**Trinity Sunday 2014**

*Disability Accessibility Sermon*

The internationally renowned priest and author Henri Nouwen wrote over 40 books on the spiritual life. He earned a doctorate in Psychology, and a doctorandus degree in Theology. For 20 years, he taught at some of the world’s most prestigious institutions, including Yale, Harvard, and Notre Dame. Nouwen’s books have sold over 2 million copies and have been published in over 22 languages.

But there was something missing in the life of this brilliant, gifted, and spiritual man. There was something he needed that he couldn’t get from books or study.

Now, St. Paul, we know, likened the members of the Church, the Body of Christ, to members of a **human** body – hands, feet, eyes, etc. – each performing its own unique function for the good of the whole. Paul said that “the members of the body that **seem** to be *weaker* are indispensable” (1 Corinthians 12:22). As it turned out, it was *precisely* these more vulnerable members of the Body of Christ that Henri Nouwen *needed*. The last 10 years of his life, Nouwen lived in the L’Arche community with people who had severe disabilities; and *they* became his teachers. Nouwen believed that the very nature of our Trinitarian God is unity in diversity, and that such diversity means that each person is a unique and indispensable gift to the world.

Shortly before both of them died in 1996, Henri Nouwen teamed up with the late Chicago Cardinal Joseph Bernardin to produce a DVD set called *Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors*. Bernardin, an important influence on the young Richard Rohr, was known for his ‘consistent ethic of life’, which champions the poor and vulnerable from womb to tomb.

I would like to share with you a segment of *Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors. (PLAY DVD. Some segments may be found on YouTube.)*

Shortly after I arrived at Christ Church, we constructed a ramp so that people with wheelchairs or walkers could enter our building. It showed that our congregation has a caring heart! But as one denominational web site says, “Accessibility is a journey – and a ramp without an accessible restroom is not *close* to the end of the journey. How would **you** feel if you were invited to a place where there was no restroom for you to use?... How welcoming *are* we when we don’t provide accessible restrooms for people who come?... There are many unpleasant restroom stories from people who use wheelchairs…” (uua.org) Just this past year, one of our own members **had** such an unpleasant restroom story, and those who were present would like to avoid such unpleasant stories in the future.

We have all heard in the news recently stories of veterans who have served our country – many of them with disabilities – waiting months and months before they get medical treatment. This revelation caused such a furor that the head of the Veterans’ Administration resigned, the House of Representatives voted **unanimously** for corrective legislation, and the Senate voted 93-3. I don’t need to tell you that this is unheard-of agreement! The situation regarding veterans’ health care has been going on for years; why are we just now becoming aware of it? Similarly, the situation of persons with disabilities trying to worship God in inaccessible churches has been going on for years.

One in 5 Americans currently has a disability, but that number will grow as more injured veterans return home, children born with disabilities survive longer with better medical care, and huge numbers of Baby Boomers age. How will we as a church accept those who want to worship but have disabilities? Churches such as ours are exempt from the legal requirements of ADA; but we are *not* exempt from loving our neighbor as ourself. One author wrote, “If bars are more accessible than altars, if theaters are more welcoming than churches, if the managers of department stores know better how to appeal to those with disabilities than our church leadership… then we have failed to meet Christ’s challenge to us all.” (Mary Jane Owen, 1993, p. 19) What do our facilities communicate about the commitments and values we hold? Like Henri Nouwen, we are “called to view people with disabilities as integral to the well-being of our community; every member should be regarded as indispensable,” as St. Paul said. (Erik W. Carter, *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities*, Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Company, 2007, p. 18)

Most of you know that our Vestry and a Disability Awareness Committee appointed by our Vestry have been investigating how we at Christ Church can be more welcoming and inclusive of those members of Christ’s Body who live with certain physical disabilities. We have addressed issues with our sound system, so that those (like myself) with hearing disabilities can better hear. We have provided large print Prayer Books and bulletins for those who have difficulty seeing. And recently, under the wonderful leadership of Jr. Warden Bill Price, we have come up with plans to convert the storage closet now used by our Montessori Pre-school into a handicapped-accessible restroom. The plans would leave our present restroom intact, so that there would be **two** restrooms on this floor level. Providing a restroom for those with disabilities says volumes about where our heart is. Providing *two* restrooms on the main level is an act of welcome and kindness to people with or without disabilities!

Accommodations will have to be made, of course. The Montessori items currently in that closet, some of them rather large, will have to be stored in other places; and as you know, we don’t have a lot of extra room to store things. We **all** will have to make some concessions. Michelle Cook has been in on our planning discussions and is graciously and generously willing to make changes to a storage system which Montessori has used for 40 years. Some space on the West side of the kitchen can be used for her filing cabinets, and her tables can be stacked on the school’s rolling hutches which are stored on the Northeast end of the Parish Hall. We must all be diligent that kids don’t try to climb around in that area, causing possible injury. One design has a privacy wall extending into the parish hall, which would take up some space, and would require the removal of half of our current Library cabinets. (I have already consulted pb Walsh, and she is agreeable to this concession.) The possibility of mounting cabinets to the East wall of the Parish Hall has also been discussed.

Here in the nave, we want to move forward with what are known as “pew cutouts” – removing 36 inches of a few pews along the center aisle, where those in wheelchairs can sit and worship amongst the rest of the congregation and next to a loved one or friend. We have talked about some options to improve the lighting in the church, helping those who have difficulty seeing.

Due to very generous legacy bequests from the estates of Linda Tipton and Al and Helen Jeske, we have the money available for these projects. (A plug here for the crucial importance of the Legacy Society!) The carpet in the parish hall, which is unravelling and worn, will be replaced, also.

Any change is always uncomfortable at first. I can well remember the resistance from some parishioners when we built the ramp, or moved these front pews and redecorated the narthex. But as one church accessibility expert notes, “Welcoming congregations… prayerfully anticipate the needs of people in their community who have not yet come through their doors… If your congregation is not accessible, you are unlikely to encounter people with disabilities. Congregations must be intentional about breaking this cycle.” (p. 31)

I encourage you to speak to members of our Vestry and Accessibility Committee. Ask questions. Offer suggestions. Envision the possibilities. Get excited!

This Trinity Sunday, when we recognize the unity in diversity at the very heart of the Godhead, let us open our hearts, our minds, our doors and recognize the diverse and indispensable gifts that people with disabilities bring to our community. As both Cardinal Bernardin and Henri Nouwen say, in reality *each* of us has disabilities (I shared some of mine with you last month). But Fr. Nouwen goes on to say, “The question is not, ‘How can we help people with disabilities?’ – which is a good question – but a much more important question is, ‘How can we allow people with disabilities to give their spiritual gifts to us and call us to conversion, call us to wholeness, call us to love?’”

AMEN