

Sermon: “Divine Diversity” - Trinity Sunday, May 26, 2024 - John 3:1-17
Rideau Park United Church Ottawa ON Rev. Steve Clifton

There was once a man who had been shipwrecked, all alone on a desert island. There he lived a solitary existence for ten years before finally being rescued by a passing ship.

Before leaving the island, one of the rescuers asked if they could see where the man had lived during his decade on the island, and so he brought the small group to a clearing where there were three buildings.

Pointing to the first he said, "This was my home; I built it when I first was stranded here all those years ago." "What about the building beside it?" asked the rescuers. "That is my church, that is where I would worship every week," he replied. "

And that building beside that?" "Don't bring that up, I don't want to talk about it" replied the man in an agitated tone. When his rescuers insisted, he confessed "That is my old church where I used to worship – but I left it...terrible place."

Often when people do not come to church, or when they move on from a church, those left behind are left to wonder what they did wrong or what they might have done differently. Sometimes people move on, and it has nothing to do with what we did or failed to do...

But as earnest people, it is a good thing to consider if we sometimes have inadvertently created barriers that make it hard for others to come and join with us.

A few weeks ago, our confirmation class members began to talk about *neuro diversity* and the church. Our young people have language and facility that older generations, people like me, may lack; they have awareness, sensitivity and insight to share... about how things like social anxiety, Autism, ADHD, Learning disabilities, Sensory sensitivities, and more... innate characteristics that all can be put under the umbrella of what may be called “neuro diversity” ...can make involvement in church more difficult.

And their discussion led me to do some exploring which leads to what I share today. I am by no means an expert on neurodiversity - just lifting something up this morning.

Neurodiversity is an umbrella term that we might use to describe an innate difference in brain design that sets the neurodiverse apart from the *neurotypical* majority.

Neurodiverse people are different, but they are but not less.

Neurodiversity is found in 15 to 20 percent of people. It's a significant minority group. Maybe one in 30 people identifies as autistic- a subset of neurodiversity.

It might be helpful just to be aware of the neurodiverse here in our community and aware of those who might like to be with us but may find it hard...

The Diocese of Oxford in the Church of England has written a resource for churches to help them bridge the gap between congregations and those who identify as neurodiverse = specifically autistic people.

Authored by Anne Memmott, an autistic woman and the mother of an autistic child, the guide reminds us of some of the differences that exist between autistic people and the neuro typical: Everyone is an individual but there are broad generalizations that may be helpful.

People who identify as autistic may use of eye contact differently, may employ different body movement and body language, may use of facial expressions differently from the neurotypical; they may have a different way of using spoken and written language...

Autistic people have brains designed to take in a vast amount of detail. If overloaded by stimulus, autistic people cannot 'see' other people very well, so may miss body language and eye contact meanings. They are taking in and processing so much information, social cues may be missed.

Autistic people, writes Memmott, like to meet somewhere quiet and out of blinding light; fluorescent lighting is particularly challenging; too much stimulus- visual, tactile, auditory is to be avoided. They may prefer known situations and known routines; tend to like smaller gatherings, quieter music; prefer clear explanations and direct, plain language.

Memmott identifies some of the special gifts that Autistic people bring to community: She writes "Research shows that autistic people are more likely to 'play fairly' with others and to be more honest. Most are very dedicated, and passionate about specialist topics. Many are able to do vast workloads in specialist areas of work. Recent research shows that autistic people tend to give more to charities and are more passionate about social justice."

Memmott also mentions that much of what may be inclusive of neurodiversity are things that help nearly everyone else too. Easy instructions. Clear signage and directions. Environments where you can think, and pray, and enjoy, rather than places of overwhelming busyness and stimulus. Friendly, welcoming leaders who want to make things work for everyone A church that is a safe and respectful place for all.

The Diocese of Oxford Guide on Neurodivergent Welcoming even tells of what appears to be Jesus autistic friend, found in the Gospel narrative, a friend that Jesus approached with sensitivity by Jesus.

In the Gospel of John today, we find Nicodemus a Jewish leader, a specialist in laws for the Jewish community, who would have had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the religious texts of his tradition.

He approaches Jesus in the quiet and dark, away from the deafening crowd.

Nicodemus misunderstands metaphor, and Jesus re-explains it to him using plain language. Later in Johns Gospel, Nicodemus uses a rule book to try to save Jesus, and, at the tomb, at Easter there's Nicodemus staggering up the hill with a simply extraordinary amount of herbs and spices. Normally people would bring a small quantity. All of this reads, says Memmott, as entirely normal autistic behaviour, and there is Nicodemus at the tomb, as autistic as ever, faithful and very much part of Jesus's life.

Today is Trinity Sunday- a Sunday to reflect on the diversity that dwells in the very nature of God. Father Son and Holy Spirit – and we can use different language to speak of the Triune nature of God:

Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer

God, Christ, and Spirit

Mother, Friend, and Comforter

Source of Life, Living Word, and Bond of Love,

One yet three. Three in One.

The Christian idea of Trinity reminds us that at the heart of the universe is a relationship, a loving unity that is a diversity. God's essence is unity without uniformity and difference without division.

The wild diversity of humanity is part of how we all individually and collectively bear the image of God. Neuro diverse and neurotypical, we all are made in Gods image.

May we find room, place and welcome for all of Gods children.

In the name of Holy One, Creator, Saviour and Friend. Amen