



When people see me for the first time, what do you think they see?

What did you see when you saw my picture? The valedictorian of her high school class? A *summa cum laude* graduate with a double major? A lawyer with

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11 years of experience in disability law? An active member of her United Methodist church family? A seminary student searching for God's direction in her life and vocation? Or, like most people, did you see my disability before you saw me?

For those who have no visible impairments, noticing major characteristics in others—gender, body shape and size, hair color, skin tone—is natural. It is difficult, if not impossible, to even know which element of someone's appearance we process first in our brains, because to a large degree we do it without much thought. We simply snap a photograph in our mind's eye. Too often, though, we allow what we see to be blurred or distorted by our assumptions and prejudices. We see problems rather than possibilities, limitations rather than gifts, separation rather than grace. How can we in ministry truly see someone, if we do not see the potential, the abilities, and the spirit of God?

Over the last 30 years there has been a tremendous increase in disability awareness. Education, advocacy and laws have helped our society to better understand the lives of individuals with disabilities. As barriers which have kept hidden people who are disabled continue to fall, a more visible presence is instrumental in

continuing to change attitudes. Though there is still an enormous challenge ahead, we can witness the signs of growing participation and contribution by people with disabilities in all aspects of human activity. Yet where are our faith communities in this transformation? Where are we as United Methodists?

Many of you may think that by talking to pastors and lay leaders about the issues affecting people with disabilities I am "preaching to the choir." After all, isn't it obvious that steps prevent those who use wheelchairs from entering places of worship; from taking part in services, where altars have no ramps; from spending time in fellowship and gatherings, when restrooms are not available? Isn't it common sense that listening devices, large or other alternative print materials, and sign language help spread God's word and the joy of being in relationship with God? Isn't it clear that people who emotionally or mentally feel lost and alone need to be embraced, comforted and encouraged?

Perhaps I underestimate most readers' sensitivity to the needs of those who are disabled and the extent of work being done. Or perhaps I, and those who prompted me to write these words, see disability concerns differently.

When we read the scriptures, we are faced with a radical and difficult statement of faith that invites us to a new way of seeing, one that enables us to be aware of God's gifts and graces in the lives around us. What we too often fail to notice, when we discuss issues touching people with disabilities, is the fact that God acts time and again in unusual and surprising ways, choosing the unexpected to do wonders. Would we have selected an infant child of slaves with speaking impairments to lead an entire people to freedom? Would anyone have foreseen the impact that a Pharisee with many physical trials would have in a ministry that showed God's strength

through weakness? Is it so odd to think that a person who is deaf may hear the silent pain of another or that someone who is blind may have incredible vision?

As church leaders, we try to see the many problems confronting those who are disabled, to know how limiting our facilities and programs can be, to understand the feelings of separation created by the inadequacies of our ministries, but so frequently we do not see the person. We fail to perceive God's spirit within disabled people and the many gifts they have. Yet our faith teaches hope and possibility, and with God's grace we can learn to see with new eyes. How much stronger our ministries will be, when we learn to see people and not their disabilities! □



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