

August 15, 2021

# Visible Invisible

Sermon by Rev. Jen Youngsun Ryu

Unitarian Universalist Church in Eugene

[You may view this service & sermon here.](#)

People living with disabilities make up the largest minority population in the world – they number 15% or about a billion people. In the US, more than one in four live with a range of life-altering conditions from mobility impairment and intellectual disabilities, to chronic pain and mental health challenges.

In an instant, every one – Every body could find themselves identifying as a person with disabilities. But until that moment of impact, those who are temporarily able, too easily separate themselves from the 1 billion people, by repeating the deception, “I am not that.”

Ableism, like all forms of oppression, privileges one group while minimizing another. And like other types of oppression, the centering of able-bodied people has been codified into laws and policies as well as practiced patterns of behavior and thought.

Disability has often been framed as lacking, sad, or even tragic. In the years between the Civil War and World War I, local statutes across the land outlawed the appearance of people who were... in the words of one of these laws, “diseased, maimed, mutilated, or in any way deformed.”  
[Chicago City Code 1881]

Laws like this targeted people living at the intersection of poverty, homelessness, and visible disability. I’m not sure about Eugene, but in

Portland, Oregon in 1881, there was an ordinance that referred to banning public “deformity and unsightliness”.

In a more recent example, 1986, the American Lutheran Church kept anyone with a disability from being ordained to ministry, writing, “...pastors are expected to be sufficiently able-bodied, ambulatory, and mobile...” to conduct their parish duties. [From Madi Snow, *Our Forgotten Ministry*]

Thankfully, this policy was overturned, and those local ordinances like the one in Portland, are gone now.

The underlying preference, though, for the able-bodied and the thought that disability is somehow wrong and undesirable – that has been harder to change.

I can’t think of a better place to do this change work – this transformational work – than THIS church, WHERE we have made vows to care for one another, to end oppression in its many forms and to fight for each other’s liberation.

We have committed to privileging bodies and voices and identities that have been historically marginalized. That doesn’t mean we do it well all the time, it means that when we fail, we don’t give up.

Biblical scholar Donald Gowan gives us a potent image of that kind of community. This is how the Israelites cared for one another. Traveling in the wilderness together, they would place the most vulnerable groups, what Gowan called the “culturally compromised,” in the center of the community, protected by a ring of their neighbors.

As we make tentative plans to safely come back together, we have a tremendous opportunity to do things differently. We can start with the empty space of the sanctuary and before putting one chair in that space. We can think first of those who have often gone last.

This morning, I want to step back and make room for the voices of people who have experienced the impact of ableism in different ways. People who know what it's like to be both visible and invisible at the same time.

First, we heard from Kitty, and now let me read the words of Natalie Maxwell, an advocate for special needs and adoptive families. She has witnessed first-hand, where the church has failed to be a Sanctuary for families and children.

She says:

“Some people look at our family through the eyes of pity. They see our children as burdens, but I wish I could get the church to understand that my children have helped me to free myself of the toxic burdens of ableism. My son has taught me that although I have always been able to walk, I was not always moving closer to God's heart. My daughter, who is nonverbal, has taught me that words without love are empty vessels, void of purpose.

“Sometimes, churches tell parents that their child cannot attend the children's program, but then ask them to leave the service when their child is too loud or disruptive.

“We trust you by putting our children in Sunday School. Then, after numerous times of finding them sitting at a table by themselves while all the other kids sat together, we get the message that inclusion isn't something that matters to you.”

THE NEXT PERSON I'd like you to meet, Mia Mingus. I wish I could share all of her words with you, but they'll have to wait for another sermon. For now, I'll share just a few of Mia's sentences:

“Disability is not monolithic. Ableism plays out very differently for wheelchair users, deaf people or people who have mental, psychiatric and cognitive disabilities. None of these are mutually exclusive, and are all complicated

by race, class, gender, immigration, sexuality, welfare status, incarceration, age and geographic location.

“As a queer, disabled woman of color, disability justice feels like a political home for me, a place where I can engage in conversations about disability and race and gender and queerness and capitalism and more.

“I imagine a world where our organizing and activism is less segregated, where our movements and communities are accessible and don’t participate in the isolation of disabled communities. I imagine places where we fight for whole and connected people, families and communities.”

## UUCE Accessibility Task Force

UUCE’s Accessibility Task Force is helping our church to be just the kind of place Mia imagines. Before I even met the members of that task force, I assumed the Accessibility group was all about improving physical access to our church building.

But after just a few minutes with them, I heard a wider perspective for an activism that is interconnected, recognizing that people with disabilities come from all parts of the human family and therefore claim multiple identities. Those intersections hold both challenges and incredible opportunities for coalescing power.

Here is David Oaks, co-chair of the Accessibility Task Force to describe that vision in his own words:

<https://youtu.be/8X1-EPH2r-k>

We need a united voice, because Access and Inclusion are just the beginning – they are entry points into a much needed interconnected approach to justice-making.

David mentioned climate change and how it disproportionately impacts People with disabilities.

As more places on this Earth become uninhabitable, who gets to leave? Who has no other choice but to stay?

Prisca Mathew is the final person we'll meet today. Prisca lives along the coast of Nigeria where methane gas from a petrochemical plant flares less than 30 feet from her home. No one chooses to live here. She and her neighbors have nowhere else to go and no way to get there. In areas devastated by environmental and climate catastrophe, those left behind are mostly the elderly, and people with disabilities.

Here's how Prisca describes her home. She says:

"The rain comes as black liquid... We don't drink the water any longer, and we don't use it for bathing because it causes skin irritation... Everyone's eyes burn from the fumes, and some have gone blind... The conditions worsen every year."

There is Hope, though, as aid agencies, governments and scientists are finally addressing the links between disability, environmental degradation, and poverty. People are beginning to realize the distinct threats at those intersections.

<https://www.fordfoundation.org/just-matters/just-matters/posts/the-unknown-ally-in-the-fight-for-environmental-justice/>

There's so much more to learn and share. Today was just one of many conversations we'll be having this year as we consider becoming certified by the Unitarian Universalist Association as a church committed to access, inclusion, and justice.

Please make plans to continue this dialogue 2 weeks from today... Sunday, August 29th at 5 pm. The Accessibility Task Force is hosting an online webinar, featuring two special guests from the UUA: One is president of the UU Mental Health Network and the other administers the UU Accessibility and Inclusion Ministry. I hope to see you there.

Until then,

May we have enough faith in tomorrow to do the wise planting  
Required of us today.

May we be bold in bringing to light  
the brilliant dreams of  
human kinship and justice.

So may it be. Amen,

Warmly,

Rev. Jen

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[www.uueugene.org](http://www.uueugene.org)