

Disability Awareness Sunday Sermon  
A Sermon Preached by Kelly Porten  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
April 19, 2020

**Psalm 139**

Hi everyone! In case you're not familiar with who I am, my name is Kelly Porten, the lady with the loud singing voice who usually sits in the back row of the 9am service. I'm here this Sunday to talk about disability awareness/acceptance across two lenses. The first- I am a music therapist who works with folks who have developmental disabilities. Specifically I use music to work on communication, academic, motor, emotional, and social skills. For example, I might write a song with someone to help them express their feelings and remember coping skills. Someone might use guitar playing and strumming to work on motor skills. Singing is a great way to work on communication. With my job, I have the great privilege to work with all sorts of people. Folks with a variety of backgrounds, interests, strengths, and needs. It always keeps me on my toes! No matter what diagnoses someone has, I love to learn about what they are interested in, and use those interests to walk along with them as they reach their own goals.

Recently, John Knox has been so gracious and exemplified the "open, caring community" that we stand for. They have opened their doors to allow my colleagues to conduct music therapy sessions at the church. So, if you are at the church in the middle of the week and you hear guitar playing, singing, drumming, or other musical happenings, that is what is going on! Just like when we are in a church service, you might see all sorts of people walk through our doors. Some who use a wheelchair. Some that use a tablet to speak. Others who need to flap or jump or spin to get the sensory input their body needs. Maybe folks that will reach out to you, but don't always know what the "socially acceptable" things are to say. Those people are beautiful. I would encourage you to approach them and speak with them in the same way you would talk to any other person. Just because they may look different doesn't mean they don't want the same love and support as anyone else.

The second reason I wanted to talk with y'all today was to share a bit of my own story. For those of you who aren't friends with me on Facebook, last year, I had some testing done, and I was diagnosed with autism. Some of you might be saying: "Kelly?! Really? She doesn't look autistic!" Well, autism looks different for every person. There's a phrase that says: "When you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism." When we say autism "spectrum", it's not a linear scale between those who need more support or those who require less. Instead, think of it as a list of different characteristics, like sensory needs, communication, social interaction, repetitive behaviors, motor issues, etc. on a sound board, each with one of those gliding switches, marking the level of difficulty the person has with each skill. For example,

someone can have high sensory needs, but has ok communication skills, but difficulty socializing. For me, I have auditory sensitivity and need pressure and movement to decrease my anxiety. I have difficulty with small talk and initiating conversation with others and finding my words. My attention can be super focused on something I enjoy a lot, like reading Harry Potter or watching The Avengers. I'll live in those imaginary worlds for days. But then when it comes time to do chores or do session plans for work, I can get easily distracted and "stuck", avoiding them until the pressure to do them builds and I have a meltdown. You might not see all of these signs because I put up a "mask" to try to fit in. I say these things not to ask for pity but to note that not everything might be as it seems.

So, jumping into our reading today: we read through Psalm 139. I'm always a fan of Psalms. Since they are collection of poems, hymns, and prayers, the musician in me loves them. Psalm 139 is actually written to a director of music! Verse 13 and 14 states "For you created my inmost being, you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well." So, God knows us and God created us. Therefore, the differences of those in the disability community aren't wrong, or need to be made "normal." Yes, there are things one can do to improve themselves or goals to make to better themselves, just like the typical population. The goals just might be a little different. For example, if someone with autism needs to flap or spin to help them stay calm and feel their body in space, what's wrong with that? That's how God created them. Instead of forcing them to sit still with calm hands and a calm body, what if we gave them more opportunities to move their body and taught proper coping mechanisms? That might just help them to navigate this world better, more than trying to fit in a box. There are some autistic friends of mine who can't maintain eye contact while having a conversation with someone else. The only way they can process the conversation is if they look away, as people's gazes are too intense and overwhelming. To someone who finds eye contact natural, that can seem really odd! You might think that the person isn't paying attention to you, but in fact, they are listening intently. God created them this way. Instead of forcing them to engage in eye contact, why can't we just provide accommodations? For example, when I find eye contact too intense, I will look at someone's forehead. It makes things a bit easier.

Verse 23 and 24 states: "Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." God can lead us to a place of understanding and acceptance of others. When we see someone who looks different from us, we might feel anxious and uncomfortable. We might think or say negative things that are hurtful towards others. Things like: "That person's weird. Not normal. Why is he talking about train schedules and the finer details of Game of Thrones? We don't talk about those things in church." I think God wants to lead us to a place of knowledge, understanding, and acceptance. I won't

pretend that I have all of the answers to solve the centuries' long problem of discrimination and prejudice, but perhaps we can start with a few things. Maybe we can follow God's path through learning from others and checking any irrational thoughts. Perhaps we can start really listening to each other even when we have differences in opinion. It doesn't mean that we still won't struggle. I still struggle all the time. But it's something we can keep in mind as we are in God's community together.

The disability community tends to be very isolated. Due to medical concerns, low immunity, or lack of access to transportation, many people are stuck inside their homes most of the time. Often, I have found at work, that one of the main things my clients are searching for is connection, just someone to talk to and who can lend an ear. Does this sound familiar to our current situation? Right now, with the coronavirus, we're trying to find ways to still connect with each other while we are all stuck in our homes. We just want someone to connect to, with our Zoom coffee dates and friend game nights over FaceTime. So when the virus has been contained, and the stay at home orders have been lifted, I have a challenge for you: keep that connection going. Do you know someone who is homebound? Someone nearby from the church? Or maybe a family member or friend? Go visit them! Go talk to them! It may feel uncomfortable and weird, but it will be so powerful to do so. I'm also saying this for myself, as I have a really hard time with this. Socializing outside of my job can be a challenge for me, it brings anxiety. But the benefits of connecting with others will outweigh the negatives. That's a part of what makes us an open, caring, community.

To end today, I would like to leave you with a quote by Daniel Share-Storm, an autistic self-advocate, who explains so well why acceptance of the disability is so important: "Autism awareness is fantastic, but what we're waiting for right now is understanding and acceptance. Understanding will dismantle preconceived stereotypes and acceptance will acknowledge validity of the way we experience the world. So don't get me wrong, I'm super grateful for the rise in awareness. The puzzle pieces, the blue lights, the 'I love someone with Autism t-shirts'. That's awesome. But, that's not enough. You want to know why? Awareness doesn't necessarily translate to understanding and acceptance in our community."

God has searched us, God knows us. His works are wonderful. Let's go celebrate and love what He has made. Amen.