical studies within this larger context. Unfortunately, scholars of the ancient Near East have only begun to approach the representation of disability in ancient sources, and progress has been minimal. What little work has been done has usually assumed a medical model of disability or discussed medical

aspects of textual depictions. Although there are sporadic references in ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian records to persons with physical or cognitive disabilities (as defined by modern constructs), there are very few sources that actually shed much light on the ancient concept of disability or social attitudes toward people with disabilities.¹

Disability appears throughout the Bible; however, one would be hard-pressed to pin down a single definition of disability—at least outside the most commonly understood definition, which is a direct reflection of the medical model of disability. Disability could be defined as a mental, physical, or emotional condition or impairment that limits a person's ability to be actively involved in essential rituals and practices in society. As I mentioned in an earlier chapter, federal law defines it as “a person who has a mental or physical impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities; a record of such an impairment; or being regarded as having such an impairment.”²

It should be noted that as an all-encompassing category, there is not a universally accepted definition of disability. But using the broadest definition, here are some basic statistics about disability:

1. About 56.7 million people—19 percent of the population or one in five people—had a disability in 2010, according to a broad definition of disability, with more than half of them reporting the disability as severe. (United States Census Bureau)
2. Over one billion people or 15 percent of the world's population live with some form of disability, and of these, between 110 and 190 million have significant difficulties in functioning, according to the World Report on Disability.

3. Estimates are that 80 to 85 percent of churches don't have any level of special-needs ministry.
4. Only 5 to 10 percent of the world's disabled are effectively reached with the gospel, making the disability community one of the largest unreached—some say underreached—or hidden people groups in the world.
5. More than 90 percent of churchgoing special-needs parents cited the most helpful support to be a “welcoming attitude toward people with disabilities.” Meanwhile, only about 80 percent of those parents said that welcoming attitude was present at their church.³

According to this data, approximately 20 percent of the United States population lives with a disability. What percentage of our churches reflects the nation's average of persons with a disability? If people with disabilities make up the largest minority group in our nation, then we must first begin our quest to learn by addressing the issue from the lens of liberation. Nancy Eiesland elaborates, “For people with disabilities, a liberatory theology draws together message and commitment. It acknowledges our struggle against the discrimination that is pervasive within the church and society as a part of the work of coming to our bodies.”⁴

A large part of the process is learning how to interpret the statistics showing that the church is failing in this area. Statistics can be extremely useful, but I have found that they are only useful to the degree that they don't insert distance between the church and the disability community, instead creating a desire to learn the stories behind the statistics.

The last several years following my autism diagnosis have been a time of learning. Because of my challenges with sensory processing and social anxiety, I am learning that I must choose my activities wisely. More importantly, I am learning that

while there are parts of my life that I don't choose, I can choose to allow God to use those moments to teach me and others.

One of the most important aspects of doing ministry for and with the disability community is learning how to create long-term, reciprocal relationships with individuals and families impacted by disabilities. In his letter to the church in Galatia, Paul brings out some pretty important points about learning, choices, and being a consistently caring community for those with disabilities.

My dear friends, what I would really like you to do is try to put yourselves in my shoes to the same extent that I, when I was with you, put myself in yours. You were very sensitive and kind then. You did not come down on me personally. You were well aware that the reason I ended up preaching to you was that I was physically broken, and so, prevented from continuing my journey, I was forced to stop with you. That is how I came to preach to you.

And don't you remember that even though taking in a sick guest was most troublesome for you, you chose to treat me as well as you would have treated an angel of God—as well as you would have treated Jesus himself if he had visited you? What has happened to the satisfaction you felt at that time? There were some of you then who, if possible, would have given your very eyes to me—that is how deeply you cared! And now have I suddenly become your enemy simply by telling you the truth? I can't believe it. (Galatians 4:12-16 MSG)

LEARN FROM THE LENSES OF THE DISABLED

“My dear friends, what I would really like you to do is try to put yourselves in my shoes to the same extent that I, when I was with you, put myself in yours” (Galatians 4:12 MSG).

We all view the world through the lens of our own experience, even if we can't admit it. This is important to remember in learning to do long-term disability ministry. Paul asks for the church to put themselves in his shoes. He joined this community not by his choice but by a choice his body made for him. He mentions that there were those who would have given their eyes to him, which meant that he was dealing with much more than a sickness. It is customarily believed that Paul had severe vision problems. We at least know his condition was serious enough that he was unable to continue traveling and was forced to put down roots in Galatia.

People with disabilities live in a world that is not built for them. And the vast majority of churches are not built with disabled bodies in mind. Building churches that are disability friendly means paying attention to the physical details of the buildings we use to hold weekly gatherings—but the purpose of this discussion is to broaden the definition of disability. One of the best ways to broaden the definition is to broaden our perspective, and we can broaden our perspective by listening to the lived experience of others.

As I was working on this project, I asked colleagues to share personal stories of how they or their loved one experienced what they felt to be discrimination in the church based on a disability. I heard several stories—several heartbreaking stories, some of which I cannot share here. I received a story of a parent whose autistic daughter was asked to no longer participate in the children's message during worship because she was “too old” to sit with the younger children. She was fourteen, but according to her mother, she was more suited to learn with the younger children. She was never disruptive or violent; she simply was not welcome.

I also heard the story of a heartbroken mother who reported that her family was completely ignored because they had a

child with disabilities. She told me that when their child was young, he had difficulty sitting through the entire church service. In order to not be a distraction, they stopped attending, and in the process they asked the church to consider assisting them with making accommodations for their child. They were ignored. Repeatedly.

Of the dozens of stories, none perhaps resonated with me more than Sarah's story. I have known Sarah for a few years now. I have been a guest on her podcast, and we both speak at the same disability ministry conferences. I've heard Sarah share her story at conferences, and when she offered to share it in writing, I asked her to share it in this book. Here is what she sent:

SARAH'S STORY

Our son Sam was diagnosed with autism when he was twenty-seven months old, though he was already in speech, occupational, physical, and behavioral therapy just before he turned two. The news came five days before Christmas, and when I hesitantly announced it as a prayer request during one Wednesday night service, the whole room gasped. "How terrible," they said. "So sad," they said. At that time, Sam was completely nonverbal, except when he scripted movie lines as he acted them out. He had no functional language or expressive language. But we had discovered that he knew all the letters of the alphabet, upper- and lowercase. He knew numbers and colors. He just couldn't communicate effectively with us then.

At church, they seemed to tolerate him in the older nursery, which was for ages one and two. But after he turned three in August, it was time to move up into the class for threes and fours. There were all of five children in the class. The first Sunday when I went to pick him up after

class, the teacher, who happened also to be the pastor's wife, met me at the door. She explained that he'd had some difficulty, and visions of him head-banging or pushing the other kids over darted through my mind. I asked what had happened, and she said that he only wanted to sit at the table against the wall and do puzzles the whole time. He refused to sit at the table with the rest of the class.

He would not play with the blocks on the floor to illustrate the Bible story they were learning. I asked if he screamed, or banged his head, or had a meltdown in any form, or if he was hurtful to anyone. "No," she said. "He just sat at the table and did puzzles the whole time. And he wouldn't participate or even look at us when we tried to call him over. He just did puzzles." And then she said the words that have haunted me to this day, "He can't learn like that." I smiled bravely and explained that he did not have a hearing disability and could probably have repeated every word they said of the Bible story. "Oh, but that's not really learning," she insisted.

She then told me that he needed to be placed back into the ones and twos class because if he could not participate with the whole class, then there was no reason for him to be there at all. The following week, he went back to the older nursery, where he proceeded to view every walking toddler as a bowling pin to be knocked down. "He can't be in here," they told me. "He has to be with kids his own age to learn how to act."

Over the next few weeks, I was requested to stay in the class with him to "watch him." I was going through postpartum depression after the birth of our third son just three months earlier, as well as all the grief, stress, and frustration of going through a new diagnosis and continued weekly in-home therapy. I wanted to be fed with fellowship

and God's Word in class. My husband had taken a new job in a new state, and I was pretty much on my own with three children ages newborn to four as we waited for our house to sell.

They brought in the children's ministry director to sit with him during class. Again, he just sat at the table against the wall, separate from all the other kids, and played with puzzles the whole time. He never screamed. He never had a meltdown. He never tried to hurt anyone or himself. Still, they said he couldn't be in there "like that." He was a bad influence on the other kids because if Sam could do puzzles, why did they have to sit at the table and follow directions? It wasn't fair to the other kids, they said.

I asked if our ABA behavioral therapist (and personal friend) could come in for one week, at our own expense, to work with them to teach them how to work with Sam in the class and engage him. They agreed, but looking back, I believe they wanted to give the appearance of willingness but truly lacked the heart and desire to actually work with our son. The following week, our therapist left her own church, where she was the Sunday school teacher for their own special-needs Sunday school class, and came to our church just to work with Sam and the teachers. When I went to pick him up at the end of class, I stood in the open doorway, and before I called out to him, I heard the teacher and our therapist talking. They had their backs to me and did not see me standing there. The teacher told our therapist that she was sorry for the inconvenience of her time but that they didn't see why they should change anything they did just for one child. She berated me to our therapist, saying I was just trying to get my own way. I then called out to Sam, and they both turned sharply to see me standing there in awe of what I had just heard.

The teacher played it off as if I hadn't heard them and told me how wonderful everything was and thanked my friend for coming.

With tears in her eyes, our therapist spoke privately to me in an empty hallway as I cried. She told me everything she had done to try to help and show them ways they could engage with Sam but that they simply refused any of her suggestions. I left the church that day feeling completely alone, and I never went back.

Sarah shared that they later found a wonderful church to belong to, one that embraced her family but more importantly embraced their son Sam. Today Sam is doing well and proved that with the right support he could learn. I've even had the pleasure of video chatting with Sam to talk about life, sports, and autism. Sam is an amazing young man.

Building a learning culture should be about hearing the stories of those impacted by disability. This is important because it creates a sense of solidarity with them. "Solidarity requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is solidary; it is a radical posture,"⁵ wrote Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. Learning through the lens of another person's lived experience is not a new concept, but it can often feel like a radical departure from learning in the traditional sense.

One of the reasons that this type of learning is a radical departure from traditional learning is because it deviates from the banking model of learning. Banking is about the collection of information. It is obsessed with facts, figures, formulas, and statistics that are all designed to be deposited into our minds.

There are two challenges with the banking model of learning as it relates to disability ministry. First it assumes that the disabled are the objects of learning. We see this quite often in church, particularly in our sermons. People with disabilities in

the biblical text are often used as symbols rather than people. They are symbols of struggle and triumph, object lessons for us to learn about God's ability to help us overcome all of our flaws, shortcomings, and sin. For years we have used the stories of disabled people in the Bible to symbolize our universally acknowledged brokenness. Yes, we are all universally and spiritually broken, but God doesn't use people with disabilities to teach us this. Disabled people in our churches should not be reduced to a symbol or a system only useful for teaching people about their spiritual brokenness.

The second challenge with the banking model of learning is that it reinforces our natural resistance to reconciliation. The very concept itself creates a contradiction—in this case the contradiction of ministry *for* people with disabilities and ministry *with* people with disabilities. Paulo Freire explains, "Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers *and* students."⁶ Our churches need to learn about disability so that we can close the gap that exists between the faith community and the disability community.

LISTEN TO THE LESSONS TAUGHT BY THE DISABLED

"You were well aware that the reason I ended up preaching to you was that I was physically broken, and so, prevented from continuing my journey, I was forced to stop with you. That is how I came to preach to you" (Galatians 4:12-13 MSG).

Paul didn't make the choice to settle in Galatia. His transparency about his disability sheds light on some important lessons for the church. When you are living with a disability, your body makes choices for you that you may not be able to control. Paul didn't have a choice about where he landed, but he did make the choice to use his time there to share the gospel.

Paul says he came to preach to them by way of his disability. It was his disability that gave him both the perspective and the passion. One of the great challenges for me as a pastor with autism is the battle to be seen as more than an inspiration. When I was diagnosed, I began to study and learn more about autism and about the disability community. I discovered the term *inspiration porn*, which was first coined by the late disability rights activist Stella Young. Inspiration porn is defined as "the portrayal of a person with a disability as an inspiration solely based on their disability."

We see it often in our culture. People with disabilities used in advertisements as a tool to pump up able-bodied people by helping them gain perspective on their struggles. Catch phrases like "The only disability in life is a bad attitude" that may be well-intentioned but are in fact extremely demeaning to people living with a disability. Inspiration porn objectifies the bodies of disabled people for the entertainment and satisfaction of others. It is also seen in giving special commendations to disabled people for doing ordinary things that nondisabled people do daily or when an able-bodied person is seen as a hero for paying attention to or befriending someone with a disability.

While it seems like a way to honor people with disabilities, it can be quite dehumanizing, making them the saintly figures who are incapable of wrong. They become saints and symbols in the eyes of others, making them less than human and eventually less valuable to our communities of faith. Their disability, which they barely acknowledge, is seen as a tool to teach others how good they have it. This is not harmless, and it is certainly not helpful, especially in the church.

Paul acknowledges his disability, but he is very clear that he has a real message to share with the people of Galatia. He is not a symbol or a sympathetic figure in need of saving. Paul is

a servant of God. Long-term disability ministry means understanding the link between disability and divinity.

What facet of God's image is being displayed in the lives of persons who are disabled? What lessons are we to learn from the lived faith experience of the disability community? Here's a more challenging and practical question. Who are the persons with disabilities in your church who are leading the way in teaching your congregation, not just by sharing how to be good to disabled people but by being given the platform to share the gospel?

Our churches need to be environments where learning about disabilities and learning from people with disabilities is normal and seen as something that is needed for the health, strength, and vitality of God's ever-expanding kingdom. Because the first part of the parable of the sower is about creating understanding, the church can use existing communication and learning channels for disability education. While there are many channels for learning in our churches, the primary channels are preaching, Christian education or Bible study courses, and various print and digital media outlets. In many churches, Christian education or Bible study is done through small groups or small classes. I will talk more about small groups in the next chapter. For now, I want to share how to leverage preaching as the primary tool for building a learning culture.

PREACHING ABOUT DISABILITY

One day a kindergarten teacher was walking around her class checking on her students to see how they were progressing on their art assignment. Pleased with what she was seeing, she continued to move about the room, slowly pacing by each child's desk, periodically pausing and offering words of praise and affirmation to her young pupils.

She rounded the corner toward the back of her classroom and as she approached young Sarah, she saw what looked to be the beginning stages of an interesting art project. The teacher leaned over to get a closer look at Sarah's picture, and when she was unable to discern what the picture was, she said to her, "Sarah, that's an interesting picture. What are you drawing?" Without looking up, Sarah replied, "I'm drawing a picture of God!" Stunned for a brief moment, the teacher chuckled and said to Sarah, "Oh honey, no one really knows what God looks like." Without so much as a flinch, Sarah confidently replied, "They will when I'm done with my picture!"

Sometimes the best pictures of the divine come from what some people would consider the most unlikely sources. As a pastor, preacher, and public speaker, I know the importance of preaching and storytelling as one of the most powerful forms of transformation. The ability to weave words together to create a tapestry of images that inspire the mind and stir the soul is artistic. In many ways, autism has given me this precious gift.⁷

Preaching is a calling and an art form, and God blesses us with the opportunity for our sermons to serve as a canvas to paint portraits of God's grace and love for his creation. Pastors and preachers, here are three ways to effectively utilize your canvas to inspire people to experience the divine by becoming more inclusive of those with disabilities.

Preach about broadening the borders of community.

We must always be mindful that we carry the task of painting a vivid picture of what community looks like when God is intimately involved and not merely institutionally involved in our church. Our preaching should push our congregations to have a broader view of community. When Jesus teaches the collection of parables about a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost

son, he shocks the listeners into hearing God's heart for those who are missing from the community.

Preaching that helps our church become disability focused should begin with painting a picture that asks, Who is missing from our church? With one simple question we can invite our congregations to broaden the borders of our community.

Preach about building God's kingdom based on real community, not just charity. One day while Jesus was preaching to crowds in a home, a few men brought their disabled friend to Jesus to be healed. The Gospel writer Luke shares that Jesus observes the demonstration of faith displayed by the man's friends and offers forgiveness. When Jesus was questioned about his authority to forgive sins, he asked a compelling question. "Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Stand up and walk?'" (Luke 5:23). Perhaps what Luke's account can teach us is that Jesus understood the need to see beyond an opportunity for charity; he saw the need for true communion with God.

There is a need for the church to remain true to the calling of discipleship. That means the ultimate concern should be spiritual growth, which is best fostered in mutual relationship. The absence of real relationship simply becomes charity.

Robert Lupton, author of *Toxic Charity*, explains, "For some reason healthy people with hearts full of compassion forget the fundamentals when it comes to building relationships with those they attempt to serve. Forging ahead to meet a need, we often ignore the basics: mutuality, reciprocity, accountability. In doing so, relationships turn toxic."⁸

We can help our churches become more inclusive of the disability community if we move beyond the easy sermons about just serving those with disabilities with charity to the harder subject of including them in our community and caring for their spiritual needs as well.

Preach about how disability does not diminish value.

One of the most inspiring messages about disability comes from the apostle Paul and his transparency about his thorn. Until this time period of his life and ministry we really don't know much about his personal life. Then Paul lets us in on a secret. He has a disability. While we don't know for certain what his disability was, Paul mentions that it caused him physical discomfort and that it was a tremendous struggle that he describes as "torment."

Whenever a disability is diagnosed, our first response is to wonder about all the possible ways that life will be limited. We almost assume that the disability will keep people from becoming the best version of themselves.

Paul, however, points to a startling revelation about faith and disability. While he doesn't deny that he struggles greatly, he openly expresses that there is at least one thing his disability cannot prevent him from doing. I can't understand all that Paul had to endure, but he seems to believe that his disability could not stop him from becoming the best version of himself, in fact he believed that it actually stopped him from becoming the worst version of himself.

"To keep me from becoming proud . . ." Through his own personal challenge comes a testimony of faith that teaches us all a great lesson. God uses people of all cultures, colors, and conditions to build his kingdom. So why don't we see more disabled ministry leaders in our churches? If representation matters, then we must find ways to create opportunities for the disability community to lead our congregations in the mission of Christ.⁹ Preaching messages about disability can help lead our churches toward inclusivity.

Preach disability from first-person perspectives. Both the parable of the sower and Paul's account to the Galatian church share an important message about the power of

perspective. Unless members of the preaching and teaching team have firsthand experience with disabilities, offering the church an opportunity to hear sermons from the lens of disability may be a challenge. Finding video and audio of sermons preached by disabled persons is an option to consider as well as finding people within the church who would be willing to share a message with the congregation. Keep in mind that the sermon itself does not necessarily have to include a Scripture text involving a disabled person. The goal should be to hear the text preached through the lens of someone living with a disability.

Giving a platform to disabled speakers and preachers may mean taking the time to equip them for the task. They don't necessarily have to be biblical scholars or professional public speakers. What the church needs is to learn to view the Bible, God, and faith through disabled persons' unique perspectives. The story of disability and faith should be theirs to share, but they may need assistance in developing their message. Disability education should be about expanding people's exposure to the life of disabled people. Here are five important keys to storytelling through the lens of Scripture and disability that may help you coach those you will call on to preach in your church.

1. *Share the sacred.* The best pictures of the divine are painted on the canvas of the deepest and most sacred places of our hearts. Sacred is whatever is separated for a special purpose. In my case, routines, my repetitive behavior, and my sensory processing issues are all sacred spaces that serve a special purpose. They are more than quirks, they are what make me complete. Sharing what's sacred has a way of painting a picture not of a person who is flawed or broken but rather a person who is filled with faith, hope, and strength. Scripture always helps to build a bridge to the sacred.

2. *Share struggles.* Every moment has meaning, even the bad ones. Disability comes with its share of struggles, but faith is the repeated process of creating beauty from ashes. Include personal struggles in the sermon so that others can be inspired to survive theirs. Sharing struggles helps to show God's creative ability.

3. *Share suspicions.* Faith asks questions. Faith has freedom to critique. Preaching combines the gifts of critical observation with the power of curious optimism. Help speakers create the type of message that challenges the congregation to question the text, critiquing themselves and their ideas about disability, healing, and heaven. This approach will assist in developing the type of curiosity that both demands and inspires change.

4. *Share strengths.* Preaching inspires faith. It also requires faith. It creates beauty from places where nothing beautiful exists. The goal and the role of both faith and art have never been safety. The role of art and faith is courage. Living with autism is living with strength, passion, and perseverance. A disabled speaker's story is a story of strength and skill that is so profound and powerful that it is artistic. They are not limited and are not a liability. Remind speakers that they are strong, and encourage them to share their strength with the world.

5. *Share your suggestions.* Good sermons capture the hearers' ears. Great sermons will capture the eyes. Their story shouldn't just ask for attention, it should ask for adjustments. A speaker's story of life with disability is incredibly valuable to the world. It serves as a voice that deserves to be taken seriously. Their sermon should cast a vision of a world that is a better place for the disability community.¹⁰

Creating a learning culture means communicating about disability in ways that help normalize the connection between God's image and persons living with a disability. The church

must learn that it is okay to talk about disability and mental health. Preaching will help the church reach a level of comfort with talking openly about disability and disability theology.

When the pastor and leaders preach and teach about disability, it not only encourages learning, it communicates that including people with disabilities is an important part of the mission and vision of the church. Preaching is important to building a learning culture because it communicates that it is important to the pastor, and the truth is nothing happens in our churches that isn't important to the pastor.

Lamar Hardwick, "Disability and the Church", (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2021), p100-118

SIX

BUILDING A LINKING CULTURE

As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away.

MATTHEW 13:20-21

According to Understood, a digital data resource for parents with special-needs children, families of kids with disabilities often feel excluded from faith communities. Children with behavioral or social issues are less likely to attend religious services than other children. In fact, they report that 56 percent of families kept their children from religious activities because of lack of support. Forty-six percent of families report having never been asked by a faith leader how to include their child in the life of the church. Approximately one-third of families who have been able to attend religious