

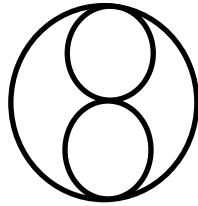
“Other-ly Abled”

Mark 6:1-4 & 2 Corinthians 12:2-10

July 7, 2024 Dean Feldmeyer

Have you ever heard of a thing called the “Introvert’s Party Path?”

It’s a circle with a figure-eight inside of it, touching the circle at the top and bottom



That’s the Introvert’s Party Path. It’s how an introvert maneuvers through a party: First, you come in the door at the bottom of the figure. Then you walk the circumference of the room shaking hands and saying hello until you get back to the door. Now you walk in a figure eight through the room, shaking hands, saying hello, stopping to chat, until you get back to the door.

Then you leave, utterly exhausted.

I know about the Introvert’s Party Path because I’m an introvert. I don’t do parties, especially cocktail parties well. I like them okay, I guess. It’s just that they exhaust me. It takes all of my mental and emotional resources to spend several hours balancing *hors d’oeuvre* and a beverage in one hand while I navigate a room making small talk with people I barely know. (Of course, none of this applies to parties where I know everyone. I love those parties.)

But the ones where I don’t know people are hard work for me. And that fact usually surprises people, given my chosen profession.

Ask people what kind of person they want as a minister for their church and they will usually say they want an extrovert. But the ministry is a career that tends to attract introverts at a ratio of about 3 to 1.

So, we introverts are at something of a disadvantage. I guess you’d say that our introversion is something of a disability.

Most of us learn to deal with our introversion disability in two ways.

First, we learn how to make small talk and then we force ourselves to do it. We accept that making small talk with people we don’t know is hard work for people like us and then we do the hard work. We bone up on baseball and the weather and Hollywood gossip and local politics and current events and we take a deep breath and we march into that party and we listen for a clue and we nod and make appropriate comments and then we go home and take a nap.

(Jean says that she knows when party pressure has reached critical mass for me when she sees me pulling a chair up to the buffet table or the bar. That's when she drags me away and takes me home.)

One of my favorite people in the world is sociologist Dr. Tex Sample. I was once at a continuing education retreat where he was the keynote speaker and a snowstorm kept most of the registrants away. About a dozen of us had Tex all to ourselves. He threw away his agenda for the weekend and we just spent time asking him questions and letting him expound on whatever he wanted to talk about.

I remember being shocked to hear him say that he is an introvert. He's so gregarious and funny and glib I just naturally assumed the opposite, but here's how he explained what he meant: "Ah ain't good at small talk. See, most of the stuff I like to talk about is stuff that I have spent a lot of time thinkin' about and I have a lot to say about it. And I want to hear more about it from other people who know about it. I just don't find small talk all that interestin' and it wears me out tryin' ta do it."

But he forces himself and he's gotten pretty good at it, but it's still exhausting for him. Anyhow, that's one way we introverts deal with our disability.

Here's the other way:

Having been a relatively successful pastor for 45 years, I have learned not to think of myself as disabled just because I'm an introvert. I am what my daughter calls, other-ly abled or differently abled. I have other skills that make up for my small talk disability.

I can, for instance, sit down at my desk, alone, for five or six hours and concentrate for the amount of time sufficient to write this sermon and feel invigorated by that creative process.

I can read for long periods of time. I can write books and articles and poems because it just comes naturally for me to sit in front of a keyboard and be creative for long periods of time.

My brothers, who are all extroverts, prefer to speak extemporaneously. They are not invigorated by sitting for long periods at the keyboard. They can do it but it exhausts them.

We, my brothers and I, are differently abled.

WE ARE ALL DISABLED

Everyone, it turns out, has disabilities. We all have things that are hard for us or that we just can't do no matter how badly we want to or how hard we try.

Once, when I was a little leaguer playing center field, I was hit in the face by a fly ball that I thought was popped up over second base. My eyesight, it turns out, is not very good at judging speed and distance. I have poor depth perception.

So, I was never able to play baseball very well. And when I hit a golf ball I have to have my golfing buddies watch where and how far it goes or I have to use something else on the course, a bush or a tree or something to gauge the distance and direction of the ball. Visually judging distance and speed of a moving object is nearly impossible for me.

But I can hear harmony in my head and harmonize when I sing with others.

I can't hit a golf ball 200 yards into the fairway. I can't hit free throws with anything like regularity. I can't tell how far away that car in the mirror is.

But I taught myself to play over a dozen musical instruments all by ear.

I can't fix an internal combustion engine or program a computer. And even though my brother, Scot and Jim my colleague, pastor Jim Nathan both explained to me the infield fly rule, I still don't understand it.

But I can read music. And I read Paul Tillich's *Systematic Theology*, all three volumes, and I understood it, and enjoyed it.

I can't do advanced algebra and I was never able to memorize the periodic table of the elements. But I can fry a chicken and I can bake a cherry pie both of which are to die for, without using a recipe.

We are all differently or other-ly abled. There are things we can do and things we can't.

Dr. Samuel Johnson, one of England's most famous and influential literary figures suffered from Tourette's Syndrome and massive facial scars caused by childhood scrofula, a form of tuberculosis that presents in the skin.

World famous violin virtuoso Isaac Perlman is unable to walk without the aid of crutches and leg braces due to childhood polio.

When he was a child, my uncle, Howard Clark, suffered from polio that left his legs bent and crooked but he went on to become a successful carpenter and contractor who built his own home, a beautiful expression of woodworking artistry. Soccer great David Beckham has extreme Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder.

Julius Caesar, Alexander the Great, Michelangelo, Lewis Carroll, Aristotle, and Sir Isaac Newton all suffered from Epilepsy.

Actress Marlee Matlin became the first deaf woman to win an Academy Award for her role in *Children of a Lesser God*. She won for Best Actress.

Phyllis Frelic, who is also deaf, won the Tony Award for the same role in the stage production.

William Ellsworth, who played baseball for the Cincinnati Reds from 1888 to 1902 was the third deaf professional baseball player and is credited with creating the hand signals which referees use to call “out,” “safe,” and “strike.”

Beethoven continued his career writing and conducting music after he became profoundly deaf.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt had polio.

Michael J. Fox has Parkinson’s Disease but continues to act, direct, and write for movies and television.

And, if you will allow me a moment to brag, my own daughter, Sarah, has profound dyslexia which makes reading very hard for her but she read enough to get a Master of Divinity degree and then start a business with her husband which has been so successful that they are both millionaires.

The list goes on and on. People with disabilities who have excelled in life by taking advantage of their other abilities. Search the internet for just a few minutes and you’ll uncover 100’s of names.

One name is left out of their list, however.

Paul.

A THORN IN THE FLESH

To understand today’s reading we have to reach all the way back to chapter 10 of Paul’s 2nd letter to the Corinthian church. There, we find that the Corinthian church has been visited by some traveling Christian evangelists who want the leadership of the church turned over to them. These newcomers must have some impressive credentials because the people of the church have written to Paul asking him what he thinks they should do.

The evangelists claim to be what Paul calls “Super Apostles.” We don’t know, exactly, what these Super Apostles have said but, apparently, they have claimed to have super powers – probably powers of healing and divination and maybe even other supernatural abilities that Paul never was able to demonstrate.

They have compared their super powers to Paul’s lack of anything like supernatural abilities and have given the Corinthians something to think about. “Why follow Paul, who has no apparent super powers?” they ask. “He’s never healed anyone. He’s never divined anything or told the future or read anyone’s mind. He doesn’t even speak in

tongues. Let's face it, the guy's all talk. Why follow him when God has obviously chosen to give us some pretty impressive abilities?"

Paul has caught wind of this attempted *coup d'état* and he writes a hurried letter to the church to defend himself and his ministry among them.

At the point where we come in, this morning, he has spent nearly two chapters laying out his credentials. He has sacrificed much. He has been beaten, stoned, whipped, shipwrecked, arrested, imprisoned, libeled, and run out of town for the sake of the gospel.

He reminds the Corinthians that his ministry was good enough when he started the church and he asks them what has changed?

Then, in this passage that we have read, this morning, he takes a rhetorical path that is totally unexpected.

First, he tells of a couple of guys he has known who claim to have been taken up to heaven and given secrets by God that they aren't allowed to tell anyone. Now, those guys, he says, have reason to boast. Heck, I even boast on their behalf, he says.

But – and this is where he surprises us and his readers – as for me? Even though I could boast about lots of things, I choose not to. The only thing I boast about, the only thing I brag about, the only thing I gloat about is my weakness.

Say what?

Why would a person boast about their weakness?

Paul says, "Let me explain."

He has been given, that is, he has received, what he metaphorically calls a "thorn" in his "flesh."

Now, biblical scholars have speculated and debated for centuries about what this "thorn... in the flesh" might be.

Was it epilepsy? There is some evidence of this in his other letters. But many find that evidence unconvincing. Their speculations have included malaria, depression, cataracts, rheumatoid arthritis, various speech difficulties such as a stammer or stutter, and even homosexuality. But the specifics are not as important as the context in which Paul places them.

Whatever his disability was, Paul understood himself to be significantly disabled in some way that hindered his ministry. So serious was it that he asked God three times to remove it.

But it was not removed.

So, Paul, in this passage, theologizes about his disability. That is, he places it in a theological context, and that context is this: ***God's power, he says, is always made more strikingly visible and evident when it is set against the backdrop of human weakness.*** (Repeat)

There is really nothing special about Superman doing super things, but when an ordinary, even disabled person does extraordinary things, well, that is clear evidence that God is at work in the person's life. The sight of ordinary people doing amazing things provides a powerful witness to both the love and power of our God.

So, it is that throughout the entire biblical narrative God calls not super-people, but ordinary, flawed, even other-ly abled people to do God's work.

And when that work is done, it is God who is praised and honored.

A FINAL THOUGHT

Our disability, then, is not something we should hide or be ashamed of. Rather, Paul calls us to place it out in front of us. Talk about it. Share it with other people. "Gloat" about it. "Boast" of it. "Brag" about it.

Because now it's not just a disability, an inconvenience that I have to live with, now it's an evangelistic tool that allows me to demonstrate all the more clearly, the amazing power, love and grace of our God.

That is not to say, of course, that God afflicts us with disabilities for that purpose.

God does not make us blind or deaf or paralyzed or shy or whatever so he can use us as a living billboard. God does not create difficulties for us so we can better demonstrate how great God is. Not the kind, loving and graceful God that I have come to know, at any rate.

Neither is it to say that all disabilities are good or desirable.

What Paul does mean to say, here, however, is that we can, with God's help, make good come from our disabilities, whether they are large or small. We can, if we choose, use those disabilities as evangelistic tools, we can use them to point to that power not within in us but outside of us that gives our lives authenticity and meaning.

We can all, abled, disabled, differently abled, or other-ly abled... we can all lift up whatever voice God has given to us and shout God's praises to the heavens.

AMEN