

TABs

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June 10, 2018 Pilgrim Church UCC Rev. Karen E. Gale

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Luke 17:11-21

2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

What do you think of when I say the word "Tab"?

If you are in your 50's and 60's maybe you think of pull tabs, the little metal piece that used to open beer or pop cans

If you are in your 30's or 40's perhaps you think of TAB, the first real diet pop that I remember my mom and all the other moms sipping on long afternoons in the summer

If you are a writer, you think of indentation.

If you are an internet computer user, you think of the key that lets you navigate electronic forms

But this morning, I want to talk about another meaning of Tab and that is as an acronym: TAB. An acronym that is used in the disability community.

Tab stands for "Temporarily Able Bodied."

I am a TAB. At this point in my life I have full use of my physical faculties and do not have mental impairments. But this will not always be true. I could experience a dramatic event like a car accident or stroke and lose some of these abilities. I could develop a slow acting disease or disorder like MS or lupus and lose some abilities.

Or, in the course of aging, I will certainly lose some of my physical abilities and mental acuity. It is a natural part of getting older.

At some point in my life I will no longer be a TAB. I will be disabled.

And that is true for all of us sitting here this morning.

We are all only temporarily able bodied.

And I believe that that fact terrifies us.

There is still so much shame and fear around disability in this culture that any recognition of our own similarity to those who are disabled—that ultimately we are not different but the same—pulls up fear within us and causes us to make assumptions and put up barriers between ourselves and those who are disabled.

We believe that if we only stress the differences between us we can avoid the reality that all of us are only temporarily "normal" as society has defined it.

And our society which worships youth, health to the extreme, and a very narrow definition of what constitutes a good life and a good body, pushes us even more.

Culture in Jesus' day also struggled with these issues. Folks who were disabled or had a disease or impairment were considered to be sinful. Their struggles were brought about by something they did or something their parents' did. It was shameful. And folks were either hidden out of sight or forced out as outcasts.

Jesus on several occasions spoke vehemently against these notions of sin.

But I think we still struggle with this idea ourselves. If we make disability or difference someone's fault, we falsely believe that we can avoid it and keep ourselves somehow safe.

But we are all only TABs, temporarily able bodied. We all will come to be disabled in some point in our lives, either visibly or invisibly. Ability is temporary, shifting and who defines it anyway?

In this morning's scripture Jesus is approached by ten lepers. Well, approached is not quite an accurate word. You see lepers had to stand well away from any other people other than other lepers. They had to yell to be heard—that they stood far enough away that no one else would "catch" what they had.

Sometimes they had to wear bells to warn of their approach. Sometimes they had to wear signs. All because they were different, outside the norm, and people were afraid of them, afraid of difference, afraid of becoming a leper or outcast themselves.

So Jesus is walking through the region between Samaria and Galilee. This is a borderland and a region of outcasts. Folks who were not welcome in the main parts of these regions lived in the borders, the edges. It seems that's where lepers live too, the edges, the margins.

Keeping their distance they called out saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." These folks have heard of Jesus and believe that he can be an agent in their healing.

Jesus said to them, "go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went they were made clean.

Now here is where the text can be used as a text of terror for folks with disabilities. Jesus healed the lepers. They were made clean. He made them acceptable. And if only people with disabilities would pray more, or open their lives to Jesus, they would be made whole again--clean and acceptable to the world.

It fits right in with the texts of terror that say if only gays would pray enough they would become straight and be made clean. Or if only women would act and behave like men and be made more acceptable. Or if folks of color would act like their Caucasian neighbors or immigrants act like the strict social norms, then they would be acceptable.

"Fit into the norm and we will accept you" can be the subtext of this passage.

But I do not think that is what the message for us today is. Jesus does not say to the lepers, "go I have healed you." Or "let me hear you declare your faith and I'll fix you up." No, he says, "go and show yourselves to the priests."

The priests were the ones who cast out lepers. The priests were the ones in charge of deciding who was to be outcast due to skin diseases or other violations of the priestly code. The priests were the ones setting the norms.

Jesus says go show yourself to the priests. Jesus is telling them to go and present themselves as a part of God's creation to be included, not excluded. These outcasts, these folks living on the borders, the margins, were to go to the center of power, because Jesus told them to, told them they had the right to, and demand to be let in.

The lepers are healed on their way, but the task to go comes first. Will they be accepted?

I was privileged to have dinner with and hear Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen speak last month. She is a physician, writer, and storyteller who also happens to live with Crohn's disease and the complications of not having most of her intestines.

She talked about the will to live and how hard it is for folks when they first get a cancer diagnosis or experience a disability to imagine their life moving forward. Movingly, she talked about how hard it was for her.

She told a story about the time she was recovering in the hospital after the operation to remove her intestine and put in an ileostomy, which is an apparatus that attaches to her body to collect partially digested food. This was a radical and new surgery when it was done 50 years ago.

She said she became so depressed while recovering. She couldn't stand the sight of her body. It wasn't "normal" for a young, 30-year old, never mind a professional doctor. She hated what this meant for her quality of life. She talked about how the nurses who came in to change her appliance would put on a surgical gown, gloves, a mask, a surgical apron and only then approach the bed. They did not say anything but only removed the one appliance, put on another then took off all the surgical clothes and immediately scrubbed their hands.

Remen said she felt awful. So alienated, treated like such an object and not a person. As if she was in a no man's land. She began to plan quietly to commit suicide. Then one evening a new nurse, a young woman, came in. The woman was dressed to go out to a party. And she did not put on the gown and the apron and the gloves and mask. She washed her hands before she came over. And as she began the work of changing the apparatus she started talking to Remen about regular everyday things. Talked about recently getting engaged, asked Remen about her life in New York, talked about the party she was going to and how she liked Remen's nightgown. All the while this nurse was changing the appliance with her bare hands and at one point gave Remen a kind touch on the shoulder.

It was a monumental moment. It meant everything. To this young nurse Remen was not an outcast, an outsider, someone to be afraid of. She was not beyond the pale. She was a person. A regular person. One who had a disability but that did not make her any different in this nurse's eyes than her own self.

A Remen resolved that day to live. And to thrive. And to move forward. And to write about her experiences. She has since touched the lives of thousands upon thousands of people including me.

What is it about disability that scares us? Why are we so frightened by physical or emotional or learning differences?

Why do we assume that one must marry to be "normal", that one needs to go to college to be "normal", that one needs to own a house to be "normal", that one needs to be able to walk to be "normal", that one has to be able to read to be "normal", that one has to be able to sit still to be "normal"?

In Jesus' day folks who were disabled were outside society and considered outside the realm of God. Jesus says, "no. Go to the temple. You are part of God's creation."

I am not sure much has changed. Maybe we believe those with disabilities can enter the kingdom of God, but do we believe that they can and should be able to enter our homes—do we have ramps? Do we believe that we can and should fall in love with disabled folks as our life partners, that folks with disabilities can be parents and are filled with the same love of people and life that we are? Do we accept that folks living with disabilities have the same fears and hopes and disappointments that we do?

Disabled folks are no less pure and no more pure than others. They are us we are them. For we are only TABs, temporarily able bodied people. We are one step away from mental, physically, emotional, or psychological disability.

Disability does not separate us from the kingdom of God, but it does sometimes separate us from society because of the huge fear of difference and shame.

Our text goes on to say that of the ten lepers one comes back to Jesus to thank him. The one who comes back is a Samaritan. This was to challenge Jesus' audience. Samaritans were the enemy, they were unclean, they were considered outside the realm of God. Sound familiar? Yet this one comes back to thank Jesus. A reminder to those listening to Jesus' message that his words are for all people, not just those living in Israel.

But I see a deeper meaning here. Jesus heals the lepers and they run off quickly to go get seen by the priests and reintegrated back into their lives. They return to their lives as before, we assume, and become once again among the able bodied.

The one former leper turns back and falls at Jesus' feet and thanks him. I wonder if the nine who left so quickly were so concerned about getting back into the fold that they left as soon as possible and didn't come to thank Jesus for they were running to regain their place in "normal" society.

Yet the one returns,. The one who can say to Jesus, "thank you for healing me." But do we assume the healing is physical. Or is the healing rather seeing this leper as a man, as a human being, as one worthy of compassion and love and care. Perhaps this leper returns because he is a Samaritan and he has nowhere to go. He has no temple where he will be accepted. He has no life within Israel where he will be welcomed. He is a Samaritan. As long as he was disabled he could hang out with the other outcasts but now, the others are healed and can reintegrate into the community. But he cannot.

Are the other nine just so afraid of the life they had led that they cannot understand that they still are TABs? That even if they find healing today, the next day they might be disabled, contract leprosy, have an accident, etc.

We are all TABs. Temporarily able bodied. And this makes us afraid.

Remen tells another story in her book Kitchen Table Wisdom. She writes of a patient she had, a 25 year old young man who had gotten severe frostbite on a skiing expedition and now had serious gangrene on one of his feet. The young man needed to have the foot amputated but he refused. Gradually he became sicker and sicker as the toxins from his injured foot began to flood his body. His family and friends were desperate but he would not be moved. He would keep his foot.

The situation came to a head late one evening when for the third or fourth time a group of doctors shared his most recent labs and reviewed his dire situation with him. In the midst of this discussion, he fiancée overwhelmed by the very real possibility of her beloved's death was driven beyond her endurance. Weeping she tore his engagement ring off her finger and thrust it on the swollen black toe of his dying foot. "I hate this damned foot she sobbed. If you want this foot so much why don't you marry it? You're going to have choose, you can't have us both." And there sat the bright diamond surrounded by the black and rotting tissues of the foot.

The next day the young man scheduled his surgery. Doing a final interview with him, Remen asked him what changed his mind. He said that seeing that diamond on his toe had shocked him. She had been right he had been married to his foot and he saw for the first time that he was more attached to keeping his foot than he was committed to life.

We are so afraid of disability, so afraid of having less than perfect bodies or minds that instead we cramp and distort our souls by running from difference and seeking to put any barrier we can between ourselves and those walking in the world with a disability.

We are TABs. Temporarily Able Bodied people. All of us.  
Being able bodied is not normative. It is not natural. It is not a good to be sought.  
It is a temporary state. And disability is the same. We will all be disabled at some point in our life.

At the end of today's scripture we read that Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming and he answered "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed. Nor will they say, look here it is, or there it is. For in fact, the kingdom of God is among you."

The kingdom of God is among you, you the able bodied, you the disabled, you the temporarily able bodied.

The kingdom of God is among us. Every time we stare down our fear of disability. Every time we push aside surface differences of ability to see the greater connection of humanity, every time we accept healing as not the creation of a perfect body but the creation of a society of love and acceptance and room for all, then yes, the kingdom of God is here.

Amen.