

**Sermon: Sunday, March 3, 2024, Lent III. 1 Corinthians 1: 18-25.**

**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley**

In one's life, there are occasional interactions, events or presentations that make an enduring impact. One such impactful encounter, for me, was with the Rev Doug Graves, who made a presentation to our seminary class about ability, disability and accessibility. Childhood polio left Doug with a severely curved spine and post-polio syndrome, and he wore an extremely uncomfortable looking fibreglass body shell much of the time.

At the time, in the mid-1980s, a lot of hurtful, demeaning language was used to describe various chronic medical and physical conditions and those who lived with those conditions, and a concerted effort was being made to find better words. One popular wording was "Differently Abled" rather than "Disabled" and I recall so clearly Doug's comment on that. While appreciating the tone and intent of this new phrase, as it lifted up the unique gifts and adaptive skills of those who lived with disabling conditions, Doug cautioned against anything that minimized the degree of challenges that some people faced in order to get through a day. In particular, the sentence "all of us have abilities and disabilities" caught his attention and he said, "it's good to name that most people live with something that makes their life more challenging. But let's be clear: being quadriplegic isn't the same as being shy."

That zinger has stuck with me, as has the indomitable spirit that Doug carried with him, sizing up his energy level and then putting his hand to the plough in all manner of practical ministry, pastoral assistance, and social activism. His words would tap me on the shoulder every so often as our Building Accessibility Upgrades project here at Ralph Connor was taking shape, reminding me how important it is for public buildings, and buildings like this frequently accessed by the public, to be accessible. The other thing from my personal experience that would tap me on the shoulder now and then, was a recollection of my home congregation, Westminster United in Regina, which has an extremely daunting front entrance. Following the sage guidance of accessibility experts, two key principles were applied as they decided how to improve access: first, don't make a spectacle of the person using your accessibility features, and second, make sure that your accessible entrance is either at the primary entrance, or at secondary access point that many people use – none of this "going around back to the loading dock" nonsense. So by the early 1980s, a three-stop elevator was installed just east of the giant front steps, giving access to the sanctuary and balcony levels of the Church.

Preparing for this day when we re-dedicate Gordon Hall and the Upper Room, now that they are able to receive a much wider range of guests, I felt called to approach Sunday's Lectionary reading from 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians from a new angle. Although we may not think of him as such, the Apostle Paul is an important spokesperson for all people who have something chronic and challenging in their lives. In 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 12 he speaks of his "thorn in the flesh" which reads like something physical he is dealing with which is both painful and debilitating and pushes him to rely on the grace and glory of God rather than his own powers. Over the years, many have suggested epilepsy as a strong possibility. That being the case, there is extra authenticity, I think, as Paul explores the notion of human and holy wisdom and foolishness throughout 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians. In the reading we heard this morning (1 Corinthians 1: 22-25) Paul writes,

“Jews ask for signs and Greeks desire wisdom, <sup>23</sup> but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to gentiles, <sup>24</sup> but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup> For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength”. From a religious standpoint, these words insist on humility as we live out our faith, telling us to get over ourselves if we figure that gifts of intellect somehow make us better than others, pushing us to embrace the holy power of foolishness and the gifts that come when we embrace our weakness. And that message, of the folly of the cross in comparison with human arrogance, is a message worth preaching pretty much anytime.

Yet today, this scripture invites me to notice its words of exclusion and inclusion in a physical and literal way: “<sup>22</sup> Jews ask for signs and Greeks desire wisdom, <sup>23</sup> but we proclaim Christ crucified, a **stumbling block** to Jews and foolishness to gentiles, <sup>24</sup> but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup> For God’s **foolishness** is wiser than human **wisdom**, and God’s **weakness** is stronger than human **strength**.”

Almost always, I have approached the stumbling block in this passage as metaphorical – for it clearly is so - but today, just imagine it as a physical thing, an actual stumbling block. For many folks, encountering such a thing might trigger a response like, “careful, you might trip!” but for one with mobility challenges it says, “you are not welcome here.” That speaks to us on this Sunday of dedication. Similarly, if we spend some time with these highlighted words we will notice other barriers: the high value we as Church and society place on being smart, wise, well-educated, and the preference for being strong rather than weak. For any persons who do not regard themselves as smart or strong, these words do not just state concepts; they are shapers of everyday micro-aggressions. If I really pay attention to these highlighted words, I am forced to wonder: as those who proclaim Christ crucified – and the power of resurrection which engages anything that diminishes human dignity and rises above it – are we fully engaged with the physical and attitudinal stumbling blocks that make it challenging or in some cases impossible for some of our neighbours to be here? Do we survey what is here, from the standpoint of accessibility or, even better, ask how they land for people with mobility challenges? Do we recognize the pervasive power of ableism in our thoughts, deeds, and structures?

With those semi-rhetorical questions raised, I want to take a more positive tone, lifting up the willingness I experience in this place to engage such questions, and the first steps taken toward inclusiveness; and I also want to offer words of encouragement for you to live from that collective good heart you have, to keep learning and growing and expanding what it means to be a welcoming and accessible community of faith.

Back around 2016, things were getting pretty full in this room on a Sunday morning, so a few of us looked at a few possible ways to increase sanctuary seating. Some of the things we explored were impossible for a designated Heritage property, and some were, well, clearly repellent to the congregation. Fair enough. But when the congregation was asked, “even if we do nothing with the sanctuary, what else do we need to do to make sure that this building enables our outreach into the community rather than hindering it?” 82% of survey respondents said, “make the building more accessible.”

That's a large number, and speaks to me of a heart for inclusion. Last Fall, when Sandy took the lead and taught our choir how one learns a Sunday anthem if one cannot see the words and music, that heart for inclusion literally took voice. Each time we pause, and imagine what it would be like to enter a room or participate in an activity from the standpoint of someone who would find that to be physically challenging, we align ourselves with nothing less than the life, death and resurrection of Christ Jesus. And since we are always learning from the lives of others, and, in response, seeking to adapt in faithful ways, that process of identifying things that are not as we want, and changing them, is a healthy pattern that I hope will continue. There's no such thing as being "finished" in the world of inclusion and, since the Apostle Paul reminds us there's no such thing as perfection, you will also need to be patient and kind with yourselves when missteps are hurtful or exclusionary.

Changing our angle of approach a bit: about the same time we started perceiving this building in a different way, we also began the Affirming Process. You'll hear more about it later in the service, but to be an Affirming Ministry is to be overtly welcoming to all forms of diversity. It begins, with explicitly stating that God delights in the full spectrum of human sexuality, and broadens from there to recognize that Churches put up many different kinds of barriers, and to clearly state an intention to address such barriers for the sake of the sacred goals of inclusion. Prior to our amalgamation, both Banff and Canmore were Affirming Ministries, and we've adopted the wording previously used by Rundle Memorial United Church in Banff as our Affirming Statement. I now invite you to say the words responsively:

As a community of faith on traditional Indigenous lands, **We strive to follow Christ's example in reaching out in love and friendship to all.**

We are committed

**to full inclusion of people, of any age, race, ethnicity, ability, sexual orientation, gender identity, family structure, or personal circumstance, in all aspects of our life together.**

We are called, in and with the larger community,

**to grow in faith through study, prayer, and service;**

**to make known God's gracious presence; and**

**to show loving concern to all Creation.**

In March of each year – most often on March 14 or the Sunday immediately before or after – Affirming Ministries are encouraged to hold a PIE Day when they are Public, Intentional and Explicit about their commitment to inclusion. It's a time when we go out of our way to invite the community into that joy. As we prepared to celebrate with the community in this physical statement of our desire for inclusion, which is at the heart of our Affirming mandate, it struck me that this is our PIE Day celebration. We celebrate these tangible changes as steps on a journey, as we live into a desire to be fully welcoming in ever-expanding ways.

When we acknowledge the barriers created when strength is lifted up as Godly, and weakness demeaned as lesser; when we recognize how much the physical features of a building say about who we are and who we do or do not welcome; when we accept how much value is placed on cognitive abilities in the way engage the call of God; we take important steps on that journey. Today, we celebrate a milestone and not an end

point, inviting new partners to join us in this work, with each new heart bringing so much. With thanks to God, for whom even foolishness and weakness are welcomed with delight, may we continue on this unfolding path. Amen.

*For further reading:*

“Accessibility and the [United] Church”, <https://united-church.ca/leadership/church-administration/duty-care/caring-community/accessibility-and-church>

National Library of Medicine.

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/7676119/#:~:text=Abstract,disturbances%20coming%20after%20ecstatic%20seizures>

“Open Hearts: Resources for Affirming Ministries,” [https://affirmunited.ause.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/06/Open-Hearts-AUSE\\_Final\\_May192020.pdf](https://affirmunited.ause.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/06/Open-Hearts-AUSE_Final_May192020.pdf)

“Our Doors are Open”, <https://opendoors.idrc.ocadu.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Our-Doors-Are-Open-Accessible-PDF.pdf>

PIE Day! <https://pieday.ca/>

Rev. Douglas Graves’ obituary from 2016: <https://www.stubberfieldfh.com/obituary/the-rev-douglas-graves-17259/>

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