

BECOMING CHURCH, ONE DISCIPLE AT A TIME

1 Corinthians 15: 1-11 (Intergenerational Service)

Brad had some incredible gifts. He could repair most anything around the church. He was also really intelligent and thoughtful about many things. And so, I was surprised that professionally speaking, Brad had done little in life. He had barely got through high school, and worked at several different service jobs before retiring on a small pension. I was also surprised that given his huge involvement in the church, he always chose to be in the background. He never imagined he could be an elder or anything else in the church where some leadership was involved. He had terribly low self-esteem when it came to his abilities or talents, and this was a major hindrance throughout his life.

As I got to know him, though, Brad also disclosed things about his life which gave me clues as to why he was so down on his abilities. He had grown up in a loving family, had a happy marriage, raised children and was now enjoying grandchildren. But early on in school, growing up in a small town, he and his parents were told that Brad had limited abilities intellectually and wouldn't amount to much. He was told he should aim for a career that involved his hands more than his head. Being in a small town and several generations ago, the authority of a male school teacher was respected. Brad's family and Brad himself never questioned it.

But once I engaged the whole area of learning disabilities in my ministry, especially as it was part of my family too, Brad wanted to speak to me. After we talked I realized that Brad's resistance to intellectual pursuits was due to a learning disability he had. Brad was dyslexic. His reading and writing were scrambled because that's what he saw and that's how his mind worked. He wasn't limited intellectually as he had been told from early on. He just needed to find creative ways to work with his disability, through guidance and practice. How sad that he had lived his whole life thinking himself flawed and limited intellectually, and therefore incapable of doing so much that he had dreamed he'd like to do. A door was closed and therefore a whole raft of opportunities. Tragic.

Then there was Sam. When I met Sam he was already totally dependent on a motorized chair with limited use of his arms and hands. Sam had Muscular Dystrophy, a condition he was born with. MD was also a condition that would get worse over time, and the prognosis in terms of life-span was maybe 30. Sam was now 30, but the way he lived and the things he did, his various involvements, learning, engagement and social life would rival many gifted 30 year olds combined without any physical disabilities. What Sam was able to do somehow, through strong support from his family and teachers and an internal passion that was

unstoppable, was turn his disability into opportunity at every turn. Sam was a coach, he loved to organize events, he was a mentor, a Sunday School teacher and a role model with connections in the hundreds. I would regularly have people bring me news clippings of various things Sam was a part of, interviews he did, especially when it came to advocacy work for the physically disabled. Sam was out there, he was alive, and he was embracing life in all its fullness.

So what was the difference between Sam and Brad? Brad had many potential gifts but had somehow, unfortunately, limited himself in terms of opportunities and possibilities in life. A door was closed on him and he lived his life in a limited space thereafter. Sam had massive walls of limitation close in around him, and yet, he created doors where doors didn't exist and he walked through them to whole new spaces and places. Opportunities were seized and new possibilities were taken up because he rose up to the challenge and refused any limitation to define him.

So, where did the church fit in? What vision of the church could support the liberation and empowerment of people like Brad and what vision of the church could create opportunities and celebrate gifts of people like Sam?

Let's ponder our scripture reading for some revelatory insight. The apostle Paul is trying to inspire the Christians of Corinth with the message about the resurrection of Jesus. First of all, he says, it's real. It happened. It wasn't just some dream and Jesus risen and alive wasn't just some ghost. You don't have to believe me, Paul says. Just listen to the various testimonies of many believers who claim to have encountered the risen Christ.

But Paul also recognizes something else. To believe in the resurrection of Jesus you have to experience resurrection yourself. What would such resurrection look like? For Paul, it's an encounter with Jesus when he is confronted with all the shame of his mistakes and how such mistakes damaged others. Paul was a violent persecutor of Christians and there were many who would never forget and never forgive. Paul found it hard to forgive himself. And yet, he claims, Jesus found me and I experienced profound grace. Grace means undeserved love, love as a total gift. And when you've made mistakes, serious mistakes that have damaged others, love as grace and gift must be experienced as forgiveness. That's the kind of grace Paul experiences first – forgiveness. And forgiveness doesn't push you into a corner. Shame and blame does that. Forgiveness liberates you. It opens doors. What doors are opened for Paul? He is called, called to be an apostle. His mistakes are turned into opportunities, opportunities to reach out to all those who have also made mistakes like him, and all those who feel like outsiders like him.

And for Paul, that's what the church must be: a place where grace happens, where love happens as a gift beyond any question of who deserves what and how much. The vision of

church for Paul is a place and space where people are embraced and cherished. Church is also a place and a space where people discover their gifts and are empowered to pursue opportunities and possibilities. And so, Paul himself becomes an apostle of grace to outsiders as he himself was an outsider. In this case, the outsiders are non-Jews who have no background in the biblical, ritual and racial history of God's chosen people. Paul will fight hard not only to welcome them into the church as Christ's chosen, but also as fully equal before God and fully embraced as Christ's own regardless of where they'd come from, how different they were or how morally flawed in their backgrounds. The vision of church for the apostle is a place and a space where limitations are turned into opportunities and mistakes are turned into new possibilities where love and grace shine more brightly still.

Sam, continued to fight hard to live life fully and brightly even as his physical light was growing dim. After repeated hospitalizations it was clear that he would not come out of this battle alive. But Sam died the way he had lived, in gratitude for all he was able to live, and on his own terms, accepting when it was time. His family and I were there around his bed when he quietly and gently breathed his last...

Now, the funeral we had was a funeral like no other I've ever experienced in my life as a minister. It's as if the whole disabilities community of the GTA were there. We had a line of wheel trans buses for blocks waiting to drop off friends, colleagues, and those who had been inspired, empowered and mentored by Sam. There were political representatives and media personalities there too. Sam had got himself known far and wide. It was tough trying to limit who could speak about him, because we didn't want the service to go on forever. Members of my family will remember something of that event I'm sure...

But here's something few would have noticed in the midst of all that celebration of life. Coordinating all the ushering and people traffic spilling into the hall and basement and spaces inside and out of the church, was Brad. Brad had not only been elected an elder by this time. He had taken on various leadership roles - even making presentations and reading publicly. Through the grace and love he had experienced in church, especially as he had found a way to share some of his personal history of discrimination, he had been finding ways to turn his limitations into opportunities and possibilities. His leadership reflected a new confidence within a space and place of welcome. And like the apostle Paul, Brad had become especially sensitive to all those on the margins of the church who felt inadequate, flawed or disabled somehow. Brad had grown especially close to Sam and his family, and Sam was a kind of mentor to him, even though Brad was twice Sam's age. Church had become a place where gifts were celebrated, opportunities for mentoring, inspiring and empowering were alive, and experiencing grace through limitations became real. Christ was resurrected and he was alive among us. What more proof did we need?

And this, my friends, is what church can become at its best. As the body of the risen Christ, Church is a place where opportunities to discover and use our gifts in the service of love happens. Church is a place where limitations and mistakes are met with the grace of God in Christ and they are turned into new opportunities and possibilities of compassion for all those who suffer guilt, shame or inadequacy for whatever reason. May we find our inspiration, motivation and fullness as members and friends of Armour Heights church in such a vision; Amen.