

Where there is no

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The struggle to fully embrace m

Just as disabled individuals today are often pushed to the margins, so too were the blind, lame, and lepers in Jesus' time. And while the majority of people who lived in first-century Israel tried to avoid interacting with them, Jesus frequently and intentionally traveled through areas where outcast men and women were forced to live.

Remember the story about Bartimaeus in Mark 10? When Jesus passed him on the road from Jericho, His disciples were prepared to ignore the blind man, just as they'd always done, perhaps holding Bartimaeus responsible for his condition (see John 9:1-12). Jesus' followers even tried to silence him as he cried out to the Lord, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" (Mark 10:47). But that day, in healing Bartimaeus from his blindness, Jesus also freed him from the social stigma that came with it.

We may not witness that kind of physical healing in our churches today, but there's something in the story of Bartimaeus for us to consider: Jesus calls us to follow His example and serve disabled men and women as we would any other member of God's diverse family. But there are things that hold us back. One difficulty we have is that we often don't personally know any people with a disability. We don't know what they're passionate about, what their dreams are, what their sense of humor is like—we don't know their stories.

A man with dark hair, wearing a purple plaid button-down shirt, dark blue trousers, and brown shoes, stands in the center of the frame. He is looking slightly to his left. The background is a textured, abstract composition of teal and grey tones, resembling a wall with peeling paint or a stylized landscape. A long, dark shadow of the man is cast on the ground to his left.

What belongs

For now, let's consider the story of one such person. Tim Landis, a husband and father, has spent much of his adult life serving people with disabilities, both by teaching biblical literacy to those inside the church and through occupational training outside the church. His ministry is filled with the kind of compassion and empathy that comes only when one is himself disabled.

Unlike Bartimaeus on the road near Jericho, Landis was not born blind but

instead was diagnosed in childhood with a degenerative eye condition called retinitis pigmentosa. After his 18th birthday, when most of his peers were heading to college, Landis's eyesight rapidly declined. And within seven years he was legally blind.

Landis remembers feeling a wide range of emotions at that time—anger, bitterness, despair. Simple tasks that were once second nature soon became arduous and overwhelming, from household chores to squeezing

the right amount of toothpaste. He also used to enjoy walking into church on a Sunday morning—greeting familiar faces, drinking coffee, and chatting with friends in the foyer. But as a blind man, he began clinging to the edges of the room, sliding his hand and cane along the wall to avoid the chaotic foot traffic. As people crisscrossed to greet each other, the last thing Landis wanted to do was bump into someone and draw more attention to himself. His extroverted personality had not changed, but his blindness limited his ability to connect with others in social settings, including at church.

Landis's experience is common among people with blindness and disabilities of all kinds. Too often, our churches aren't set up

as welcoming places, and the members of our congregations feel ill-equipped when it comes to knowing how to respond or even speak with someone different from them in these ways.

The good news is that today a growing number of faith communities are exploring how to compassionately and effectively engage with disability. Landis's church, for instance, created a dedicated ministry team whose main goal is to cultivate a welcoming environment where anyone—regardless of physical or intellectual ability—will feel at home on walking through the doors. Inside, greeters won't just give directions to where the bathroom is; they'll guide the person all the way there. And when a mother brings her autistic child, the team will assign an older "buddy"—whom they have specifically trained—to accompany him or her to Sunday school.

While there are many practical ways a local church can help disabled members feel welcome, it's the underlying human connection that gives them the feeling that they truly belong. Here, the body Christ has a unique opportunity in its call to recognize the value of each member, where those considered the least in society's eyes can hold the greatest honor.

When a church intentionally incorporates men, women, and children with disabilities, not only does it create space for their unique contributions, but it also makes more room for the human needs and dependencies of everyone else. You see, mercy is reciprocal—when we extend it, it reaches back to us. And if the church is a merciful place where all are free to be fully themselves, then every one of us experiences the joy of being accepted—just as we are.

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