# Room at the Table A worship service for Disabilities Awareness Day

*by the Rev. Dr.* *Sharon Ballantyne*

*This service was created for Disabilities Awareness Day 2017, which this year falls on Advent 1, or “hope” Sunday. The personal examples interspersed in the Theology of Disabilities report presented to General Council 42 are excerpts taken from statements submitted by people living with a disability across Canada who were asked to contribute their feedback about their experience and what they would like the church to know.*

*In preparing to use the service in your local community of faith, there may be those present who live with a disability or are allies who can share their own stories or reflections. Each community will be at a different place in its own efforts to ensure accessibility, inclusion, welcoming, belonging for all, and moving beyond physical barriers and obstacles to addressing those that may be experienced through thoughts, words, actions, beliefs about and in relationship with people.*

**Welcome**

Welcome to our community of faith family.

Come share open hearts, open doors, and open minds.

Experience spiritual living built on belonging, believing, blessing.

Not confined to our building, we are people who are everywhere, every day.

We are free to be ourselves, included, accepted, and welcomed, and people who help each other.

We warmly welcome everyone and extend a special welcome to all guests today.

Please sign the guest book and introduce yourselves to us.

Everyone is invited to stay after worship, visit, and enjoy refreshments in the church hall.

***To ponder:* Whom do we welcome to our tables? Whom do we have trouble welcoming to our table?**

**Bold print –** Congregational response

\* Rise in body or spirit (stand or remain sitting according to your comfort)

## We Gather Together

*Please rise in body or spirit when the choir enters.*

\*GATHERING MUSIC

“Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying” (VU 400)

WELCOME, ANNOUNCEMENTS, AND CELEBRATIONS

MUSICAL PRELUDE

LIGHTING OF THE CANDLES

We light the Christ candle, inviting us to notice God’s presence within us, aware that God knows everything about us, and loves and cherishes us. Let the light and love grow, May we feel that love more deeply within us, feeling loved, forgiven, giving us new hope. Awaken us, Lord!

We light the candle for our community, inviting us to notice God’s presence within the neighbourhood and community around us, aware that God knows everything about those all around us, and loves and cherishes all. Let the light and love grow. May we feel that love more deeply in our outreach of kindness, caring, and forgiveness as we share hope. Awaken us, Lord!

We light the candle for our world, for all of creation, inviting us to notice God’s presence within everything, everywhere, aware that God knows everything about the pain, brokenness, and hurt in us and throughout our world. God loves and cherishes all life. Let the light and love grow. May we feel that love more deeply for hope and peace, and pray for that light and love to be shared throughout creation. Awaken us, Lord!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF THE LANDS

*(Use your community’s land acknowledgement, or for guidance on crafting one, search “Acknowledging the Territory” on* [*www.united-church.ca*](http://www.united-church.ca)*.)*

**Since time immemorial First Peoples’ lives and spirituality have been deeply connected to this land. We acknowledge the Anishinaabeg-Mississauga peoples whose territory we are on. We acknowledge and give thanks for their stewardship. May we live with respect and gratitude on this land and live in peace and friendship with its people.**

CALL TO WORSHIP

One: We come to celebrate and give thanks for God’s love for us, where all may find welcome, acceptance, and belonging at our table.

**All: We gather sharing our uniqueness, our differences, our gifts and strengths, our needs, and our fears.**

One: We come to open ourselves to God’s presence.

**All: Keep us awake, Lord! We want to create welcome for all in this place, in our homes and communities, and throughout the world.**

One: We come to feel loved, accepted, and cherished, to be renewed in hope, peace, and joy.

**All: In God’s awesome wonder and grace, we gather to pray, to praise, to share together, including all at our table.**

\*HYMN *(suggested choices)*

“Spirit of the Living God” (VU 376)

“Come In, Come In and Sit Down (Part of the Family)” (VU 395)

“Let Us Build a House (All Are Welcome(” (MV 1)

“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” (VU 1) *(seasonal)*

BREATHS & OPENING PRAYER

*Leader:* As we prepare to enter a time of silence and prayer, I invite us to take three deep breaths. As we take our first deep breath, let us breathe in God’s love and light, peace and grace, letting go of all the concerns, stresses, and distractions that are on our hearts and in our minds.

Breathe in … hold … release … breathe out

As we take our next deep breath, may we be aware of this unique time and place, this moment of which there will be no other like it, and offer our thanks for being here together. We offer thanks for all who are with us here, for this community, this time.

Breathe in … hold … release … breathe out

For the third of our three deep breaths, let us breathe in our awareness of God and invite God to help us be awake and open, to give and receive, to be listening and aware of God’s message to us this morning. May we profoundly encounter the Holy One in our own aha moments. We give thanks.

Breathe in … hold … release … breathe out *(Silence)*

God of surprises, keep us awake; you know us all, fill us with hope and renewed spirit. We come wearied, from various challenges, from triumphs, from fears and doubts. In your grace and mercy, fill us with your presence.

God of divine mystery, you love and cherish us as we are; restore us, forgive us. Thank you for loving us unconditionally.

We gather as we are, known, loved, seeking you. Fill us with new hope. Refuel us and help us draw closer to you.

You we praise, Steadfast Love,   
for your presence never abandons us,   
but is at our side in all of life.  
Each of us comes to your table just as we are.   
Speak to us in this time of worship. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

MINISTRY OF MUSIC

“My Love Colours Outside the Lines” (MV 138)

MINUTE FOR MISSION

INVITATION TO GIVE

Leader: As we prepare to present our tithes and offerings, reflect on God’s love that welcomes, accepts, includes us all, assuring us we all belong at this table.

What is God awakening you to this morning?

Our offering will be received.

\*HYMN OF DEDICATION

“Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow” (VU 541)

DEDICATION OF OUR TITHES AND OFFERINGS

**Gracious and loving God, father and mother of us all, empower us to proclaim your good news of great love everywhere.** Your steadfast love is one of the many gifts you pour into us. Bless these gifts as you bless us, to ministries of healing and hope, that invites, includes, welcomes and needs us all at the table. Help us share the message of your great love, here, and throughout our world. Amen.

\*TEACHING SONG: Piggyback Psalm

*(by Sharon Ballantyne, based on Psalm 139)*

*Tune: “The Wheels on the Bus”*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Lord, you know when I wake and sleep. Wake and sleep, wake and sleep. Lord, you know when I wake and sleep. You know me very well. | You knew me before I was born. I was born, I was born. You knew me before I was born. You know me very well! |
| Lord, you know when I laugh and cry. laugh and cry, wake and sleep. Lord, you know when I laugh and cry. You know me very well. | You will always be with me Be with me, Be with me. You will always be with me You know me very well. |

STORY AND PRAYERS FOR THE YOUNG AND YOUNG AT HEART

VIDEO: Psalm 139“Fearfully and Wonderfully Made” from Faith Church (<https://vimeo.com/86925527>)

*(or invite it to be read)*

*Discuss video with children. Do a repeating prayer with children.*

THE LORD’S PRAYER

*(Children leave for Junior Church)*

## We Hear God’s Word

SCRIPTURE LESSONS:

1 Corinthians 1:3–9Mark 13:24–37

\*HYMN *(suggested choices)*

“In Christ There Is No East or West” (VU 606)

“When I Needed a Neighbour” (VU 600)

“I, the Lord of Sea and Sky” (VU 509)

“We Are One” (VU 402)

“Spirit, Open My Heart” (MV 79)

“What Can I Do?” (MV 191)

“A Candle Is Burning” (VU 6) *(seasonal)*

PRAYER BEFORE SERMON

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts and meditations of all of our hearts be open to you God as you awaken new awareness and understandings in us. Speak to our hearts, minds, and spirits. May you welcome all to your table. Help us to do the same; in Jesus’ name we ask these things. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

* Whom do we easily welcome to our table?
* Whom do we have trouble welcoming?
* Whom did Jesus welcome to his table?
* What is God awakening in our hearts today?

God offers a table of grace. We never know from moment to moment whom we will encounter, but do we really live anticipating the face of Jesus in all those we meet?

Invite members of the community of faith to share moments of insight.

When have you experienced God in unexpected places?

Reflect on the Faith Church video of Psalm 139. How does it show hope and empowerment? What ripple effects can you see? Make difference: risk faith, dare hope!

As affirmed by the United Church in 2012 in the report “Open and Accessible: Ministries with Persons with Disabilities,” people with disabilities may have physical, mental, or emotional conditions that affect movements, senses, or activities. A disability may be visible, or invisible; it may be physical, cognitive, mental, sensory, emotional, developmental, or a combination of these. Disability is complex. A person with a disability is not reduced to their disability alone; rather, ability is just one identity among many—such as gender, sexual orientation, race, class, and age—that make up who a person is. In addition, understandings of disability change over time. Conditions such as Crohn’s disease or chronic fatigue syndrome, for example, were not considered disabilities several years ago. Disability can also be dynamic. It is an elastic category—an open minority—that anyone can join at any time, with the likelihood of joining increasing with age.

SERMON NOTES

What do you think about when you think about disability?

Some years ago, a group of people in the United Church met to talk about disability and theology—and how people living with disabilities understand God, and how the Bible talks about people with disabilities. They had already heard a few stories from people with disabilities about their hopes and challenges in the church, and how sometimes it was difficult for people with disabilities to be fully accepted in the church.

The group who met invited people living with disabilities, and allies, to tell their own stories.

Some people living with disabilities shared stories such as this one:

*Many times I have wondered: “Why would God let this happen? Where is God today?”*

*I have been bemused, saddened, and perplexed by the way our church has treated those like me, and has largely refused to hear that there is even a problem.*

*The church is behind, playing catch up and not leading. This saddens me, because of your history of fighting for social justice... This is a justice issue in our midst.*

*The problem with the church and disability is cultural, and no amount of legislation, tsk-tsking, or calls to right thinking will change it quickly.*

The group heard that many people felt excluded. But they noted that “the Gospel witness of the ministry of Jesus shows that he sought out the very people who faced disability and marginalization in the society of that time. If we are to be true to Jesus’s example, and to the biblical witness, we must be clear that a theology of disability is inherent in Scripture. It affirms that all are created in the image of God, and that all of God’s people are welcomed into the radical hospitality of Jesus, wherever they are on the spectrum of ability.”

*My disability is not [the] totality of who I am. Usually, disability is not the first identity I name. As a person of faith, my first identity, my baptized identity, is as a beloved child of God. This is the primary identity that continues to shape my life, and one that I hope [to] be reminded of as I seek to remind others that they too are beloved children of God.*

*Ideas of normalcy and imperfection remain and get reinforced in the church making some people feel inadequate because of their disability.*

*I would value a church that spends time thinking about how to walk with people who live with chronic, demanding, unpredictable situations.*

*More than anything, I need you not to be afraid of my story. I need people who are willing to walk with me when I am afraid, angry, exhausted, or sad.*

*It is essential to be aware of the power we hold related to our identities and our roles and who makes space for our leadership. How we see ourselves in leadership impacts how others see us and vice versa.*

*At church, the now startlingly regular references in Bible readings and music, to the healing of the blind, to sight miraculously being restored, jumped out at me at every turn with irony and challenge and sometimes a wry smile. I still notice and think a lot about what these words really mean. Has my sight been restored?—sadly no. Has there been healing? This is a more difficult question, and I am grateful to be a member of a denomination and local congregation that can talk about healing at many levels.*

*Nurturing relationships, getting to know others and having open communication fosters bridge building. “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” and “Be still and know I am God” are important verses that keep my faith “doing and being” in perspective.*

*I need the church to know that I do not need to be fixed.*

*I have been bemused, saddened, and perplexed by the way our church has treated those like me. And has largely refused to hear that there is even a problem.*

*I was told that God would not give me more than I can handle. I heard these opinions often, and for a young mother (of a child with disabilities) struggling with constant feelings of exhaustion, fear, and uncertainty these suggestions not only did not “cheer me up,” but they engendered feelings of inadequacy and shame.*

*Fast-forward five years, and you can’t tear J, now 16-years old, away from our church. He’s an active member of (the youth group), volunteers at community dinners, attends camp, sings at open-mic, and won’t miss a Sunday for anything. J has embraced the church and the church has embraced him in return….Our faith community at XYZ United Church has definitely enriched J’s life. He now has faith* as well as *a whole faith community to support him. And J has enriched the lives of the faith community in return. They know this fantastic young man who grasps life in both hands.*

*I am not special. I do not believe that God has uniquely chosen me for this journey. I am not a saint, nor am I some kind of superwoman. In fact, I am the same as you and I am simply doing the best I can because I don’t have any choice in the matter. This is our life …*

*Not all disabled people “suffer.” Disability can be just one more factor that shapes who a person is*.

*I was born with [cerebral palsy]… Had I the choice of miraculously becoming able-bodied, I would choose not*.

*One of the messages within the Bible is that of perfection, and people with a disability are not perfect. In fact, all people are not perfect*.

*I have never believed that my disability was a “gift from God” or God’s way of “testing” me. I find such ideas abhorrent and nauseating.… [A]ll of my physical and psychological imperfections, visible and invisible, which seem to be piling up the whiter my hair gets, in no way detracts from the light that shines within me. I know I am made in the image of God. I have God’s thumb-print on my soul. At my core I know I have been ‘fearsomely, wondrously made.’*

*Many disabled people have been severely damaged by Christians who have told the person that their faith is insufficient and that is why they have not been healed*.

*I didn’t like the way people with disabilities were portrayed in the Bible. There were too many references to the lame walking and the blind seeing. If I couldn't walk or couldn't see, was I to blame for having too little faith?*

The group also noted that “the healing stories may be understood differently. For example, Jesus does not treat disability as a sign of spiritual need or deprivation, as punishment for previous sin, or as a blemish marking some kind of danger. In fact, he challenges such cause-and-effect depictions, opening up alternative perspectives on healing. For instance, in John 9:1–41, with reference to a blind man, Jesus counters the disciples’ assumption that disability is a consequence of sin, claiming that neither the man’s parents nor he had sinned to cause the disability, but rather that the works of God may be displayed. In this story, as in many others, the focus is not merely on the elimination of impairments and illnesses, re-making people so that they function normally. Instead, the emphasis is on the personal and social transformation that takes place through Jesus’ presence.”

Perhaps this is a sign of hope! “Healing entails the restoration of community, removing barriers to belonging, for Jesus had already recognized people with disabilities as part of God’s community. Healing marks Jesus’ radical hospitality, which fosters new possibilities for the wellbeing (*shalom*) that comes from living in transformed relationships with Christ, with oneself, and with others. Stories of healing in the Gospels serve to show Jesus’ identity as Christ, revealing a taste of God’s realm at hand: making whole, overcoming isolation, and building community.”

Perhaps as we focus on hope today, we can reflect on the importance of restoration back to community. What does this mean for us today? What does this mean for our church? How might we be people of hope?

May we all be people of hope. May we all work towards the church being a place where all might give and receive gifts. May we all create a place where all belong. May we all welcome one another as we welcome the divine in our midst. And may it be so!

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Merciful God, you are always with us, sometimes in unexpected places. Help us to be open to encountering you, as we let go of the past and seek to thrive and grow in the present, open to the unknown future ahead of us. Help us to make room at our tables, to be givers and receivers of grace, that dares faith and risks hope. May we look around our tables to find the reflections of Christ.

Help us to risk radical inclusion, dare to reimagine and create communities where we share vulnerability and provide safe space for all.

Tear down the walls of our hearts, minds, words and actions that create barriers and harsh judgments. Heal us from negativity and preconceptions. Remind us always that your love colours outside the lines, always making room for us—our abilities and living with physical, cognitive, mental, sensory, emotional, or developmental challenges.

Help us to carry each other’s burdens to be awake in all of our living and loving. Help us to be sensitive to the known and unknown abilities and disabilities in our families, among our friends and strangers alike. We lift up all those who feel separated, lost or on the outside. We lift up all those who are living with physical, mental, emotional or spiritual challenges, caregivers, allies, advocates, counsellors and all serving in roles of positive support.

Guide us in paths that seek equity for all. Help us to support and mentor others and forgive us when we get in the way, or do nothing.

**Help us to grow more open minds and welcoming hearts.**

Help us to accept others and welcome them as they are, without harmful judgements or hurting thoughts and comments. When we label others as good or bad, like us or different, able or disabled, rather than accept them for who they are,   
**forgive us and confront us to experience others as you do.**

Loving God, you receive us, love us, and forgive us. We lift up before you concerns in our world *(can list some)*, concerns in our community *(list some)* and within our family of faith, as we name the people and situations on our hearts … *(allow for congregation to audibly name and a brief time for silent prayer).*

Still our spirits that we truly listen receive you. Open our hearts, to possibilities.

In the name of Jesus, the one who finds a place at the table for everyone, our teacher and model. Amen.

## We Are Sent Out in Faith to Serve

\*HYMN *(suggested choices)*

“Will You Come and Follow Me” (VU 567)

“Just As I Am” (VU 508)

“Go, Make a Diff’rence” (MV 209)

“Draw the Circle Wide” (MV 145)

“Hope Is a Star” (VU 7) *(seasonal)*

“Hope Shines as the Solitary Star” (MV 220) *(seasonal)*

COMMISSIONING AND BLESSING

Go now in peace. Go into God’s world with confidence and hope. God’s presence is with us in all that we do. Plant seeds of comfort and hope. Offer gratitude and thanksgiving. Bring messages of hope to all. Stay awake and welcome all at the table. As we have been blessed, may we bring blessings to others. Now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be ours this day and forever more. Amen.

CHORAL RESPONSE

“I’m Gonna Live So God Can Use Me” (VU 575)

POSTLUDE

**Please remember in your prayers:** Those dealing with physical, emotional, psychological, or spiritual difficulties; their care providers and allies’ and those at home, in nursing homes, and in hospital who are facing illness, bereavement, and other life challenges.