

God Makes No Mistakes
Creating Beloved Community for All Our Children
A sermon by Sally Patton
(author of “Welcoming Children with Special Needs”)

God, or however you wish to name the Divine, does not make mistakes. What does this mean? What does this mean when a mother gives birth to a child with mental retardation or cerebral palsy? What does this mean when a child is in an accident and becomes seriously physically impaired? What does this mean when our schools increasingly teach to standardized tests at the expense of creative learning and all those children who learn differently? What does this mean when more and more children are born within the autism spectrum? The list could go on and on.

That question was asked me last year by a mother attending one of my workshops on spiritual parenting. She arrived angry and spent much of the workshop crying. Her son Tim was six and has cerebral palsy. She described him lovingly as full of energy and a dynamo on wheels. Tim sometimes involuntarily jerks his hands and his body as do many people with cerebral palsy. The mother had just received in the mail a Xerox copy picturing the front of Tim’s teacher’s chest which showed a large red stain on her white shirt. The note scribbled on the bottom from the Principal said that Tim’s behavior was highly unacceptable and would not be tolerated. Evidently as the result of an involuntary spasm Tim had knocked the juice cup from his teacher’s hands which spilled on her blouse. She immediately assumed he had done it on purpose and he was punished. All of us in the workshop sat in stunned silence which eventually erupted into immense anger and an outpouring of stories of adults who do not see children as children but only what is wrong with them. Now none of us in that room, believed Tim was a mistake, especially his Mom. But there was a huge question as to why Tim and children like him have to have to struggle so with a disability and then have to put up with other people’s misunderstandings and prejudices? I was hard pressed to answer the mother’s question, “What does that mean, God does not make mistakes?”

Though at the time, I shared the mother’s anger, some where deep inside, perhaps that still small voice within acknowledged, God does not make mistakes. And so I continued my spiritual journey toward understanding this belief which started with my son Tyler.

Tyler at age five began to have difficulty in school which eventually led to a diagnosis of multiple learning disabilities. I initially thought, well I will fix this. This led to two years of fighting with the school system and trying to understand the problem. It left me feeling as if I was in a desert of no beginnings and no endings. Desperate to get out I embarked on a spiritual quest to nurture my own healing. It eventually led to the writing of my book and an awareness that it was not Tyler I had to change, but myself. Trena Tremblay in the book, *You Will Dream New Dreams*, says “Never, ever forget that you have been chosen for this very special journey. It matters not what the challenges may be; what matters is that you open your heart to this child. For as difficult as things may get, you will discover that this soul, wrapped in the precious little package, has much to give and volumes to teach you about yourself---if you are willing to learn.” All our

children, not just the ones some of us parent or the ones we happen to know, but all our children, have volumes to teach us if we are willing to listen and learn.

Over fifteen hundred years ago Benedict wrote a short, simple document about hospitality called *The Rule* to guide monks living in monasteries which during his time were small communities of fifteen or so people. The *Rule* has endured over time and shapes most of Western monasticism. St. Benedict believed in order to grow as a human being, you need other people. To be a person of Great Spirit can not be done alone. St. Benedict's rules of radical hospitality offer a wonderful model for individuals and faith communities to live by. Adapting the practice of St. Benedict's radical hospitality leads to the creation of a beloved community in which the different, those who appear strange, and those who are marginalized are welcomed and accepted. St. Benedict's hospitality is a way of love. St. Benedict asks that we see the divine in every single adult and child that we encounter. Father Daniel Homan in his book *Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love* says that St. Benedict's hospitality is not about social graces, it is about mutual reverence. In our faith communities it is about accepting those who are different. Acceptance is not about judging or condoning behavior. It is about embracing. We do not have to like a child's behavior in order to embrace and accept the child. Welcoming all children into our faith communities is an act of radical hospitality.

One of the ways we can become more accepting of the children we label is to find ways to see the world through the child's eyes, to discover the Divine in each child. When we can see the world through the child's eyes, we often become much more creative about how to include all children in the life of the church community. On your index card provided in the order of service, write on one side the word "deficits" and list 2 to 3 things you do not like about yourself. On the other side write the word "gifts" and list 3 to 5 things you like about yourself.

Hold the deficit side facing out against your chest. Close your eyes and take a few minutes and imagine that everyone you meet only sees this side of you. They only talk to you from this perspective. What would the conversations be like, how would you feel. When you want to talk about something you feel good about, the person only responds to what they see on the front of your piece of paper. They only see the deficits and they probably will try to fix you. How do you think you would re-act and treat them? Now release these thoughts to the Universe.

Now hold the gift side facing out next to your chest. Take a few minutes to imagine that the people you meet can only see this side of you. They only talk to you from this perspective. What would the conversations be like, how would you feel. They see all your strengths and gifts and think you can take care of yourself. They do not try to fix anything. How do you think you would re-act and treat them?

Children who have been labeled with a disability or disorder or those who are perceived as weird or difficult walk around as if they have a piece of paper plastered to their chest labeling all their deficits and in this society we have a tendency to want to fix them. We hear a child is autistic and we immediately assume he will be difficult to handle, we hear a child is mentally retarded and we assume she has limited abilities, we hear a child is struggling in school and we assume he is not very smart or are just lazy, we hear a child has ADD and we assume she will be a trouble maker. And then we expect all of these children to behave according to our assumptions. It often becomes a self-

fulfilling prophecy. And we wonder why some of our labeled children are so angry and difficult.

From our reading Judith Snow points out, we live in a world that follows the “disability paradigm” in which we define people by what is wrong with them and then we feel sorry for them and want to fix them and they become special and then are entitled to services. Then the fight becomes us vs. them. Judith proposes that instead we create a world based on the “giftedness paradigm” in which every person, not just a few but every single person is seen as having differences which offer opportunities for meaningful interaction and spiritual connection. Because we choose to believe that each person is different from the next person, then no one difference should be more normal than the next. Most people in our culture, social service professionals, doctors, teachers, school professionals, and even ourselves operate within the disability paradigm in which we decide certain types of differences have to be fixed. As much as the special education law has been a god send for parents trying to get educational services for their child, it perpetuates the “deficit model” of thinking. I am one of the first to be thankful for the law. And I also realize that sometimes a diagnosis can bring relief to years of confusion and suffering because now there seems to be a reason for the behavior and a perhaps a method of treatment. But it is a double-edged sword. It can lead to “fixing it” rather than seeing the whole child and the child’s gifts. It also, as demonstrated by our activity, can lead to assumptions of expected behavior based on the label. So, have we gone too far? Are we narrowly defining what is normal so more and more children are forced into the special needs label?

When we talk about hospitality in our churches we are addressing issues of inclusion and exclusion or as Judith defines it - disability versus giftedness paradigms. As demonstrated by our labeling activity, our entire culture excludes people based on labels, differences, their color, their sex, their race, their religion, their age, how they are dressed, how much money they make, where they went or go to school, the list goes on and on.

Father Homan says, “Hospitality has an inescapable moral dimension to it. It is not a mere social grace; it is a spiritual and ethical issue. It is an issue involving what it means to be human. All our talk about hospitable openness doesn’t mean anything as long as some people continue to be tossed aside.Hospitality puts an end to injustice. But calling hospitality a moral issue does not tell us the whole truth about hospitality either. A moral issue can become bogged down in legalisms, and hospitality is no legalistic ethical issue. It is instead a spiritual practice, a way of becoming more human, a way of understanding yourself. Hospitality is both the answer to modern alienation and injustice *and* a path to a deeper spirituality.”

A spiritual practice is an action designed to make a change in our deepest selves. It is something we do to gain new understanding of ourselves and leads to growth, change, and a more loving way to be in the world. We stretch ourselves in spiritual practice. Meditation, prayer, walking mindfully, hiking, and feeding the homeless can all be forms of spiritual practice. Father Homan says, “Because hospitality always involves giving something of ourselves to others, it is a spiritual practice. Spirituality is about relationship.” It requires us to take chances, to face our fears, to change and to grow. Accepting people different from ourselves means acknowledging our fears. We live in a fear-based culture in which we fear those who are different from us. It has become even

more acute since 9/11. Fear of others chokes out love. Hospitality is risky and is courageous and calls us to confront and sit with our fear of those who are different. Only then can we feel a transforming love. The act of hospitality heals us as individuals and as faith communities.

We all know that merely being nice to people does not always change us. We sometimes go through the motions without being affected. The hospitality espoused by St. Benedict requires us to make connections with those we feel are different and then we are personally transformed. I have found that it is those parents who embrace the opportunity their special needs child provides for healing and growth who are personally transformed by their parenting experience instead of staying stuck in the pain and the "why me?" syndrome.

Connecting with a child who is struggling can be simple, it does not necessarily mean making every child your best friend. It means listening to children's stories. When we listen to children's stories we will learn something we never would have learned. Children are rarely listened to, so often their desires and wants are ignored by the adult who believes they know best. We make assumptions about children's behavior all the time. We make assumptions based on the labels and our past experiences. So often when we parent, befriend or minister to children we have to confront our own fears. Children often reflect our own past hurts and disappointments. Sometimes we do not understand their behavior, and as adults we feel we have to control the behavior or we can panic. Give yourself the gift of a question. Ask the child why they are behaving they way they are. But ask from a place of respect and acceptance. Then listen. Listening is one of the ways we see the world through the child's eyes. Listening is one of the ways we see the Divine in each child. Father Homan says, "Listening is the core of hospitality, and while the people we listen to benefit, in the end we are the ones transformed. Benedict doesn't call us to listen on the surface. He wants us to listen with the ears of the soul. Listen way down deep. You know the place; it's the same place that weeps at the sight of a newborn, the same place that falls silent at the edge of a mountain, the same place that reaches for a falling sparrow. Listen from *that* place."

Being able to see the world from the child's eyes means being willing to drop the labels and assumptions. As Father Homan says, "The walls only come down when the labels are changed into human faces." It means accepting the Divine presence of every child.

Operating from "the giftedness paradigm" helps us understand the idea God does not make mistakes? Even for those who question the existence of God, this notion has profound implications for children with special challenges. Believing that children with disabilities are no mistakes is essential to our ability to accept them into our congregation, minister to or parent them. We must be able to see the wholeness of spirit instead of only brokenness or deficits. Otherwise, we lose sight of the whole child and his or her unique gift to the world. This is a lesson for all of us, to see wholeness of spirit for all the children in our church.

The lessons from embracing the opportunity children with special needs provide us for healing and growth are many. It is not the events in our lives that shape our destiny but the decisions we make about those events. We can turn obstacles into opportunities by choosing how we think and how we respond. We can embrace the opportunities or

obstacles that come our way as lessons to be learned with many blessings or we can choose to think of these obstacles as barriers.

In many people's minds, Judith Snow's life is filled with insurmountable obstacles. Judith chooses to see her life differently and attracts people to help her break down the walls and obstacles that would keep her confined and helpless so she can be the visionary she is.

Children with special needs and all our children can help heal us as we help heal them. It is a sacred circle. We are co-creators with the Divine of our own experience. We can choose how we want to live our lives. We can choose to believe that children with special needs are no more than their labels imply or we can see their wholeness of spirit. Parenting, loving, befriending, and ministering to children with special challenges changes people. How we handle the change will either mire us in the prevalent belief system about disability and limitations, or it will set us free and alter our ideas about who we are and why we are here.

Radical hospitality is about preparing a place at the table for all who enter our church. Preparation says, you are welcome, you are accepted, you are honored. Margaret Mead's famous phrase, "It takes a village to raise a child" may be over used but it rings so true. Sometimes it takes an entire church community to raise a child. And in order to do this we must adopt an attitude of hospitality that is based on seeing the divine in every child, confronting our fears of differences, listening to children's stories with an open heart, and seeing each child's life as holy ground. And holy ground is often risky ground.

As a congregation we can embrace the opportunity that each child and adult who crosses the threshold into our church provides us to be in a community that sees differences as gifts and opportunities for meaningful interaction and spiritual connection. We know in our hearts that no adult or child is a mistake. They are whole unto themselves in God's eyes. We are all here as unique, spiritual beings in physical bodies having a variety of different experiences.