

Aldersgate United Methodist Church

Sunday, September 28, 2014

Good Morning everybody,

Thank you for inviting me. I am honored to be here to speak with you today. I also thank the Congregation for your interest in this issue, something that is very personal and close to my heart, and also to Rev. Roger Morimoto, who I have come to know from Junior. High Camp days.

My name is Austin Tam, and, I speak to you, coming from an Asian-American who happens to have lived the disability. I am going to reflect on the scripture passage of Corinthians 12:12-31 and how it has spoken to me in my own faith journey that I have been on, and a path that I continue to be led on.

When stumbling upon Corinthians 12:12-31 there were particular verses that really struck a chord with me, that which I saw my own story being played out in the scripture, not only that, but also seeing my own story, written all over the scripture.

Chapter 12: verse 12:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.

Even as I read this verse, it wasn't always easy to believe this, or to accept. God chose each and every one us, in a diverse way, to be who we are, and that there is no accident in who God has created us to be in this world. It was a hard pill to swallow.

It presented a huge challenge for me, and at many different points in my life, one that seemed too difficult to absorb, and take in, because at times, I didn't always feel that way, even as a child, growing up, and attending school, and I

felt at times in my life, even in the beginning, and at times presently speaking, the fact that those around me, don't even look like me, where are all the Asian people? I would quietly ask myself. Am I the only one?" Is something wrong with me?" But as I started my own process, I came to a realization that, O never mind, it's a cultural stigma, remember it is something we don't talk about that, it is better to just lay low, and be silent, not to bring any attention, embarrassment to the family, as long as we be silent, and keep it to ourselves, all is good, right? What will my friends think of me? Will my friends look at me any differently, You just don't understand what I am going through. The fear of people not understanding, especially those close to me, that I cared deeply about. I felt invisible.

Although, we are of one body, and Corinthians clearly states it here, and though these words may seem to offer comfort, it was still a process, and not easy to accept in the beginning or to even weather through.

It was something that I didn't obvious feel like I was a part of one body. I felt like I had to compare myself to others, "I want to be like other people," in order to put aside the cruel reality that I had a disability, I didn't want to be seen as "different," especially being in grade school, when I witnessed a lot of people, mostly those who were disabled being bullied, just because of who they are.

Even though, my memories of my own childhood, are very cloudy, the things that I remember most is the beginning process of my diagnosis in Berkeley at Harrick Hospital, as my mother tried to advocate on my behalf to make sure I got a proper diagnosis, and I remember my mother telling me, as I witnessed another individual being carried away by doctors, and I was crying, I guess you can say I was showing some empathy for him in that moment. Especially when In school, when Psychologists and Speech therapists would come and pick me up. From then hen on, I knew there was something different about me, but at the time, I was too young to really comprehend into words, as I didn't see other classmates of mine, having to be picked up by other specialists.

Even through the process, of actual coming to terms with my disability, there were a lot of mixed-emotions, the feeling of brokenness, and clearly feeling

very invisible in the making, and feeling a great sense of disconnection with others.

As months, and days became years, it all started to pretty much continue to build up inside of me, as I graduated from High School, and entered the real world, and where I was old enough to make my own life-decisions, to the point that I was starting to lose more self-esteem for myself, and those questions that started to build up in my mind as to, “what would life be like without a disability?” Why did God make me this way?” That was seen as a breaking point that saw me through the beginning of my coming to terms, it was as if a huge burden, that for so long I was carrying was beginning to slowly be lifted off of me.

I soon realized that God had a plan for me, and that God has plans for people, sometimes not in the way people would prefer or might expect it, or would have planned, but in truth, it was God’s plan to make me into the person that he intended me to be all along from the time of my birth, even despite the flaws, limitations, and what not. Nevertheless, I was still a child of God.

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Verse 13: For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body- Jews or Greeks, slaves or free- and were all made to drink of one spirit.

Verse 14: Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many.

What this verse tells us, is this doesn’t just consist of the few and able-bodies, but rather it talks about but everybody being included in our community of faith especially those who are invisible, and are on the outside that we may not be made aware of.

What comes to mind, when reading this is clearly, God works in mysterious of ways, and although we are all different, in our diversity, and not one unlike, whether they lie in our gifts, thinking, cognitive processes, our own mobility, physical, mental, emotional wise, we all consist of one body, and are still

precious in God's sight. And In the end, I came to the realization, despite all this limitation, of my ADHD and Cognitive disorder had on my life, that I was a child of God, and that he made me who I am.

As I have seen it, and speaking to the contrary, though God clearly states, that we are all part of God's kingdom, despite what we may bring with us along the journey, we have to put it in mind, there are those in communities, that voices are not heard, and therefore suffer in silence. For example in the Asian-American community, the cultural stigma still is at a great high, because of cultural expectations

But that started to come to an end, as I began to come to terms with my disability, and as we started to connect the dots of why I was feeling so bad about myself, and the lack of self-esteem for myself, it began to be know, that I had a disability, and to name my disability after all those years of being in self-denial, trying to compensate for what I could not do. Right before I turned the milestone of 30 years of age, it was time for me to finally own up to my disability, and after all those years, of guessing what my diagnosis was, it was finally revealed that I had ADHD and cognitive disorder, which in a sense gave a sort of closure, and feeling of liberation from not knowing, to now knowing,

But as I started to accept myself, and to embrace myself, raising awareness and educate myself of who I was, and that I was still a member of the body, did I feel that people started to, in an intentional way, treated me as if I was of one body.

As God talks about, its easy to speak it, but to walk the walk, and talk the talk is another. It is the fear of the unknown, and honestly discomfort, allows people to not include others into the body of Christ, and just to use people with disabilities and mental health challenges, many might be annoyed, irritated, grossed out, because somebody is blurting out words, making noises, but in the end, what it all broils down to, is education.

It would finally take me to finally understanding my diagnosis of ADHD & Cognitive Disorder, and what it meant, to study about it, not just for my own

personal sake, in educating my own-self, in educating my own self, to know what I can and cannot do, but most importantly for those around me.

In verse 15 and 16;

15: If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body.

16: And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body.

Reading verses 15 and 16 really reiterates that just because individuals are differently-able, and have different challenges, does not mean in any way that they are less of a human being or any lesser of a Child of God, it is that some process differently, and there is still much to raise awareness and address regarding that.

Verse 17;

If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?

There are those in the community, without certain functions, not choosing of their own as it talks about without a certain body function, a person is not a child of god, that’s when differently –able members come into discussion.

18: But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.

This verse made me think of the the Asian-American community, for example, they are not made whole, when they have to go and be hidden away from their own respective communities, because of a “cultural taboo,” rather than be

included and be part of society, where they can finally be empowered, to tell their story, and no longer have to live and suffer in silence.

That is when my life journey comes in. ¹⁸But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. This also really spoke out at me,

Even though I may have different ways to process, and my own limitations, in the end, I had to come to a sense of peace, a place of peace and purpose, and a trust in God, that he made me who I am, and it was not accident, and God has worked miracles in my life, things I could not even see down the road, and those unique gifts of compassion, and social justice, as my faith calls me to walk with those without a voice, who continue to live injustice, and see injustice in their lives.

That's what is so beautiful about humanity, that we are different, and in fact, not one of us is alike. The way we process, the way we might interact with each other, the way we are seen by others, and how they define us.

A Community is not complete community, unless all are included, into the body of Christ, wherever they come from, whoever they are, or the flaws, burden, that they come with.

My deeper sense of faith, you can say has helped me come to terms with my disability, and rather than focus too much on the past, I try to steer away from that, and just focus on the NOW, and I've come to really understand what it means to be a child of God.

My next step was to work on raising awareness in my community, which started with Disability Awareness Sunday, that we held at Buena Vista United Methodist Church for 3 years, in which I was invited to speak about my own testimony, as a person with a disability and relate it to my own faith journey, and had a panel discussion that included guest speakers, who would reflect about their own personal journeys.

At the beginning of 2014, I was encouraged in prayer and discernment, to be a Disability Advocate for the launching of our new Asian Pacific Disability Awareness Project. The Asian Pacific Islander Disability Awareness Project

came up, as a way of providing resources to those who are in the disability and mental health communities, and a way to outreach to others in the community, by having our monthly community gatherings, and as a way to help empower individuals and their families. The project was formed to provide support, education, and advocacy for the API Disability Community. The project will provide resources to individuals & families and give voice and empowerment to the API Disability Community, which in my opinion is greatly in need of with the cultural stigma and taboo being placed. As my new role as Staff Person for the Disability Advocate for the Asian Pacific Islander Disability Awareness Project is to provide support for families and individuals living with a disability. I will be working with the Resource Committee to do outreach & planning for the project. I will also coordinate our API Disability Resource Network.

26: If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

What comes to my mind, when reading this is, My family, Pastor Michael Yoshii, friends, and the BVUMC community have played an enormous role in this efforts regarding the process of having been diagnosed, and still showing me love, and embracing me, especially through the darkest periods, and still finding a way to show compassion, and to let me know that they just want the best for me, and believed in me, and most of all God, who helped to guide me every step of the way.

Lastly, I want to invite you all to take part in our Asian Pacific Islander Disability Awareness Project.