

## Honoring the Image of God by Dawn Clark

*“I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made.....” Psalm 139:14*

Alyce and Tony approached the stroller of a young mother. Tony peered into the stroller and looked at the baby and exclaimed. “Mom, come look! Isn’t this the cutest baby! Smile, baby!” Alyce smiled and made cooing noises at the baby as well. Then she looked up at the mother and saw tears streaming down her face. The mother said through her tears, “This has never happened before. All everyone ever sees is his disability.” The baby did indeed have a significant disability, but Tony, who has Down Syndrome, only saw a beautiful baby.

Every person is made in the image of God, which makes each of us beautiful. Even a profound disability cannot diminish the image of God when we have eyes to see it. None of us has value in God’s sight for what we can accomplish or how well we perform. God loves us because he has made us and we are marked with his image. When we see each individual as made in the image of God, we see the things that are true, noble, pure, lovely and admirable in the person and focus on those things first. We point first to the things that are excellent and praiseworthy in a person.

Yet people with disabilities are often defined by their diagnosis and limitations rather than the unique gifts and talents that God has given them. People see their brokenness rather than what is praiseworthy.... what a person cannot do rather than what they can do....what is marred rather than what is beautiful. This results in people being stigmatized and provided with few opportunities to become all that God intends them to be.

When we see people made in the image of God FIRST, then our posture and attitudes will be different. We will see each person's unique gifts and perspectives whether or not they live with disabilities. We won’t make assumptions about people, prejudge people, or stereotype people. We will make appropriate adaptations so that each person can fully participate in the life of the church.

Luke 6:45 says, “For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.” When our hearts are full of ignorance, pity and perhaps even prejudice toward people with disabilities, our words and actions will tend to demean them and exclude them from our lives. At best we may thank God that He didn’t make us like them. However, when our hearts see God’s plans and purposes for all people irregardless of their abilities or disabilities, we will be respectful and honor the image of God in them. We won’t use person first language because it is politically correct. We will use person first and respectful language because it reflects the attitudes and beliefs of our heart.

Honoring the image of God in people with disabilities means that:

1. We believe God has good plans for people and a purpose for their lives irrespective of their abilities or disabilities.
2. We emphasize the unique gifts and talents that a person has rather than the disabilities, diagnosis or limitations.
3. We use person first and respectful language when addressing people with disabilities. (See Sidebar.)
4. We talk directly to people with disabilities not the person next to them and allow people with disabilities extra time to move and talk.
5. We ask people with disabilities if they need help rather than always assuming that they do.
6. We educate our congregations in ways to honor the image of God in people with disabilities.
7. We look to the interests and well-being of people with disabilities in our church and society.

As Christians, let’s honor the image of God in everyone we meet, regardless of their ability.

# Respectful Language and Action Examples

(Adapted from: Guidelines for Reporting and Writing about People with Disabilities, Research and Training Center, University of Kansas, 2008)

Respectful Language/Actions	Less Respectful Language/Actions
Person with a disability	Disabled Person
Person without disabilities	Normal, Able-bodied, whole
Person with an intellectual disability	Retarded
Person with Down syndrome	Downs person
Child with special needs	Handicapped Child
Person with hearing impairment	Deaf and Dumb
Person with communication disorder	Mute; dumb
A person with autism	He/She is autistic
A polio/burn survivor	Polio/burn victim
Person with mental illness/psychiatric disability	Schizo; psycho; crazy
Person with dementia	Demented; Lost their mind
Accessible bathroom, parking space, changing room	Handicapped bathroom, parking space, changing room.
Person who uses a wheelchair; a wheelchair user	Person confined to a wheelchair
Speaking first to the person with a disability	Speaking first to the caregiver instead of the person with a disability
Asking the person with disabilities if they need help	Doing something for a person with a disability that they could do for themselves.
Moving to eye-level when speaking to a person using a wheelchair.	Towering over a person who uses a wheelchair when speaking to them.
Listening sensitively without judgment to the struggles of a person with special needs	Minimizing the struggles or making people with disabilities into overachievers with comments like, "I couldn't do what you do. You must be so special."

References: The Holy Bible (NIV): Psalm 139; Philippians 4; Luke 6

© 2016 by Dawn Clark. All rights reserved.

Distributed by MNA Special Needs Ministries