

Celebrating Diverse Abilities:  
25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of The Americans With Disabilities Act

Even today when I hear this Gospel, I go back to those thoughts of amazement I had as a little girl, sitting in church and hearing about “The Five Loaves of Bread and Two Dried Fish.” I think, “Now really, how did he make that happen?” As a little girl, I would sit in church and try to visualize exactly how each one of those people got fed.

Eventually, my mind grew tired of trying to figure it out and I gave in to it just being one of those weird mysteries the nuns at my Catholic school always spoke about.

It was until well into adulthood that I realized the “mystery” of all these mysteries is the mind shift that occurs, a transformation of our own beliefs from what can't be done to focusing on what's possible.

Think about a situation in your own life. A circumstance that felt impossible, too hard, too challenging, and maybe too expensive. Did it feel like a huge barrier? Did you anguish over it, keep letting it roll around in your mind? Perhaps even allowed it to keep you awake at night?

And then, one day out of what seems like the blue, the solution to your dilemma suddenly seems more reachable, more doable, and maybe within the stretch of your wallet. What happened? What changed?

Your mind. Your beliefs. Your willingness to be open to possibilities.

That, my friends, is a mind shift.

You begin to believe and put your energy into what can happen, rather than hopelessly face the limits presented by the situation.

This is what Jesus did with the loaves and fish...and so many other things. Rather than accept “No,” or “This can't be done,” he said, “Well, let's think about this differently. Let's think about what we can give ALL people, rather than try to ration to a few.”

Jesus' mysteries weren't in some “woo-woo” magic as much as they were in teaching us that the magic is in us... when we embrace all and reach for what's possible.

Hard to believe, but in 1990, Congress displayed that even it had this sense of magic, by finally legalizing – for people of all abilities – physical access, public accommodations, and fair employment. Twenty-five years ago today, our nation demonstrated that if we don't begin embracing ALL, reaching for the possibilities, and making it happen, then we might as well be throng of people grappling over a couple of fish and loaves of bread.

Last Fall, this parish also displayed the magic of this mind shift and over \$500,000 was pledged in just a few weeks to place an elevator in our new Parish Center to make it accessible for ALL. Whether you were conscious of it or not, you were engaging in the core of Jesus' “loaves and fishes” teaching – believe in what's possible and make it happen. It's not a mystery; it's the miracle of life.  
(Kathy O'Connell)

To celebrate the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), I invite you to think about this landmark legislation and how we as Catholics can support it.

The year is 1988. Imagine that you are invited for an interview by an employer in your community, and you are using a wheelchair for your mobility. You arrive at the building and realize that the only visible entrance has a flight of stairs. You call the employer and ask if there is any other way that you can get into the building. She tells you that there is a freight elevator in the back of the building that requires a key. The employer comes out to greet you and brings a key. To get to the elevator, you go through several halls, blocked with materials, as this is the storage area. Assuming you can get into the elevator, you go upstairs and have the interview. The employer invites you to look at the area where you would be working, if you were offered and accepted the job. You notice that the bathroom has several small stalls, none of which are as wide as your wheelchair. You ask the employer about parking, as you had someone drop you off today because you weren't sure where the accessible parking for your wheelchair-accessible van would be. She informs you that the closest handicap parking is across the street from the building. You remember that this is a very busy road, which did not appear to have a curb cut. A week later, the employer contacts you to say that she would like to offer you the position. Would you take this job?

In the above scenario, if you really wanted the job, you could try to work something out with the employer, but the employer has no legal obligation to accommodate you. Also, the employer has no knowledge of how they might be able to accommodate you. The ADA, which was passed in 1990, clarifies what the applicant can expect in the above situation, how to discuss the situation with the employer, and how the employer can respond to a request for accommodation.

The ADA is a landmark legislation, effecting not only employment, but, also accessibility standards for public accommodations, transportation, and for new construction. A 1989 Harris Poll found that the majority of people with a disability had not gone to a movie, concert, or to a restaurant in the past year. This was largely due to lack of accessibility at the venue and lack of accessible transportation. Since this time, more people with disabilities are able to enjoy activities in the community.

Places of worship, such as All Saints, are not included under the Americans with Disabilities Act. They are not included due to the financial hardship it would pose for many congregations to make the place of worship accessible. However, at All Saints, we have raised the funding for a new elevator. This shows the community's commitment to including people with disabilities.

Are there other ways in which you can support the community and people with disabilities? Yes, there are. Examples include:

- Supporting businesses and companies that make an effort to be accessible to and employ people with disabilities; or, if you are a proprietor, be willing to make your venue accessible and to hire qualified people with disabilities;
- Learning sign language and other forms of communication;
- Attending community events that support people with disabilities such as the annual ADA March and Disability Pride Parades;
- Asking people with disabilities if they need any assistance opening a door for example;
- Reporting to mall cops and others in authority when handicapped parking is taken by people who are not displaying a handicapped sticker;

- Becoming an inclusive recreation reporter, by taking an online class through Cornell University (in the class you will learn to report the degree of accessibility at places where you go every day. The information is added to a database that can be viewed by people with disabilities.)
- And encouraging universal design when creating a home or business.

By taking time to support people with disabilities to be fully included in society, you are making the “mindset of abundance” that Kathy described, become a reality. You are a representative of Jesus. Jesus stressed the importance of social justice and creating a society in which all people are treated with justice and mercy, and people with disabilities are no exception. He advocated that the community support the poor, some of whom were, as they are today, people with disabilities. He healed many people with disabilities, sending the message that all are welcome and important to Him. I close with the words of St. Paul from the first reading: “There is one body, one Spirit, just as you were called into one hope when you were called. There is one Savior, one faith, one baptism, one God and Maker of all, who is over all, who works through all, and is within all.”  
(Jennifer Thau)

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*Kathy O’Connell and Jennifer Thau, both parishioners of All Saints Parish are members of our Parish’s Disabilities Taskforce, which Kathy Facilitates. Both draw on and share their experience of living with Cerebral Palsy in their professional work and service to the community.*

*Kathy O’Connell, MS, CRC, LMNC is a writer and Director of Radiant Abilities, LLC in Syracuse, NY. Kathy is author of the self-help book, **Firewalk: Embracing Different Abilities**. She was motivated to begin providing counseling services because of the gap she observed in opportunities for personal growth and transformation to people with disabilities. Kathy believes that within each of us is the full potential to lead the lives we dream of; ones full of happiness, love, health, and peace. Kathy teaches the concept of “different abilities” meaning that each of us has our own unique strengths and gifts to share with the world, regardless of ability level. Kathy’s commitment is to assist people with different abilities and their family members in living full lives through promoting growth, enhancing self-worth and personal empowerment. Kathy is married to Scott Willis with whom she is raising their son, Jaden in Camillus, NY.*

*Jennifer Thau, BA, LMSW is a Licensed Master Social Worker and works for the Self-Advocacy Association of New York, where she helps people with developmental disabilities make informed choices regarding their living situations and opportunities. She has been appointed by Governor Andrew Cuomo to serve as a Caucus Member of the New York State Developmental Disabilities Planning Council (NYSDDPC). Jennifer also has a degree in Religious Studies and, in addition to her work to promote self-advocacy among persons with disabilities; she has studied the role of religion in shaping cultural understandings of and response to disabilities. Jennifer and her partner, Chris, live in Fayetteville, NY.*