

“Shalom”

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1 Corinthians 2:11-13

¹¹ For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. ¹² Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. ¹³ And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual.

1 John 3:18-20; 4:16b, 18-21

¹⁸ Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. ¹⁹ And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before God ²⁰ whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts and knows everything. ... God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. ¹⁸ There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹ We love because God first loved us. ²⁰ Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their sisters or brothers, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. ²¹ The commandment we have from God is this: those who love God must love their sisters or brothers also.

Even as a child, Mandy knew she was different. She couldn't do anything right. She was always getting into trouble. She has had many jobs, but most last only months. Mandy is a bright woman, compassionate and caring. But that's not always enough when you live with mental illness. Some medications have helped her, but she has often self-medicated. We should not be quick to judge. Without a regular job, insurance – and medical care – is rare.

A few years ago, Mandy shared some of her grief with me. “I know I'm a mess. But all I want is to be accepted. Mom and Dad never accepted me. I mean, I'm their child, for crying out loud. That's their job, isn't it? She never will! We're so similar but she won't see it. Now he's died and he'll never accept me either. Why is this so hard for them?”

Mandy has put on a tough shell for most of her life, but the pain is always present.

May is Mental Health Awareness Month. April was Autism Awareness Month. Today we conclude our sermon series about some of the harder things in life by focusing on acceptance.

At a clergy gathering last winter, we talked about the difference between tolerance and acceptance. Many of us pride ourselves on our tolerance. Yet tolerance has an edge. It endures something distasteful with forbearance.

Acceptance conveys welcome. It allows the other (whoever that is) to feel that they are good enough, just as they are. Tolerance is self-serving while acceptance is an other-serving action, one that God calls us to practice. We need to work on acceptance rather than practicing tolerance.

Jill never realized she was different. It didn't show like it does when someone's accompanied by a guide dog or has trouble walking or speaking.

Jill grew up doing all the things children did. She didn't have many friends but as she grew older she chalked it up to being a quiet person. After graduating from college, she got a job and started a family. Jill was a fairly well adjusted person, so she expected to have a good life.

But there were snags along the way that made it harder than she expected. Little things, like laughing at the story only to find the others around her looking at her curiously. Or having to look at the floor or out the window when she talked about something close to her. Big things, too, like missing all the nonverbal stuff in any conversation. And without ever meaning to, regularly offend people with her words. She misinterpreted friendliness for true friendship or romantic interest, and, because of this, she was, as one person put it, the frequent victim of other people's social weaknesses.¹

Jill followed rules, but by studying other people, she learned that there are many shades of gray. Only newspapers or Dalmatians are black and white.

She came to accept that she was odd. She acted as if it didn't matter. But her friendless state was her secret shame. Jill longed for close connections, but as she looked back, even in school, her closest friends always had other best friends.

God makes us for relationship. We are hard-wired to be in connection with not only the Holy, but with each other and our world. We deny this at our own peril.

Jill's story is my story. It was simply easier to tell it in the third person. Three years ago, I found out that I have Asperger's Syndrome. I share this today partly because it's a good illustration for today's topic of acceptance. But also, I've been with you in Wausau for ten months. I waited to give us a chance to get to know and care for each other first. Yet I need you to know about this part of me, especially for those times when I'm not at my best.

Asperger's, like many things, is a two-edged sword. Aspies tend not to get ahead in the world; we are not motivated to compete. We're sincere and genuine, loyal. We're trusting to the point of seeming naïve. We are direct, speaking our minds regardless of the context – which gets us into trouble. Since lying is almost impossible for us, you can trust what we say. Some people mistakenly believe we don't care. But we do, deeply. We just are not good at expressing it.

All of this makes us excellent friends once you get past our rough edges, especially when life dumps on you. While other friends stay away when they're uncomfortable and don't know what to say, your Aspie friends are used to feeling awkward. We're used to showing up and hoping that's enough – which is precisely what a person needs when the bottom falls out of our world.

There's no cure for Asperger's any more than there's a cure to being tall. But there doesn't need to be one. Asperger's and Autism describe different ways that some of us connect with the world. People on the spectrum have gifts to offer and ways that can help you see the world more fully than you might without us. If you accept us and include us.

I don't share my story so that you'll feel sorry for me. I'm leading a great life. But I hate hurting or offending people. I put so much mental energy into avoiding this that I wear myself out. That deep exhaustion is actually one of the traits that convinced me of my diagnosis. Attempting to fit in, trying to understand social situations and respond appropriately is exhausting. Without abundant alone-time and sleep, Aspies can become shells of ourselves.

I tell you this story to remind us that we need to accept people whether they're like us or different, whether we know what's going on with them or not. We need to do this for three reasons: It's good for us. It's good for them. And God expects it of us.

Acceptance is God's way. Acceptance is only steps away from love. And love is what we're called to practice – on our neighbors as ourselves. Tolerance won't get us there. When we tolerate people, we resist contemplating others' ways. When we accept people, our world grows larger as we draw these neighbors closer. We grow and so does our faith.

It's unfortunate but many of us have criteria for which people we will accept. Some criteria are a little odd, like when I used to feel uncomfortable around bald men. Or when people used to act like differences would rub off onto us, as if that would be a bad thing.

Who challenges your notions about who to accept and welcome? What groups do you exclude from your circles? If someone with a spacy stare and a constant mumbled conversation to an invisible partner was sitting on the step outside the church next Sunday, would you invite them in or go to a different entrance?

Mental illness and developmental disorder are different things. Yet everything is connected. When someone groans about a sore back or neck, saying the problem is in their knee or shoulder, I jokingly respond that everything's connected. It is, more fully than we usually believe.

Mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual health are inseparable. Some cultures, some religions get this. We need to learn it.

We all crave wholeness yet wholeness is hard to come by when we don't feel accepted as we are.

Before I end... a word about today's sermon title. If you have ever received email from me you may have noticed the definition at the bottom of the message. "Most understand shalom' to mean 'peace.' It's used as both a greeting and a farewell, but it's more than that. Shalom is a complete peace – a feeling of contentment, completeness, wholeness, wellbeing & harmony."

True biblical shalom speaks of fullness, a type of wholeness that encourages you to give back. Throughout Jewish literature, the word is bound up with the notion of perfection.

We find true shalom in God. God graces us with such a gift, and we are expected to share it. So, now, think back on those people who came to mind when I asked who you don't include in your circles. Those are the ones you need to practice such a shalom on. That is your homework.

Live out the acceptance and love God offers you, in every one of your exchanges this week. Text and tweet. Gossip and gratitude prayers. Accept. And love. And watch what happens.

ⁱ“Strengths & Advantages of being an Aspie!” theotherside.wordpress.com/autism-aspergers/good-qualities-or-aspie-advantages/ (Last viewed on April 18, 2018).