# Beautiful and Beloved, Vulnerable and Whole Service for Disabilities Awareness Day

## Gathering

### Call to Worship

Come, every beloved body to worship.

**Come, everybody to praise God.**

Come, every beloved body to celebrate within the Body of Christ.

God be with you.

**And also with you.**

### Hymn

“Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus” (VU 2)

### Prayer

**Dear God, we have come together today**

**to thank you for giving us life**

**in all its wonder and fragility.**

**We are preparing for the human and divine body of Jesus Christ**

**to enter our world again.**

**We confess that in this life**

**we have sometimes lost our way**

**and sometimes lost heart.**

**Forgive us and renew us.**

**Help us remember that we carry**

**the life of Jesus in our bodies,**

**eternal life in our souls.**

**Amen**

### Words of Assurance

The good news, friends, is that Jesus has come and is coming into our world, into our bodies. He is marked by the joy, pain, and love of human life—bringing us closer to living as God’s beloved as we anticipate the coming of the kingdom on earth. Thanks be to God.

### Response

“Don’t Be Afraid” (MV 90)

### Peace

Please share with your neighbour the peace of Christ.

### Children’s Time

I brought a clay pot with me today. Can you tell me what this pot looks like? What does it feel like? What do you think it might hold? Some writers in our Bible used a clay pot to describe people—what do you think of that? Maybe it’s because they don’t last forever—they are fragile. Like us, they get bumped and hurt sometimes. The same is true for Jesus when he was born—he had times when he felt hurt, angry, and sad. And still, God was with him. Always encouraging him to live and love as God loved him—despite any bumps he faced, God’s love was stronger.

### Children’s Song

“Away in a Manger,” v. 1 (VU 69)

## Word

### 1st Lesson

Job 1:1–5, 13–21; Isaiah 64:1–9

### 2nd Lesson

2 Corinthians 4:1, 7–12, 16–18

### Sermon: The fear of vulnerability

I’m not sure how you imagine God, or used to imagine God, but growing up I saw *The Simpsons*’ portrayal of an old white guy with a beard in the sky. When I studied at Emmanuel College, I was introduced to the field of disability theology. An image from Nancy Eiesland’s *The Disabled God* image has stayed with me: she describes God sitting in a sip-puff wheelchair. This is the chair that many quadriplegics use to get around by blowing and sucking on a straw-like device. “Not an omnipotent, self-sufficient God,” she writes, “but neither a pitiable, suffering servant…. God as a survivor, unpitying and forthright.” God in a sip-puff wheelchair. Jesus travelling around, healing, loving, teaching, recognizing and living the vulnerability of humanity—a treasure in a clay jar. An image that disrupts our sense of God’s omnipotent power.

Bodies are marked by vulnerability. I am using the term *vulnerability* in relation to physical disabilities today—but of course, there is much more in that word. In my work on disability theology, vulnerability is used widely to speak about impairments. I think this is a way of drawing attention to societal norms and juxtaposing our Christian teachings. Society has, in all its histories, devalued and undervalued people with disabilities. Society has valued power—the power that comes from wealth, position, privilege, family, independence, upholding the status quo. People with disabilities do not fit that focus—we are seen as lacking power, vulnerable. Meanwhile our faith teaches us to look toward God’s kingdom, where power is turned on its head. Where all reflect the image of God—beautiful, broken, vulnerable, source of life and hope, and beloved.

You don’t have to look far to spot the injustices faced by people with disabilities. We are, regardless of our competence, less likely than our nondisabled counterparts to have a career or to marry, and more likely to live under the poverty line, to suffer harassment and exclusion. The statistics and stories are disheartening. I know I fit into these numbers somehow. And I know there is a motivation for people to encourage me, or even to name me as inspirational. However, that is not the message I’m seeking to convey, nor the message that Paul is conveying. Rather, it is remembering that there will be times when we are vulnerable because of our flesh and blood bodies…and that will not be the end of our stories.

Sometimes, fear of vulnerability is triggered by the presence of people with disabilities. Perhaps this is part of the reason for experiences of social exclusion. By looking at me, or others with disabilities, with a perspective of pity and thinking, “I’m glad I am able bodied” or “I’m grateful my children don’t have to experience that life” (at least subconsciously), I remind people about being vulnerable. One writer points out that the more that people with disabilities are pushed from public life, the less we know about them. And the less one knows about their lives, the greater the fear of them. But this fear itself can be disabled—“through encounter and through communal life with persons with disabilities.” Any fear of the unknown, of becoming vulnerable, is released through relationship.

Paul, and Isaiah, are speaking about facing adversity. We are simply clay jars. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down but not destroyed. It is true that people with disabilities face adversity and hardship (as do we all). I have often said I wouldn’t want not to have Cerebral Palsy—it’s who I am, and there have been tremendous people, experiences, and joys I have encountered because of it, but there are moments… Mornings, especially if I’m particularly grumpy, when I wish I didn’t need the support of an attendant to get ready. Times near the end of my Botox schedule when I’m weary of my body feeling 90 years old (or how I imagine that to be). Encounters with people who change their behaviour toward me when they learn I have a master’s degree (and a whole lot of privilege). In these moments, I need the words of Paul—the message of God’s presence and grace. We all, regardless of our physical abilities, have moments where we need to remember we are God’s treasures.

Our fear of vulnerability, of disability in ourselves and others, often cuts ourselves off from God and others—a refusal to recognize and celebrate vulnerability makes us a stranger to ourselves. We want to hide our own vulnerability, for fear of the shame that it brings. But as human beings we are vulnerable. We are not invincible; the power and abilities we hold are not a sure thing. We are a treasure, beautiful and beloved, in clay jars, vulnerable and whole.

Paul says we carry around the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus might be revealed. Jesus is God’s presence in the world. Jesus is the Son of God, born in human flesh, so that our relationship with God might strengthen and deepen. It is the Risen Christ who appears with the wounds of crucifixion on his body. The Disabled God, God in a sip-puff wheelchair. Ah, the Vulnerable God. We tend to think of Jesus as the vulnerable babe in a manger…but he is also the vulnerable man, human flesh, on the cross. Yes, Easter comes. Yes, that promise, that gift of the resurrected Jesus is our hope—the hope that Paul speaks of and the hope that grounds us. But the wounds on Jesus’ physical body remind us that there are Good Friday moments in our lives, moments we must stay with, wrestle with, even as God’s grace moves us toward hope.

The good news, friends, is this: The fear of vulnerability cannot hold our attention when we experience the world through Jesus. That fear of vulnerability, of bodies marked by disability and limitations, cannot hide God’s promise of abundant life, God’s vision for the kingdom on earth. God comes again to our world, bearing the promise of abundant life and love. Hard pressed, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down but not destroyed. Thanks be to God. Amen.

### Hymn

“Lo, How a Rose E’er Blooming” (VU 8)

## Table

### Offertory

### Offertory Response

Bless the Lord (Taizé) *or* Ubi Caritas (MV 170)

### Prayers

O Lord, you are our Creator; we are the clay, and you are our potter;

we are all the work of your hand.

We thank you for the beauty of this day, this season.

For the lights and decorations, the songs and celebrations

As we prepare for the coming of the Prince of Peace, your vulnerable son.

Help us wait for you, O Lord.

**“Wait for the Lord”** (VU 22)

O Lord, you are our Creator; we are the clay, and you are our potter;

we are all the work of your hand.

We pray for your earth, your creation of sky and ground.

Help us tend to it with healing hands, so that there continues to be abundant life.

Teach us to love your creation as you love.

Help us wait for you, O Lord.

**“Wait for the Lord”** (VU 22)

O Lord, you are our Creator; we are the clay, and you are our potter;

we are all the work of your hand.

We pray for your world, vulnerable, beautiful, and whole.

We pray for people and places that are hurting—Palestine, Congo, Ethiopia,

the United States, and our land of Canada.

May our words and actions strengthen our love for one another,

living into your call for the kingdom on earth.

Help us wait for you, O Lord.

**“Wait for the Lord”** (VU 22)

O Lord, you are our Creator; we are the clay, and you are our potter;

we are all the work of your hand.

We pray for those we know and love, who are hurting in body, mind, and spirit.

We pray for those who are only known to you, who are feeling fragile and vulnerable.  
In the silence of our hearts, we name the joys and concerns of our lives…

May your love enfold all of us, as we prepare to enfold the baby Jesus with our love.

Help us wait for you, O Lord.

**Wait for the Lord”** (VU 22)

### Lord’s Prayer

*(spoken)*

## Sending Forth

### Hymn

“People Look East” (VU 9)

### Commissioning/Blessing

Let us go forth knowing we are the clay and God the potter,

and live enacting God’s call as beloved people.

May God who created you be with you.

May Jesus whose love is being born in our world be with you.

And may the Spirit who sustains us be with you.

This day, this season, and always. Amen.

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