

*“Loving and Welcoming ALL with
a Range of Mental and
Physical Abilities”*

*(Part IV of V in sermon series,
“Extravagant Love and Welcome:
Uniting All in One Community”)*

*Twenty First Sunday in Ordinary Time / Proper 16
Isaiah 51:1-6; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20*

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From the Pulpit

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A baptismal meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, August 27, 2017, 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time/Proper 16, dedicated Kai Michael Oberschlake and Elliott Ann Hayler on their baptismal day and always to the glory of God!

“Loving and Welcoming ALL with a Range of Mental and Physical Abilities”

Isaiah 51:1-6; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

Part 4 of 5 in the sermon series,

“Extravagant Love and Welcome: Uniting All in One Community”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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MENTAL ABILITIES

Last August, a miracle happened at First Church. Light was shining in and through our congregation. Following an article

in the Columbus Dispatch in which I announced a book study and a sermon series on Mental Illness, people came from all over the region to worship and study with us. For five weeks of Sundays, the hot and stuffy Fanning Room (large Conference room) was packed wall-to-wall with people who came to talk and to share their own stories of mental illness and/or the struggles of family members struggling with mental illness – as we all opened and read Sarah Griffith Lund’s book, *Blessed Are the Crazy*. In addition, Jonathon Miller met with people each Sunday after 11 a.m. worship to hear more stories and share more insights.

In worship, I looked out each week on sea of new faces knowing that many of those who had come among us were in need of one healing word about mental illness and the stigma and struggle they bring each day to their living struggle with their mind and spirit. In this room, there was a spirit of welcome, love and grace that swept over us as people spoke and heard for the first time in a church – words of hope and words of love – for themselves and loved ones who suffer daily from a range of diagnoses -including anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and more. One young woman from our congregation told me, “as a mentally ill person, it was the first time in my life here I really felt understood, loved and welcomed by you and our congregation.”

Then, September came. The sermon series and book study ended. We got back to our daily routines. Some of our guests went back to their churches or no church at all. Several ended up in the hospital in their cyclical struggle with schizophrenia and suicide. Their families had no church. They called me to visit and I did. One family lost two family members to early death due to the opiate crisis – neither of whom was the member struggling with mental illness.

For us, many of our own members who daily struggle with mentally ill family members do so in private – quietly continuing the often stigmatizing and paralyzing journey experienced with mental illness. Not long ago, I had a veiled conversation with a man about his son who needs special care because of mental illness. We were alone but nevertheless, we whispered as though we were talking in a crowd of people. Most of my conversations with people about mental illness take on a hush-hush quality. Mental illness can do that to people.

Even though a miracle happened and light shined on us in August 2016, we still live in the shadows in August 2017. We have so much more to do as a congregation for those with mental illness and their family members who struggle. I see it every day. One in four persons in our society is afflicted with some form of mental illness. Therefore, in a family of four all

are affected by mental illness. One in 17 Americans live with a serious and persistent mental illness.

At the UCC General Synod in 2015, The Rev. Dr. Alan Johnson shared his story of becoming engaged with mental illness support in the church. *"It began with my son's first psychotic break down from bipolar disease 23 years ago, my own episode with depression and my brother's suicide,"* he said. *"The sound of silence about mental illness can be profound."* At the same Synod, Eric Kendall of our OK-KS Conference asked everyone in the room who was affected by mental illness in their family or circle of friends to stand. Almost the entire room of over 3,000 people stood silently as a witness (UCC Website, www.ucc.org, "WISE Congregations gain Synod support", July 2015).

Today, I would like to challenge each and every one of us as members and friends of this congregation to deal with this piece of our love and welcome in a much clearer way. There is a clear way to make the miracle of 2016 step into the light from the shadows of 2017. Just as there are ONA churches, our denomination also has WISE congregations. I would like us to become a WISE Congregation of the United Church of Christ. [WISE means - Welcoming, Inclusive, Supportive, and Engaged.](#) WISE congregations use 12 steps to involve mitigating the shame and stigma that mental illness

engenders. In one church a committee member noted, *"As church, we are considered armies of compassion."* *With rapidly shrinking public services available, "churches are where those who suffer turn."* To become a WISE congregation, I need a few good soldiers in the army of compassion. I need anywhere from 3-10 people to join me in working on this. If you have a friend, a family member or a co-worker – or you yourself – struggle in any way, shape or form with mental illness, please join me in this effort. Right now, our WISE proposal sits with the Justice and Mercy Commission. But, they have a plate full of work to do. We need people who can guide us to become WISE and mental illness. Please see me very soon. Let's get started on this immediately.

PHYSICAL ABILITIES

"Outside the door of every congregation, there are those who cannot enter, or once in, do not feel welcome. Through your outreach, you will be fulfilling God's mandate to make the House of God fully inclusive for ALL people of God!" These were the words of Reverend Dr. Harold H. Wilke, UCC pastor and Founder and Director the Healing Community over 40 years ago. The questions I ask behind the behind Dr. Wilke's words is, *"How are we doing as a congregation to open our doors and*

welcome our sisters and brothers who do not have access to church AND how have done – once we have welcomed them – fully integrating them into the life of our congregation? These are questions of **servicing** persons with physical and mental disabilities.

In a beautiful article written by advocate and theologian, Joan Huyser-Honig, “*All God's Children Have Gifts: Disability and Worship,*” we hear about exceptional congregations which are doing great things for persons with disabilities.

Fellowship Christian Reformed Church in Edmonton, Alberta is one such congregation. Fellowship has two young adults, Marlow Witten and Dena Ruiten-Koopmans, who are deaf and have mobility challenges. Dena spent her first eleven months in the hospital and was given little chance to survive. But she made it! Fellowship stood by her and her family from the first hours of life. She has become central to Fellowship’s ministry and mission. Because Fellowship has always provided a sign language interpreter, Witten and Ruiten-Koopmans sometimes lead parts of the liturgy. They sign and the interpreter speaks. Witten has also designed art work for a youth service.

At Alberta School for the Deaf, Dena Ruiten-Koopmans performed in dramas and acted as mistress of ceremonies.

Since graduating as valedictorian, she has volunteered as a storyteller for younger students there. She shares the same gifts in worship at Fellowship. *“I told a story during children’s story time, using a cardboard model of a church building to show the children that the people are the important part of church. Even if the building was gone—and I collapsed the model flat to show this—we could still meet in another place and continue worshiping God,”* she says.

“People at Fellowship accept me just the way I am and encourage me to become involved in story time, nursery care, youth group, and so on. Some are curious to learn sign language. Sometimes the minister will ask the interpreter the sign for a particular word and use that as a symbol for his or her topic...or just for fun,” Ruiter-Koopmans adds. (Joan Huyser-Honig, *“All God’s Children Have Gifts: Disability and Worship,”* Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, January 6, 2006).

The conviction that God gifts every member flows naturally into [supporting members in using their gifts](#). “Fellowship actively seeks involvement from all members in all aspects of worship planning, the worship service, and member care. All members are valued for their contributions, period,” says Linda Ruiter, Dena’s mom. She and her husband, Dave Koopmans, say their small congregation never questioned the cost of hiring an interpreter or building a ramp to the front of

the sanctuary. How do you discover what a person needs in order to use his or her gifts in worship? The answer is embarrassingly simple. “**Just ask,**” advises Jake Heerema, minister of pastoral services at [Hope Network](#), which helps Michigan churches to [value and include people with disabilities](#) (*Ibid*).

Centreville United Methodist has a choir member with Alzheimer’s. His wife confided to the choir director that her husband, conscious of his losses, gets extremely embarrassed when corrected. So, the director is flexible with him. “We don’t count on him for solos, because he may be great in rehearsal and then forget to come on Sunday. We are grateful for whatever contribution anyone can make,” Karin Orr says (*Ibid*).

St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church, also in Grand Rapids, recruits members and college students to mentor parishioners who have disabilities ranging from severe rheumatoid arthritis and Parkinson’s disease to ADHD. “One of our members with cerebral palsy recently read a Scripture lesson. We spent time practicing with her, and it was amazing how easy she was to understand when she was relaxed. It was wonderful for all of us,” says Cindy Nawrocki, a St. Andrew’s pastor (*Ibid*).

In the Pastoral Statement of U.S. Catholic Bishops on Persons with Disabilities, in 2001, the Bishops called the church to an even deeper dive into our relationship with persons with disabilities. They wrote, *“When we think of persons with disabilities in relation to ministries, we tend automatically to think of doing something for them. We do not reflect that they can do something for us and with us...they have the same duty as all members of the community to do the Lord’s work in the world, according to their God given talents and capacities”* (no. 17, NOD, 2001).

Leading advocates for persons with disabilities talk about the evolution of congregations with ministries. They move from “FOR” to “WITH” to “BY.” You establish ministries FOR persons with disabilities. Then you work WITH them to craft ministry together. Finally, the ministries are led BY folks in your congregation. The other option is for congregations to stay “apart” from persons with disabilities. We must never be “apart” in our efforts to welcome people.

There is a huge gap between the spirituality of persons with disabilities and their presence in worship. The National Organization on Disability found that approximately 85% of people with and without disabilities state their religious faith is important in their lives, but only 47% of people with disabilities attend church at least once a month, most likely

due to architectural, programmatic, communication and attitudinal barriers. *“Of all the barriers to full participation and inclusion, the barrier of **unexamined attitudes** is the most difficult to address,”* states Ginny Thornburgh, director of the American Association of People with Disabilities' Interfaith Initiative (*Ibid*).

Where do we begin? Joan Huyser-Honig says, begin with questions – “Who are the people in our church with disabilities? How much or often do they participate in planning or leading worship? When did we last ask someone to tell their story about living with a disability...or ask how they'd like to serve in worship...or find out what prevents them from participating more fully in church life? Who keeps track of individuals and families who deal daily with disability? What structures do we have in place to offer support and respite? In what ways do these structures clear the way for more people to participate more fully in worship? Which words—apart, for, with, by—best describe your church's relationship to people with disabilities? (*Ibid*).

Deacons we can take these questions up tomorrow night. Church, we need to communicate together about how we welcome more completely.

Thanks to the creative work on behalf of our church by staff and lay leadership, two exciting barriers will be addressed in our building in the next few months. First, thanks to a generous gift from Gail and Bill Johannes and Francille and John Firebaugh, a wheelchair accessible restroom will be added to our lower level AND the women's room will be made beautiful and useable. Also, we are adding five wheelchair locations in the sanctuary – hopefully in place for our 165th Birthday celebration in one month. Thank you, Gail, Francille, Bill, John, House and Grounds, Church Council, the Deacons, and Mark Dahnke, our Building and Grounds Superintendent!

Let's continue to use our gifts of creative and extravagant love and welcome to figure out how we more fully integrate ministries FOR>> WITH>> BY persons with disabilities as we seek to become more and more the beloved community Christ has called us to be. Never "apart" always "together" - we can do this. Amen.

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