

Christ and Autism  
Mark 1:21-28, 40-45

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Giving a sermon is not an activity I could have foreseen 5 years ago. 5 years ago I was a very angry 17-year-old atheist, then I became agnostic, now I shift between being an agnostic who probably doesn't believe in anything to being some kind of Unitarian on my good days. My shift in faith from definitely not believing in anything to being open to the existence of more had a lot to do with connecting with people of faith whose theologies are without the limitations the ones I had experienced as a child.

The differences between the theology of the progressive Christians I've met during and after college and the doctrine of the Christians that I was exposed to before college boils down to radical acceptance and lack of fear. The Christians of my childhood in rural Oregon still think that the gays are going to hell, as are people of any other faith, often including other Christians who doubt their specific beliefs or practices. There isn't room for me to exist authentically in the faith communities of my childhood as the queer doubter that I am but I feel very comfortable moving between doubting and seeking and back again in the UCC.

It doesn't feel like anyone here is afraid that if they make mistakes God will smite them and off to hell they'll go. There is little emphasis here on the rules of Leviticus about what you can do to be worthy of God's wrath. The Christians of my youth only focused on the rules that could justify their oppression of others anyways, using the idea of sin and unclean spirits to blame people for their struggles in life or even just to blame people for being different than them, because for them, difference was bad.

From my current theological perspective, and I think most of you would agree, being Christlike requires welcoming everyone at God's table, and if they don't want to sit down, feeding them where they are at. Welcoming people the way that Christ did doesn't mean saying "oh, you can sit at God's table but not in my backyard." Or you can be here but you can't be here like *that*. Or you can sit with us but only if you're trying to change fundamental parts of who you are to be more like us.

That's not what Christ did but is what a lot of Christians and non-Christians alike do. Fear of the unknown and fear of difference are biologically and socially conditioned into us. The radical acceptance practiced by Christ and ideally practiced by all of us requires the constant

work of challenging the assumptions we have about people different from ourselves. This sermon is about some assumptions that you might not have thought to challenge and what that means for welcoming *everyone* at God's table.

I started writing this in October after a conversation with Meighan about a sermon that had been given by a guest speaker. I don't remember who the speaker was or what their major message was; I do remember that the speaker used the phrase "spiritually autistic" to talk about being spiritually disconnected from the environment. This metaphor made me cringe for a few reasons.

For some background: I chose to give this sermon on the last day of April because, depending on who you ask, it's either [Autism Awareness Month](#) or [Autism Acceptance Month](#). Depending on who you ask you'll get a variety of explanations of what autism is, which is why I don't blame the speaker who coined "spiritually autistic" for being misinformed. The common perception of autism is a list of deficits and a puzzle to be solved. And if the understanding that you have is that autistic people are trapped inside our heads, disconnected from society, waiting for modern medicine or divine intervention to cure us so that we can be like you then the metaphor of spiritual autism makes sense. However, that understanding is not one that's helpful for autistic people and is in fact actively harmful.

You may have noticed that I use the word "we" when talking about autistic people, that's because I'm autistic. [I say autistic](#) instead of person with autism because autism isn't a piece of baggage that I'm carrying around. It's not something that happened to me. In the same way that external influences didn't make me gay I wasn't made to be autistic by vaccines, poor parenting, or an unclean spirit. I've been autistic for the entirety of my life; if I wasn't autistic I wouldn't be really be me. Like many on the spectrum, I prefer to explain autism in terms of [differences](#) rather than deficits. It is a developmental disability in which our brains develop differently than those of the 98% of people who aren't on the spectrum. The different ways the [autistic brain](#) develops affects our language and communication, cognition, sensory processing, motor control, and social behaviors in certain predictable ways. Predictable in that if you talk to enough of us you'll see patterns in the way that we speak and move and interact. We're not all the same but we're more likely to experience the world and behave like each other than we are to experience the world and behave like people who aren't autistic. All of these predictable differences or traits, together, make up the developmental disability we call "autism."

Autism is disabling because our society is not designed to work for autistic people. Something that autism isn't is an inherent disconnect from society, which is what the "spiritually autistic" metaphor implied. The way that society treats autistic people often leads to us becoming disconnected from it. Historically we were forced to disconnect from society through institutionalization, which was one of the recommended treatments for autism well into the last decade. Today the recommended treatment for autistic children is 20+ hours per week of [behavioral](#) therapy that forces them to disconnect from themselves with the goal that they'll become indistinguishable from their non-autistic peers. There's the disconnect that every autistic adult I know has experienced, whether we were diagnosed in childhood or in adulthood: that's the disconnect that stems from the ostracization that happens when you fail to intuitively grasp and follow the unwritten social rules of our society. Which in combination with all of the other things that push us to the margins is a major contributing factor to a lot of worrying statistics. For example, my life expectancy is [16 years shorter](#) than that of my non-autistic peers. If I had an intellectual disability it would be 30 years shorter. The difference in life expectancy for autistic people like me who don't have intellectual disabilities likely comes from our leading cause of premature death: suicide, which we attempt at [a rate 28 x](#) that of our nonautistic peers.

Autistic disconnect from society is a very real problem with very real consequences but I do not think that autism is really to blame for our marginalization. What does this disconnect mean in the context of Church? If you google autism and Christianity you'll find articles about autism being a [manifestation of sin](#), [a test for parents](#) to endure, or something to pray about. In Mark chapter 1, leprosy is talked about in terms of uncleanness, a manifestation of sin. "A leper came to [Jesus] begging him, and kneeling he said to him, 'If you choose, you can make me clean.' Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, 'I do choose. Be made clean!' Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean." There are many healing stories like this in the bible.

Jesus can be interpreted both as fully human and fully divine. If you take this story as a face value account of fully divine Jesus healing someone then it implies that disease makes someone unclean; this whole clean/unclean thing comes from Leviticus where everything that society deems bad about you is a sin or can be blamed on your sin. Autism isn't a disease and even if it were I think we can all agree that disease does not come from sin. God is still speaking. How can we interpret this story or any

of the healing stories in a way that is relevant to what we know now and in a way that isn't a disservice to disabled people?

Let's look at the context of this story. Who decided that the man in the story was unclean because of his leprosy? That wasn't explicitly stated but I think we can infer, given the way that people are, that the people in his community thought he was gross and decided that this was a product of an unclean spirit. People still do this today, maybe not in the sense of "you're disabled because you or your parents have sinned" but people still look at causation as excuse to blame people for their suffering. Examples of this include the way that the gay community was treated during the AIDS epidemic, society literally blaming their suffering on their sin. Another is the way that people blame homelessness on individual bad choices instead of on housing unaffordability or the broken system we live in. In a different way people do this with autism, there are countless articles about autism coming from bad parenting or vaccines or gluten. All of which imply that autism is inherently a bad thing and that there is a [non-autistic person within every autistic one](#), which is inaccurate.

We're also blamed for the disconnect that I mentioned earlier. It is assumed that we are broken for not communicating the way that *you* do and that our goal in life should be to become more like *you*. Autistic people like me who can pass as nonautistic are constantly working to adapt to *your social expectations*. I am nearly constantly evaluating my body language and behaviors in relation to the rules I have in place for social interaction in different situations. 22 years of experience has taught me that if I deviate too far from the norm people will assume I'm unintelligent, my ideas won't be taken seriously, and I will be scorned and avoided. And I'm one of the lucky ones, because not all of us can adapt to your norms. Not all of us can pretend to be normal long enough to land or keep [jobs](#) that we're qualified for, for [police](#) to trust that we're not a danger, for our medical concerns to be taken seriously, or to experience acceptance that doesn't feel like one of those TV show episodes where we're a [life lesson](#) for the cast regulars.

The leper that Jesus healed in Mark was pushed to the margins by society for being different than them. In my opinion, the radical thing that Jesus was doing by healing people wasn't the healing, it was bringing them back into the circle of "acceptable" society. Jesus doesn't leave anyone at the margins and neither should we. Radical acceptance shouldn't mean accepting people from the margins despite intrinsic things about them or expecting people to change intrinsic parts of who they are to be like you and to be accepted. Communication is a two way street. If you want to connect with the autistic people in your life I have a few suggestions to leave you

with, since I needed to have some kind of conclusion. Some of these are probably applicable to interacting with nonautistic people as well but I can't speak for the neurotypical experience.

Recognize that your assumptions are based in your experiences and perceptions of the world and that they aren't universal. What comes naturally to you, especially in terms of body language, eye contact and speech patterns, does not come intuitively to everyone. Things like [flapping your hands](#) or not making normative amounts of eye contact aren't hurting anyone and should be an accepted way of being.

When you're planning events or meetings, think about how accessible the environment is beyond basic mobility and sound access. Lots of us on the spectrum have sensory processing differences. What doesn't seem loud to you might be very painful to us; limiting clapping or sudden loud noises when possible can do a lot to make a space comfortable. Perfumes and other scents are overwhelming and sometimes painful. As is touch; ask before touching people. Lots of us have food allergies or sensitivities, including sensitivities to the textures of foods, which might not make sense to you. Ask if people have allergies and don't be offended if we avoid foods that you love. These are just some common accessibility issues to be aware of. Different people have different needs; asking what those are is important for truly making a space open and affirming.

More importantly for making us know that you actually accept us for who we are is acknowledging that our thoughts and opinions have as much value as anyone else's, that written or typed or otherwise nonverbal types of communication are as valuable as verbal communication. Give us time to gather our thoughts and respond during conversations. People think and communicate at different speeds and taking longer to get things out of our mouths or fingertips does not invalidate what we're saying. Finally, get to know the weird people in your life. Ask us about ourselves, our struggles, and our triumphs and truly listen even if the answers you get are unexpected. That's all I've got. Amen.