



Our Family Cares for People with Disabilities

Our society has started to pay a little bit more attention to people with disabilities. In the past buildings were designed without ramps and usually had steps leading to the front door. Now you almost never see newer buildings designed for public use without ramps or a level entrance. And if you have a hearing disability some increased efforts have been made to accommodate. Decades ago it was rare to find a movie closed captioning. Now it's a standard feature of any major film or television production. And if you have a visual impairment the movie industry hasn't left you out. Descriptive audio is included on the home video version of many new films. It describes every scene between the movie's dialogue. And I'm sure there were special Olympics when I was growing up. But they weren't promoted like they are today. It seems like our society pays a lot more attention to people with disabilities than it used to. How about God? Does he pay enough attention to those with disabilities? Today we begin a sermon series in the Gospel of Mark titled "Family Values." We see how being a part of the family of God means being part of a family that cares for people with disabilities. And God's family does like no other.

Jesus had certainly met his share of people with disabilities. He had healed those who could not walk. He had opened the eyes of the blind. And he had healed people who were suffering chronic illness. Matthew's account records for us that at this time many disabled people in the Decapolis region came to Jesus. "Large crowds came to him, including the lame, the blind, the crippled, those unable to speak, and many others. They put them at his feet, and he healed them." (Matthew 15:30)

Mark highlights for us a single incident when Jesus gave special attention to someone. In the mix of all these large crowds some brought to Jesus a man who was deaf and could hardly speak. Jesus could have just healed him with a single act of his will, a single word, or given a single healing touch. But that wasn't the case for this man. Jesus took extra time to help him.

Having a disability can often put someone into a different sphere of coping with your surroundings. This man could see the large crowds. I'm sure he found it difficult to navigate and make sense of the crowd. He was already isolated because of his deafness. He was further isolated because he couldn't cry out for help. The word describing his condition means he could either not speak at all or only spoke poorly with great difficulty.

Jesus responds to his condition by giving him special attention. First he removes him from the busy crowd. Then Jesus meets the deaf man in a way he could best understand. Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. That man had to understand. Jesus was about to do something with his ears. Then Jesus spit and touched the man's tongue. Once again the sign language would have been clear. Jesus was going to do something about his speech. Then, so that the man would know he is about to receive power from God, Jesus looked up to heaven and gave a deep sigh. These things were all done for that man's sake.

Yet it wasn't all these motions which healed him. Jesus makes it clear the healing comes through the power of his word. With a single word, Ephphatha, "be opened", he heals the man. The deaf man hears the word of Jesus. The one who had difficulty speaking speaks plainly in response! By the power of the Word of God he is healed. Those who saw this were overwhelmed with amazement.

Imagine the impact all this had on that man! Someone cared! It wasn't just the Jesus' signs and gestures which prepared him for that moment. Every moment of his life had been leading up to it. His friends no doubt shared with him that they were going to bring him to Jesus. By leading him to Jesus were saying to the deaf man, "we care." And more importantly they led him to understand that God cared about him! Did God love him? He now had every sigh and prayer answered with a resounding "yes." God himself took the time to make that known.

Just knowing someone cares makes a huge difference! I can't imagine the lonlieness that comes from some disabilities. I've never had to deal with a disability but have met those with loss of arms, with loss of their legs, loss of their sight, and loss of hearing. Once when I was young, I had to wear a cast on my foot for only a few weeks. At times I felt terribly lonely. I can recall sitting alone inside while everyone else got to go outside and play on the beach and swim. But not me. That was just a minor disability for a short time. Those who deal with chronic illness, loss of vision, loss of hearing, or cognitive disabilities have an on-going struggle. Most of us can only imagine how hard or lonely that can get at times.

It is important to know someone cares because it is so easy for people without disabilities to dismiss people with disabilities. We can all be deaf and blind sometimes. It was easy for everyone around me to go out and play without me when I had a cast. Likewise it is easy for those without disabilities to go on with their lives ignoring others. There's a reason why in past decades there weren't many ramps, closed captioning, and other considerations for those with disabilities. It wasn't because there weren't as many disabled people. It wasn't just cost. It was because it's easy to ignore the problem if it's not yours. It's easy to remain blind to the struggles faced by people with disabilities. It's easy to shut your ears to the cry of those who are without a voice. That deaf man needed to have people who cared. Because if they didn't speak up, then he couldn't speak up for himself!

And don't be fooled by our society's accommodations for those with disabilities. This world doesn't always listen or care as it ought. Those without a voice are easily silenced and dismissed. This world is a cold and dark place for many who are disabled. My wife and I have many children and usually have had a god-fearing doctor for them. But our last ultrasound

technician was a reminder of the world's view of disabilities. There is a way for medical professionals to test for cognitive disabilities when the child is still in the womb. The technician at the clinic wanted to know if we were screening our unborn child to see if she had down syndrome. The procedure is somewhat invasive and there aren't really any medical benefits from having the test. Yet many who are told they are at risk ask for it. Why? Because if you find out while a child is in the womb you can legally kill your baby before giving birth. And it's not just the unborn disabled who are despised and dismissed to death. You can walk down the halls of those confined to a wheelchair in a senior care center as they are desperate for attention. You can enter numerous buildings where there are people with cognitive disabilities and they are lost and crying for help. You can travel to parts of the world today (many parts of Europe) where societies are proud that they have reduced the number of disabled through abortion and euthanasia. They kill their babies and they kill the elderly. And they are proud! How is that for what the world values? "You have a disability then we don't want you. And we'd rather be guilty of your death than live with you."

But can we claim to be without a selfish sinful heart? Wouldn't your own heart sometimes rather avoid dealing with a disability? When seemingly innocent young children are on the playground who can end up as the target of their ridicule? Isn't it most often the child who stands out because of some disability? This happens at Christian schools too! Should that surprise us? And how many are willing to spend the time it takes to comfort others who are disabled? If you and I might ever suffer under a disability don't we at times feel tempted to wonder, "do my friends, does my school, does my family really care about me?" Or the hardest question we are tempted to wonder, "Does God care about me or about the disabled?"

When it comes to the family of God we have a clear answer. Our Father in heaven does care. And so do all our brothers and sisters in the family of God. Thank God he does not dismiss the suffering and the lowly. Far from it! He directs his attention to the cause of the blind, sick, and disabled.

He did far more than heal that deaf man who could hardly speak. He came to fulfill the prophecy which would deal with all such troubles forever! We read earlier of the prophecy from Isaiah 35, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come...he will come to save you. Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy." Our God did come to save us. He came in human flesh and he touched the deaf man's ears with his own hands. As fully human he spat, sighed, and looked up to the heavens. Jesus, the Son of God came to meet us at our own level in love. He has spoken to us in a way that we can clearly understand, "I care about you."

With a single word he healed that deaf man. With another single word he spoke in the flesh, "it is finished" (a single word in his native tongue). By that word proclaimed on the cross he declared the payment for every sin covered his suffering. He carried our sorrows. He died as the most dismissed and despised. He carried our sins -including the sins of selfishly overlooking others with disabilities -even the guilt of considering or committing abortion.

And with another single word he proclaimed in victory, "peace" after he rose to life. He now lives our brother and will do more than open our eyes and ears. He will one day open our graves. Then the ultimate fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy will come true, "... everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away." And just as the people who saw him heal the deaf man were overwhelmed with amazement, we too will be overwhelmed! We will stand in joy and amazement as the Scriptures are fulfilled which proclaim an end to every disability. Everything which causes suffering or struggles will be undone.

Like the deaf man we could not ever find God our cry out for him. So he comes to us with his gospel. He meets us blind and deaf in sin and opens our eyes, ears, and heart to see and believe. Through faith we become members of his household, sons and daughters, part of the family of God. And Isaiah's prophecy is already fulfilled in part as our mouths are opened to speak his good news.

The same God who opened our eyes and ears to believe in him also opens our eyes and ears to see disabled people around us in a new light. The deaf man had friends who brought him to Jesus. Imagine if this eagerness to bring people with special challenges in life to hear and see Jesus was eagerly carried out by every believer today? God forgive us for the times we failed to care for people with disabilities. But thanks to God that he has worked care for all. This event in Mark 7 was only the beginning!

Those who belong to the family of Christ are all in a new family -one that cares for people with disabilities. We share the heart of Christ as we are concerned for one another. It means making every effort to love those with disabilities. I'm not just talking about holding open the door for someone. I mean spending one-on-one time together away from the crowds. The whole household of believers taking time to talk, listen, and learn from each other's struggles. Every believer in prayer and deed showing they care. I love the fact that we have a special ministries organization in our church body. We have a ministry to the deaf and hard of hearing. We have a mission to the visually impaired with audio meditations and more. We have a special ministry called "Jesus Cares" which serves the intellectually disabled. A full-time administrator coordinates resources so our congregations can serve people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Jesus does care!

And this care is not patronizing. It is real for real people with real value. Those who belong to the family of Christ value those with disabilities. Each and every member is precious to God regardless of disability. This world may rank value on your strength of body or mind. But the family of believers ranks value on every soul --young, old, and even unborn regardless of physical or mental abilities. That's amazing! That's a family with real values. That's the family you belong to in Christ.