

# The Family Table: The Place We All Belong

## A SERMON SERIES AND STUDY GUIDE



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PDFs and accompanying videos can be found at: <https://www.firstpresaurora.org/familytable>. Please connect with us with any questions. We would love to hear stories of how God is at work in your church as you set the table and welcome others to the Family Table, the place we all belong.

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## A Sermon Series

### Introduction

#### The Family Table: The Place We All Belong

God created each one to be in relationship with Him and one another. The desire to belong is universal and flows from God's welcome to each person. The universal application of belonging helped our congregation view people with disabilities as an integral part of our life together, not as a separate ministry that involves only a few. We all desire to belong.

Our church preached a 7- week series on what it means to belong to God, and to belong to the family of God. The series explored a biblical theology of belonging through the lens and perspective of disability.

#### **Pastor Jeff summarizes:**

***“God’s heart is a heart of grace; He has welcomed us first. We are all disabled by sin and the gospel’s inclusion in God’s family makes us right. Look at who Jesus welcomes around the table, ticking off every person in power. He is making a point: ‘My welcome goes further than you are willing to go.’ That is radical. That is true and I need to hear that, our church needs to hear that.”***

The image of gathering around the table prevalent throughout scriptures represents God's presence with His people. We find **The** place to belong as we gather at the Family Table.

Believing we all belong, we welcome others into relationship with Christ. And we welcome others to gather around our table in our homes, in our small groups, in all aspects of our lives together. Belonging goes beyond welcoming and inviting. Each week's sermon connected one or two dimensions of belonging as identified by Dr. Erik Carter with scripture to deepen our congregation's understanding of belonging.

One goal of the series was for our congregation to see who was missing from the Body of Christ, those who have not found a place at the table, and to call the church to be “table-setters” for the Kingdom!

This guide provides sermon outlines and a basic format for the series. We've included worship elements and story options as resources to create a sermon series on belonging for your congregation.

There is an accompanying study guide that can be used in conjunction with a sermon series or as a stand-alone resource for small groups of varying ages and abilities.

## Overview: 10 Dimensions of Belonging by Dr. Erik Carter

- [A Place of Belonging](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2732474520977482) found at [journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2732474520977482](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2732474520977482)
- [Fostering Belonging](https://bc.edu/content/bc-web/schools/stm/sites/encore/encore-access/fostering-belonging.html) found at [bc.edu/content/bc-web/schools/stm/sites/encore/encore-access/fostering-belonging.html](https://bc.edu/content/bc-web/schools/stm/sites/encore/encore-access/fostering-belonging.html)



This graphic was originated by Erik Carter and adapted for legibility by All Belong.

## **Defining disability: something that hinders life activities.**

Disabilities may be visible or hidden and include mental health challenges. Disabilities may come or be discovered before, at or after birth. They may come with age, illness, injury, or other trauma.

### **Overview of Sermon Series**

<b>Week</b>	<b>Title/Theme</b>	<b>Scripture</b>	<b>Dimension(s) of Belonging</b>
1	God's Heart of Welcome	Ephesians 4:4-6 Exodus 25:8; 33:11 John 1:1-5; 14 2 Corinthians 5:21 Acts 4:32-35	Present
2	Radical Inclusion	Luke 14:12-14; 21-23	Invited, Welcomed
3	I See You	Luke 19:1-10	Known, Accepted
4	Whatever it Takes	Mark 2:1-12	Supported, Cared-For
5	No Longer Strangers	John 15:12-16	Befriended
6	Better Together	1 Corinthians 12:12-26	Needed
7	The Way of Love	1 Corinthians 13:1-13	Loved

## Week 1 - “God’s Heart of Welcome”

**Scripture focus:** [Ephesians 4:4-6](#), [Exodus 25:8](#); [33:11](#), [John 1:1-5](#); [14](#), [2 Corinthians 5:21](#), [Acts 4:32-35](#)

### **Key idea: Belonging begins with being welcomed.**

Our welcome of others flows from God’s heart of welcome for all peoples. The Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit exists forever in eternal communion. The Triune God was present with his people in the temple. In the Incarnation, Christ tabernacles among us so that he may save us. Because of Christ we belong to him and to one another.

### **Dimension of Belonging: Present**

To be present is to be there. People with disabilities are a part of all the things you offer as a congregation and all the places where people gather, just like anyone else. To be present to others is not simply to be alongside them; it is to recognize them for who they are and to learn what it means to love them.

### **What do these Scripture passages say?**

- Nature of the Trinity—He has existed forever with the indwelling communion of the Trinity. Ephesians 4:4-6
- God desired to be present with His people, in the Temple. Exodus 25:8, 33:11.
- Christ being present with us. John 1:1-5; 14.
- The Gospel and the cross. 2 Corinthians 5:21
- God’s welcome to us is through Jesus Christ. Because of Christ we belong to Him, and we belong to one another. Acts 4:32-35

### **So what? Why is this important?**

God’s heart of welcome is for all peoples. God calls us into a relationship with Him. We are to be in relationship with one another: all ages, all abilities, all ethnicities, gathered around the Table. There are many individuals and families impacted by disability in our community who have not found a place at the table. Part of the body of Christ is missing.

### **Now what? What must I/we do now?**

Be open to the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts through this series so that our church becomes a community that embodies Christ-like love so that all belong.

## Worship elements

- [Carried to the Table](https://vimeo.com/478656244) Video by Faith Church, Dyer, IN, at [vimeo.com/478656244](https://vimeo.com/478656244) (4:01)
- Guided Reflection following Sermon (5:00)
  1. A Prayer for the Holy Spirit to lead and show us: Who is/has been missing? (Quiet listening prayer)
  2. Scripture Reading: Acts 4:32-35 (ESV)
  3. What are we willing to do about it? (Guided prayer)
- “Set the Table” (see note, right).

We tried it...

...what will you do?

At First Presbyterian, the congregation sang the Song of Response while a family “finished setting the table” as a response to the message.

## Additional worship elements

- During songs, use praise streamers with colors representing Father, Son, Holy Spirit (gold, red and white, respectively).
- Intentionally have greeting time, a moment to acknowledge each one who is present.

## Story options

1. One from within your congregation: someone who had not made it to the table for some time but is now present. Think about stories from people with visible and hidden disabilities and mental health challenges.
2. The story a pastor: his friend asked this pastor to come conduct his 5-year-old son’s funeral, as the family had no pastor or church, but had found a church that was willing to allow them to use the building for the funeral. His son’s disabilities had been what kept the family from being welcomed into the churches in their area (until the boy’s body was welcomed as it came to the church in a casket).



## Week 2 - “Radical Inclusion”

**Scripture Focus:** [Luke 14:12-14](#) ; [Luke 14:21-23](#)

**Supplemental Scriptures:** [Psalm 23:6](#) , [Isaiah 43:1](#) , [Revelation 19:9](#)

### **Key idea: The Grace of Welcome**

These verses challenge our view of the kingdom and who will be at the Messianic banquet. We extend the grace of welcome to people who cannot reciprocate, because that is what God does for us.

### **Dimension of Belonging: Invited, Welcomed**

**Invited**—Actively pursued, sought out; people notice when you are not there and reach out into the community; we want you to be part of this community; you are indispensable; being pursued is something different than simply showing up. The “ache of your absence” is felt by the congregation.

**Welcomed**—When they do arrive, they encounter wonderful, even extravagant hospitality, that warm deep welcome, not just in terms of what people say, but really in terms of how people feel when they are part of the family. A welcome without condition, without a caveat.

### **What do these Scripture passages say?**

Verses 12-14: Jesus gives plain teaching on the people we are to include around our tables.

Verses 15-24: Jesus tells a parable to illustrate that teaching.

1. Grace of God to us: The king desires his house to be filled in celebration. All are welcome to celebrate with the king.
2. Grace of God extended to others through us: God’s people are called to welcome others with the same grace. Verse 15 is a challenge brought by a hearer to Jesus to disclose his view of those who are worthy to feast at the messianic banquet. The hearer wants to hear a discourse on keeping the law (personal righteousness). Jesus responds with a call to radical hospitality which shows the heart of God.

## So what? Why is this important?

These verses challenge our view of the kingdom and who will be at the Messianic banquet: we are to extend the grace of welcome to people who cannot reciprocate.

We tend to enter relationships to get something out of it. Jesus admonishes us to enter relationships where we're giving more than we're getting.

## Now what? What must I/we do now?

Examine our own hearts.

- Are we actively welcoming those who are different from us, or who cannot reciprocate?
- Do we have an “ache” about the people who are absent in our fellowship?

Survey our church: Who is not here? Why aren't they here?

Use Erik Carter's *Reflection Tool for Congregations* available in the Study Guide

## Go out. Seek. Compel. Invite

- What does this look like in our context?
- The church is to be table setters for the great banquet.

## Worship Elements: Videos

- [Hyatt Moore painting the Luke 14 banquet](https://hyattmoore.com/videos/luke-14-banquet-time-lapse) video by Joni and Friends, found at [hyattmoore.com/videos/luke-14-banquet-time-lapse](https://hyattmoore.com/videos/luke-14-banquet-time-lapse) (3:00)
- [The Wedding Banquet](https://youtube.com/watch?v=hv8ojKvo1pI) video by Rain for Roots, found at [youtube.com/watch?v=hv8ojKvo1pI](https://youtube.com/watch?v=hv8ojKvo1pI) (3:38)

## Story options

1. A story from your congregation about invitation and welcome. Think about stories from people with visible and hidden disabilities and mental health challenges.
1. The story of Adam Winstrom being invited and welcomed by pastor Andy (in [\*I Choose Adam\*](#), pp. 111-113). Find this excerpt from the book in the Study Guide.
2. Pastor George Grevenstuk talks about a group home coming to his church in this [video, “Worship as One”](#) by All Belong, found at [youtu.be/Goiumi\\_CxLI](https://youtu.be/Goiumi_CxLI) (stop at 0:50).

## Week 3 - "I See You"

**Scripture Focus:** [Luke 19:1-10](#)

**Supplemental Scriptures:** [Psalm 139:13-18](#) , [Isaiah 43:1](#) , [John 10:14-16](#)

**Key idea: Our Creator God knows and sees us.** Jesus saw and welcomed Zacchaeus. He sees us and says, "You are mine." However, welcoming is often not welcomed. It messes with everybody. Welcoming is hard but it also transforms those that are welcomed.

### **Dimensions of Belonging: Known, Accepted**

**Known**—When people are known personally and by their name, not just by their label. They are known by their gifts and strengths, personality, and passion they bring to this community, not simply by all the things they can't do or struggle to do, which is so often how people with a disability are known in church communities: not by what they bring and those gifts, but by what they lack or struggle with.

**Accepted**—Without condition. I don't have to earn my entry and I don't have to wonder whether that entry will be re-offered the following week.

### **What do these Scripture passages say?**

The acceptance that Jesus gives causes grumblings by others. Acceptance by Jesus causes Zacchaeus to give half of his goods to the poor. Zacchaeus, in contrast to Matthew, stays where he is (he doesn't follow Jesus to Jerusalem) and gives grace in response to being known and accepted by Jesus.

### **So what? Why is this important?**

Believing is nurtured within the context of belonging (Erik Carter). Pity is different from acceptance.

## Now what? What must I/we do now?

Our job is to love without condition, no matter the capacities of the new friend. God's Word and Spirit will do the rest. His grace and Word are sufficient. What costs do we incur when we accept our friends with disabilities? Worship? Interruptions may be God-ordained moments to ponder and/or help us accept differences. How far are we as a church willing to go to accept invisible disabilities? Is our love conditional?

### Worship elements:

#### Scripture Reading

Psalm 139 - Read or recited by people with varied abilities.

#### Song

"[He Knows My Name](#)" by Tommy Walker, a congregational song (3:43), found at [youtube.com/watch?v=1bj-rlGcj8M](https://youtube.com/watch?v=1bj-rlGcj8M).

#### Story options

1. One from your congregation in which a person expresses how well they are known and accepted within the congregation. Think about stories from people with visible and hidden disabilities and mental health challenges.
2. [This video](#) (4:25) from All Belong, found at [vimeo.com/480553894](https://vimeo.com/480553894) tells the story of Nolan becoming known at his church.

We tried it...

...what will you do?

At First Presbyterian, we created a video of portions of Psalm 139 (2:55), found at [Psalm 139](#). We also sang "He Knows My Name" and during the instrumental interlude, we showed pictures of our Friendship Bible Club.

## Week 4 - “Whatever it Takes”

**Scripture Focus:** [Mark 2:1-12](#)

**Supplemental Scriptures:** [Psalm 121](#), [1 Corinthians 12:25](#)

**Key idea: God’s care for us is 24/7.** He neither slumbers nor sleeps. There is never a time when He is not providing for our welfare. Likewise, in community we care and support one another, not only when we gather to worship but throughout the week. We do whatever it takes so that people can experience the love and presence of Jesus. We do whatever it takes to help one another flourish in Christ.

### **Dimensions of Belonging: Supported, Cared-For**

**Supported**—I feel like I belong when people know me well enough to know what support is needed so that I can be part of all that is offered in that community. Support is the pathway to being present. The support you are providing tells me that you want me there and you are willing to make the effort that is required to support that presence. Congregations that are committed to being places of belonging see that support as essential, not optional.

**Cared for**—Care for my flourishing 7 days a week. You are not just involved in my life for 3 hours on Sunday morning, but you know what is going on in my life and you are meeting other needs we have as a family; needs for respite, needs for relationships, just times of having fun together. Needs for jobs, or housing, or practical help, those kinds of things. Care is really about what happens beyond the walls of our building.

### **What do these Scripture passages say?**

Tenacity of the friends to bring the paralyzed man into the proximity of Jesus. Their expectation was for Jesus to heal him in body, but Jesus loves him even more to heal his heart and soul as well as his body.

Trust and vulnerability of the paralyzed man.

Jesus’ willingness to heal the paralyzed man’s heart as well as his body.

Response of the crowd and the Pharisees.

## **So what? Why is this important?**

Jesus displays his absolute authority over sin and absolute love for the paralyzed man. There are no “disabled souls” after Jesus heals them. The friends have a singular task, passion to do whatever it takes to bring their friend to Jesus.

Jesus’ care for the man is first the healing of his soul. That is the sort of care that we as the church must be prepared to give to all people, including people with disabilities.

How do we pray for one another? If we are only praying for physical disability/healing and not their spiritual disability and reconciliation with Jesus, then our prayers are as limited as our view of God. How do we view God’s work?

## **Now what? What must I/we do now?**

Talk with families. Listen to their needs. What feels like support? What isn’t helpful?

What are we prepared to do to bring people into proximity with Jesus?

## **Worship elements**

### **Imaginative Prayer**

[“Living the Story”](#) -Video example of how this was used available from First Presbyterian Church Aurora (9:33), found at [youtu.be/VOVOIDBsn5g](https://youtu.be/VOVOIDBsn5g).  
Script available in the Study Guide.

### **Image**

[Painting by James Tissot](#), found at [i.pinimg.com/564x/cc/bc/f4/ccbcf49f4550aae771c0539885c46d1d.jpg](https://i.pinimg.com/564x/cc/bc/f4/ccbcf49f4550aae771c0539885c46d1d.jpg)

### **Video**

[Sand painting of Mark 2:1-12 \(4:47\)](#) by Harm van Schaik, found at [facebook.com/watch/?v=10154924677586104](https://facebook.com/watch/?v=10154924677586104)

You can also find these visuals in the Study Guide.

## Story options

1. One from your congregation, in which a friend relied on others to participate in church. Think about stories from people with visible and hidden disabilities and mental health challenges.
2. Kevin's story as told by John Swinton in the article "[From Inclusion to Belonging](#)" in the *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health*, April 2012 (pg. 180-181):

Kevin, a young man who has profound intellectual disabilities... [at] a local faith community... During the three months he attended, not one person spoke to him. One person patted him on the head in passing but that was it! The staff [who brought him] wondered if people were scared of Kevin, or embarrassed, or uncertain how to approach him. Either way the experience was not a good one, and they decided there was little point in Kevin continuing to attend. One member of staff said: Kevin gets a more positive response in the local coffee shop. Kevin has not been involved in any faith community since.

## Week 5 - "No Longer Strangers"

**Scripture Focus:** [John 15:12-16](#)

**Supplemental Scriptures:** [Proverbs 17:17](#) , [Proverbs 18:24](#)

### **Key idea: Friendship is more than serving.**

Jesus invites us into friendship with him and the Father, not just service. This friendship is the foundation of all relationships in the body of Christ. We are brothers, sisters, and friends. People with disabilities are not projects to be served but people to befriend.

### **Dimensions of Belonging: Befriended**

I know I belong when people name me as a friend, and when I can name them as friends. People to do things with, to go to the mall with, to have a meal with.

### **What do these Scripture passages say?**

As Christians we are commanded to love one another. Jesus demonstrated the depth of His love for us by laying down his life for us. Friendship with Jesus involves the obligation of brotherly love. Christians grow by caring for and nurturing one another. (vs. 12)

Our friendships with one another are to reflect the self-giving love and sacrifice of Jesus. (vs. 13-14). Friends know one another (vs. 15). They have a close relationship. They know what one another is doing. Friendship is mutual, reciprocal. Friends share a common life together because we are brothers and sisters in Christ.

### **So what? Why is this important?**

People of all abilities are created for relationships. People with disabilities desire friendship but often find many barriers. Often these barriers exist in the church. Christ's love for us is unconditional. He calls us friends. We are called to extend that same kind of love and friendship to one another, even if those friendships are initially inconvenient or uncomfortable.

### **Now what? What must I/we do now?**

Make it a priority to spend time developing a friendship with a person who experiences disability. Often a good place to start is finding common interests. Become a prayer partner.



## Worship elements

### Reflection Prayer

Participate in a guided prayer using the words of Jesus, who calls us friends. (John 15:12-16).

### Story options

- One from your congregation about people befriending one another. Think about stories from people with visible and hidden disabilities and mental health challenges.
- [This video](#) (3:28), found at [youtu.be/hdLVQwJNmW8](https://youtu.be/hdLVQwJNmW8), created by Living Stones Academy may take place in a school, but if they can build friendship and figure things out for whole schooldays for Ruby, perhaps your church can be inspired to think about how to include someone with needs like hers.

We tried it...

...what will you do?

At First Presbyterian, we created [this video](#) (7:39) from a recorded online session with our Friendship Bible Club in which we talked about being and having friends. Find it at [youtu.be/a7Vl2xH70ts](https://youtu.be/a7Vl2xH70ts).

## Week 6 - "Better Together"

**Scripture Focus:** [1 Corinthians 12:12-26](#)

**Supplemental Scriptures:** [Ephesians 2:10](#) , [Philippians 4:13](#)

**Key idea: One body; many parts.**

The body of Christ is made up of many parts; all unique, all needed for the body of Christ to be complete. People of all abilities are co-laborers in Christ. We are better together.

**Dimension of Belonging: Needed**

The church doesn't see me only as a focus of ministry, that designated recipient of support but sees me as someone who has gifts and talents and support to give to others. Reciprocity in ministry.

**What do these Scripture passages say?**

The Body of Christ is one body but many parts. It is God who arranges the parts. All are needed. We cannot say to one another, "I have no need for you." Greater honor is due to those who "seem" to be weaker. They are indispensable.

**So what? Why is this important?**

Does God (or God's people) accept me only if I'm healed?

What happens when we apply this passage to members of the body experiencing disability?

So...do we operate in our churches as if we NEED everybody?

- As if *all* are "indispensable"?
- As if *all* are to be treated with greater honor?
- What would that look like if we did?
  - What would our leadership look like?
  - What would our facilities look like?
  - How would our fellowship need to change?

Active rather than passive participation. We NEED people with varied abilities to read Scriptures, because we hear it different from their lips rather than from pastor's. We NEED people with disabilities to help us remember that the Body of Christ is not about flawless performance or fake perceptions of perfection; rather, we are a community who are called to bear one another's burdens, both seen and unseen.

## **Now what? What must I/we do now?**

Look for opportunities for people with disabilities to use their gifts in the congregation.

Encourage people with disabilities to be in leadership roles.

Be Co-laborers in Christ. Not ministry to, but ministry with.

## **Worship elements**

### **Reflection Tool**

Overview of 5 Stages: Changing Attitudes [the5stages.com/resources/](http://the5stages.com/resources/)

### **Video/Story**

Story of Christine Barreto and Debbie Abbs by InterVarsity Access, found at [youtube.com/watch?v=\\_\\_-CxfqRpeUo](https://youtube.com/watch?v=__-CxfqRpeUo) (6:14).

## **Story options**

1. One from your congregation in which people with varied abilities serve alongside one another. Think about stories from people with visible and hidden disabilities and mental health challenges.
2. A story from Barbara Newman's book, [\*Body Building: Devotions Celebrating Inclusive Community\*](#), such as the story about Melissa and Michele (pg. 57).

## Week 7 - “The Way of Love”

**Scripture Focus:** [1 Corinthians 13:1-13](#)

**Supplemental Scriptures:** [Galatians 5:22-23](#)

**Key idea: Love is the most important thing.**

Love is the motivating factor. If I am welcoming, but not loving, my welcome is meaningless. All these dimensions of belonging will be evident in the life of our congregation if we are actively practicing love. Love bears all things.

Everything else will pass away.

**Dimension of Belonging: Loved**

Love permeates all aspects of belonging. The command to love one another fully extends to people with disabilities. When people talk about communities that matter most to them, they often talk about the love they experience there.

**What do these Scripture passages say?**

Love is the highest calling of the follower of Jesus.

Love is the only mark of the Christian life that lasts forever.

Love must be what the church is known for—the sacrificial love of Jesus must be our distinguishing characteristic.

**So what? Why is this important?**

Historically, the church has been the place where the lost, the broken, the sickly, the disabled, the abused, the orphaned, or hurting have found rest and peace and healing and the love of the Savior. Public hospitals first appeared as additions to Christian cathedrals in the Roman world.

Loving not only in word, but in action and deed. We love through what we do, not only with what we say. Our actions prove our love.

**Now what? What must I/we do now?**

The Church manifests such fruit in the way it deals with and supports members in its congregation. In doing so they demonstrate love in actions –as required by Jesus’ disciples (John 13:35). Go. Love.

## Worship Elements

### Song

- [“Be Glorified” by Bob Kilpatrick](#)
- [“The Servant Song” by Richard Gillard](#)
- [“Let Us Be Known” by Micah Massey](#)

### Story options

1. Tell stories from your own congregation, allowing individuals to share how they have found belonging in your community. Think about stories from people with visible and hidden disabilities and mental health challenges.
2. Share this story from All Belong about Aaron using his gifts to serve his congregation, while the worship director chose love over convenience: [Aaron’s story](#) (3:00), found at [vimeo.com/480553291](https://vimeo.com/480553291).

We tried it...

...what will you do?

At First Presbyterian, we created a video we called [Stories of Belonging](#) (6:34), because we could not all gather at the same time and place due to COVID, and in this way we could share stories of belonging in our congregation. Find it at [youtu.be/QD9UXjiRjv4](https://youtu.be/QD9UXjiRjv4).

## Additional Resources

### Books

Abbs, Deborah Meyer. *Belonging: Accessibility, Inclusion and Christian Community*; 2021, InterVarsity Press.

Bolt, Sarah. *Your Feet, My Shoes*; 2009, All Belong (formerly CLC Network).

Gehan, Mary Beth. *Irresistible Invitation: A Bible study on God's Extravagant Love for People with Disabilities*; 2018, Mary Beth Gehan.

Grcevich, Stephen. *Mental Health and the Church*; 2018, Zondervan.

Hardwick, Lamar. *Disability and the Church: A Vision for Diversity and Inclusion*; 2021, InterVarsity Press.

Hubach, Stephanie. *Same Lake, Different Boat*; Revised and updated 2020, P & R Publishing Co.

Newman, Barbara. *Accessible Gospel, Inclusive Worship*; 2014, All Belong.

Newman, Barbara. *Body Building: Devotions Celebrating Inclusive Community*; 2009, All Belong (formerly CLC Network).

Philo, Jolene and Weatherbee, Katie. *Every Child Welcome*; 2015, Kregel Publications.

Roberts, Tony. *Delight in Disorder: Ministry, Madness, Mission*; 2014, A Way With Words Publishing.

Winstrom, David. *I Choose Adam*; 2017, Lighting Tree Creative Media.

### Ministries

[Ability Ministries, abilityministry.com/](http://abilityministry.com/)

[All Belong Church Resources, allbelong.org/for-churches/church-resources/](http://allbelong.org/for-churches/church-resources/)

[Joni and Friends Church Resources, joniandfriends.org/ministries/church-training-resources/](http://joniandfriends.org/ministries/church-training-resources/)

[Key Ministry Church Resources, keyministry.org/churches](http://keyministry.org/churches)

[Nathaniel's Hope, https://nathanielshope.org/about-us/](https://nathanielshope.org/about-us/)

[The 5 Stages: Changing Attitudes, the5stages.com/resources/](http://the5stages.com/resources/)

## Study Guide

### Forward

This Study Guide explores belonging through the lens of people with disability. We have defined disability as something that hinders life activities. Disabilities may be visible or hidden and include mental health challenges. Disabilities may come or be discovered before, at or after birth. They may come with age, illness, injury, or other trauma.

Designed for small groups of people with varied abilities and ages, each lesson includes suggestions to use with children, youth, adults, or as an intergenerational experience. Each lesson is interactive and includes multi-sensory ways to engage and respond. Links to short videos are provided for each lesson along with options to use the guide without them.

The guide is designed to be a stand-alone study on belonging or in conjunction with a 7-week sermon series. The study could be used to prepare for an upcoming sermon or as a follow up discussion.

The desire to belong is universal and flows from God's welcome to each person. Dr. Erik Carter asked individuals and families impacted by disability to describe what belonging to a faith community would look like. Based on their responses Dr. Carter identified 10 Dimensions of belonging.



This graphic was originated by Erik Carter, and adapted for legibility by All Belong.

Each lesson introduces one or two **dimensions of belonging** and then explores correlating **Scripture passages**. Many lessons include links to videos that capture stories of belonging. Options for using the Study Guide without the videos are also provided in each lesson. The last segment of each lesson focuses on **applying the scriptures** in your own context and suggestions for a time of prayer.

Supplemental handouts and materials as well as resources are available in the appendix. A group facilitator should gather and print materials in preparation for the group study. Group participants need no other additional preparation. Participants may choose to watch the worship services and or sermons as presented by First Presbyterian Church.

The image of The Family Table is used throughout this study. The Family Table represents being part of God's family; to feast on the Word and experience God's presence in community. We invite others to come and dine with us, to come to the place we all belong.

The lessons in this Study Guide are formatted in sections:



**Engage with a Dimension of Belonging (Seated at the Table)**



**Explore Scripture (Feast on the Word)**



**Embody the Scripture (Set the Table for Others)**



**Pray**



**Ideas for Varying Ages**

We hope your group will include people with varying abilities and ages. Some helpful tips for accommodating various challenges that people in the group may experience and how you can adapt your sessions to the needs of your group are available from Friendship Ministries' *Together* curriculum at [togethersmallgroups.org](http://togethersmallgroups.org).

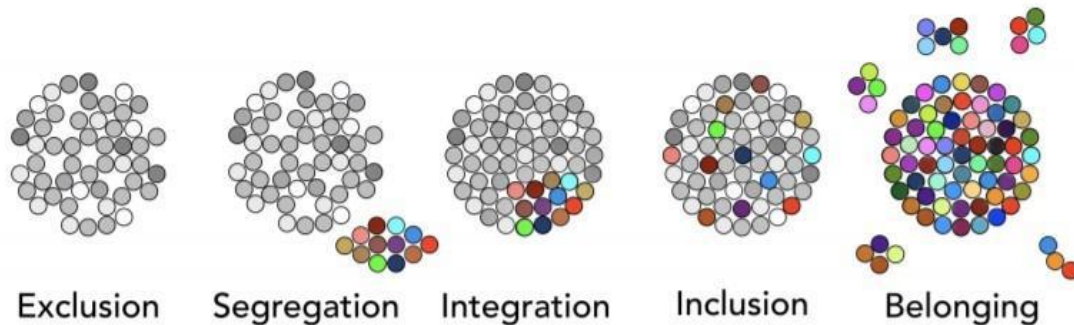


Creation of the study guide was a collaborative effort. Each lesson is a compilation of many contributors:

- First, the writings of Dr. Erik Carter on the 10 Dimensions of Belonging and Fostering Belonging.
- The sermons and outlines created by Rev. Jeffrey Moore and Rev. Isaiah Nordhagen and Rev. Dr. Karen Roberts of First Presbyterian Church of Aurora, IL provide the Scriptural foundation of each lesson.
- Suggestions for intergenerational groups were created by Lindsey Goetz, Children's Discipleship Coordinator of First Presbyterian Church of Aurora, IL, and Victoria White, Director of Church Services of All Belong Center for Inclusive Education.
- Others in the Circle of Congregations for Teaching and Learning, an initiative of All Belong also contributed to the creation of this Study Guide.

## Lesson 1: God's Heart of Welcome

### Introduction



Watch this video of Erik Carter providing an overview of belonging:

[“What Does it Mean to Belong?”](#)

Found at [vimeo.com/270445248/d5ecb21cd2](https://vimeo.com/270445248/d5ecb21cd2) (4:50)

#### Group discussion option

***Have you ever thought about what makes you feel like you belong somewhere?***

***What things make you feel like you are really part of a community?***

***What would you point to that tells you that you belong in your church, your school, in your neighborhood, and in your community?***



## Engage: Seated at the Family Table

### Dimension of Belonging: Present

To be present is to actually be there. People with disabilities are a part of all the things you offer as a congregation and all the places where people gather, just like anyone else. You cannot have a presence in a community if you are not present. It is hard to be part of a community from the outside.

Group activity: Identify the following with words or thumbs.



### True or False

- There are no people with disabilities in my city or at my school.
- There are no people with disabilities in our congregation, youth group, or children's ministry.
- Aurora's population is 194,899. There are 37,030, or 19% of people with disabilities in my city. (Insert the numbers for your community)
- In the neighborhood surrounding our church 1 out of every 7 households have a person with a disability.
- Barriers to belonging include both accessibility and attitudes.

### Option 1

Video: [Carried to the Table](#), found at [vimeo.com/478656244](https://vimeo.com/478656244) (4:02)

Discuss:

- Who is present at the table?
- What happened before people came to the table?
- What happened at the table?

## Option 2

Respond to this story from a pastor:

*His friend asked this pastor to come conduct his 5-year-old son's funeral, as the family had no pastor or church, but had found a church that was willing to allow them to use the building for the funeral. His son's disabilities had been what kept the family from being welcomed into the churches in their area (until the boy's body was welcomed as it came to the church in a casket).*



## Explore Scripture: Feast on the Word

### Scriptures

- Ephesians 4:4-6
- Exodus 25:8; 33:11
- John 1:1-5; 14
- 2 Corinthians 5:21
- Acts 4:32-35

Each of these Scripture passages speak to how the Triune God is present with his people. You may choose to read all the passages or select only 1 or 2 and discuss how the passage expresses God's heart of welcome to all.

### Key idea: **Belonging begins with being welcomed.**

Our welcome of others flows from God's heart of welcome for all peoples. The Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit exists forever in eternal communion. The Triune God was present with his people in the temple. In the Incarnation, Christ tabernacles among us so that he may save us. Because of Christ we belong to him and to one another.

God welcomes us into a relationship with Him that changes all our other relationships. The Church is called to be a picture of this: all ages, all abilities, all ethnicities, enjoying God together

**Discuss:**

**What do these passages say:**

- **About God?**
- **About people with disabilities?**
- **About the church?**

**So what: Why is this important?**

## **Embody: Set the Table for Others**

Watch this video, one of the Stories of Belonging from First Presbyterian Church Aurora: [Emily & Hollie](#), found at [vimeo.com/605667821](https://vimeo.com/605667821) (2:00)

### **Discuss:**

- **In what ways did Emily and Hollie feel welcomed at Friendship Bible Club?**
- **How did Hollie and Emily describe the fellowship they experience at Friendship Bible Club?**
- **How does Emily welcome others?**

Now what? What must I/we do now?

- Be open to the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts through this study so that our church becomes a community that embodies Christ-like love so that all belong.
- Take a walk around your church building. What areas are accessible, which are not? Or assign someone in your group to do that and report back to the group next week.
- Use Erik Carter's "Reflecting on Our Community" (Appendix [Resource A](#)) as a tool to evaluate where your congregation is at right now. We will come back to this tool in the last lesson.



### **Pray**

- Praise the Lord for being the Creator and Sustainer of Life. Praise Him for creating each person in His image.
- Take a moment to silently confess any personal fears or barriers.
- Thank the Lord for each person with a disability who is a part of your church community.
- Ask the Lord to work in each person's heart through this study.
- Pray for your church to become more and more a place of welcome for all ages, ethnicities, and abilities.



## Ideas for Varying Ages

Read **Mark 9:33-37** and discuss Jesus' welcoming of children. Look at how you have been welcomed and how you can welcome others.

Read **Acts 4:32-37** and imagine together what it would be like to be a part of the church described here.

Discuss:

- How is this like our church? How is it different?
- Make a poster of the words from **Ephesians 4:4-6**. Discuss:
- What does this unity look like?
- Where do you see it in your family? In our church?
- Where do you see it missing?
- Do you need to repent of wanting things to be comfortable or easy for you at the expense of others?
- Do you need to say you're sorry for refusing to welcome others as you have been welcomed by Jesus?

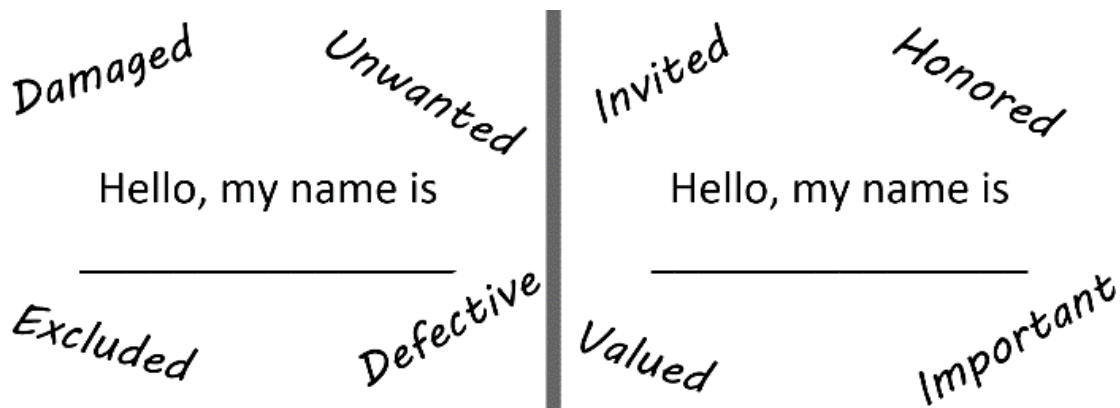
Imagine what radical welcome would look like in your home. In our church. Talk to God about what you notice.

**A Prayer:** God, you have welcomed us into your family. Forgive us for putting ourselves first, for choosing not to welcome as we have been welcomed. Change our hearts, Holy Spirit. Give us the grace to welcome as we have been welcomed by Jesus.

## Lesson 2 - Radical Inclusion

### Introduction

Give each person two nametags (like pictured here). Have you worn each of these nametags? Which nametag would you rather have? People with disabilities are often given the wrong nametag. Put the right nametag on yourself, on others.



### Engage: Seated at the Table

### Dimensions of Belonging: Invited and Welcomed

**Invited**—Actively pursued, sought out; people notice when you are not there and reach out into the community; we want you to be part of this community; you are indispensable; being pursued is something different than simply showing up. The “ache of your absence” is felt by the congregation.

**Welcomed**—When they do arrive, they encounter wonderful, maybe even extravagant hospitality, that warm deep welcome, not just in terms of what people say, but really in terms of how people feel when they are part of the family. A welcome without condition, without a caveat.

## Explore Scripture: Feast on the Word

### Scripture

- Luke 14:12-23

### Key idea: The Grace of Welcome

These verses challenge our view of the kingdom and who will be at the Messianic banquet. We extend the grace of welcome to people who cannot reciprocate, because that is what God does for us.

#### Discuss:

##### What do these passages say:

- About God?
- About people with disabilities?
- About the church?

##### So what: Why is this important?

Video: [Hyatt Moore painting](#) Luke 14, found at [vimeo.com/120535615](https://vimeo.com/120535615) (3:06)

#### Discuss:

The grace of God to us: The king desires his house to be filled in celebration. All our welcome to celebrate with the king, The grace of God extends to others through us: God's people are called to welcome others with the same grace.

- Who was invited to the banquet?
- Who declined the invitation?
- Who accepted the invitation?
- What are key verbs or action in this passage?

## Embody: Set the Table

We tend to enter relationships to get something out of it. Jesus admonishes us to enter relationships where we're giving more than we're getting.

Now what? What must I/we do now?

- Go out. Compel. Invite. What does this look like in our context?
- Are we actively welcoming those who are different from us, or who cannot reciprocate?
- Do we have an "ache" about the people who are absent in our fellowship?





## Pray

Spend some time in prayer. Examine your hearts. Commit to personally take one step to either “go”, “compel” or “invite” someone to the Table. Ask the Lord to show you a step you could take as a group over the next few weeks. Here is what the angel told me to write. “Blessed are those invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!” Then he added, “These are the true words of God.” Revelation 9:19



## Ideas for Varying Ages

**Video:** [The Wedding Banquet](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hv8ojKvo1pI) by Rain for Roots, found at [youtube.com/watch?v=hv8ojKvo1pI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hv8ojKvo1pI) (3:38)

Retell what happens in this story.

Re-read the reasons people give for refusing the King's invitation.

Discuss

- What do you make of them?
- Who is at the banquet instead?
- What makes them different?

**A Challenge<sup>1</sup>:** As a family or small group, make a list of 5 people to invite to a special dinner in your home.

Think of 2 people in your class, office or neighborhood who never get invited to anything. Imagine asking those people to your party.

- How would it change things at the party?
- What would it mean to the person invited?
- What would it mean to you?

**A Prayer:** God, we spend so much time thinking about ourselves, we forget those around us. Help us to notice who is missing from our church, from our friend groups, from our tables. Help us to miss them. Amen

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<sup>1</sup> Challenge taken from <http://worshipingwithchildren.blogspot.com/2016/07/year-c-proper-17-22nd-sunday-in.html> (accessed 9/2/21).

## Lesson 3: I See You

### Introduction

God sees us and says, “You are mine.” Welcoming and getting to know those who are different is hard, but it changes both the community that welcomes and the one who is welcomed.



### Engage: Seated at the Table

### Dimensions of Belonging: Known, Accepted

**Known**—When people are known personally and by their name, not just by their label. They are known by their gifts and strengths, personality, and passion they bring to this community, not simply by all the things they can’t do or struggle to do, which is so often how people with a disability are known in church communities: not by what they bring and those gifts, but by what they lack or struggle with.

**Accepted**—Without condition. I don’t have to earn my entry and I don’t have to wonder whether that entry will be re-offered the following week.



### Explore Scripture: Feast on the Word

#### Scripture

- Psalm 139:13-18
- John 10:14-16

#### Key idea: Our Creator God knows and sees us.

**Video:** [Psalm 139](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MlcyiF_vbDY), found at [youtube.com/watch?v=MlcyiF\\_vbDY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MlcyiF_vbDY) (2:54)  
Or have multiple readers recite Psalm 139:13-18.

#### Read John 10:14-16

The acceptance that Jesus gives causes grumblings by others. Acceptance by Jesus causes Zacchaeus to give half of his goods to the poor. Zacchaeus, in contrast to Matthew, stays where he is (he doesn’t follow Jesus to Jerusalem) and gives grace in response to being known and accepted by Jesus.

**Discuss:**

**What do these passages say:**

- **About God?**
- **About people with disabilities?**
- **About the church?**

**So what: Why is this important?**



## **Embody: Set the Table for Others**

Believing is nurtured within the context of belonging. Our job is to love without condition. God's Word and Spirit will do the rest. His grace and Word are sufficient.

### **Option 1**

**Video:** [Story of Nolan](https://vimeo.com/480553894), found at [vimeo.com/480553894](https://vimeo.com/480553894) (4:25)

**Discuss:**

- How did the church get to know Nolan?
- How did getting to know Nolan impact the way the church welcomed Nolan and his family?

### **Option 2**

**Read** the story of Adam Winstrom being invited and welcomed by Pastor Andy (in *I Choose Adam*, pgs. 111-113 (see [Appendix C](#)).

**Discuss:**

- Is our love conditional?
- How far are we as a church willing to go to accept people with varied disabilities?



## **Pray**

- Spend some time in praying for your church and for one another.
- Ask the Lord to reveal ways to show unconditional love to those already part of your church and for those outside your church walls.



## Ideas for Varying Ages

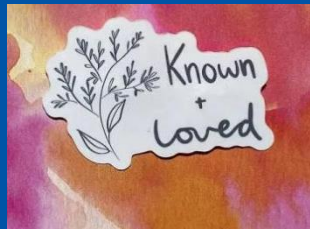
Talk about a time you have felt left out or unknown.

- What happened?
- How does it feel to know that Jesus has known and accepted you?
- What would it look like for you to see, know, and accept others?

**Video:** [Hardest/Best Willow Creek Special Friends](https://vimeo.com/99459645), found at [vimeo.com/99459645](https://vimeo.com/99459645) (3:56)

Identify some of the areas mentioned by individuals as hard/best.

**A Prayer:** God, thank you for knowing us and for accepting us in Jesus. Help us to see, know, and accept those who are left out and on the edges. Give us soft hearts that your Holy Spirit can change as we get to know those who are different from us. Amen.



Write notes to encourage someone in your congregation. Include a drawing like this one to remind each one that they are known and loved, the branch a reminder of Zacchaeus being in the tree when Jesus called out to him, revealing how he was known and love.

## Lesson 4: Whatever It Takes

### Introduction

God cares for us all the time, even when we forget he is caring for us! God's people care for and support each other, not just on Sundays at worship but throughout the week. We all help one another experience Jesus' presence and care whenever we can. We all help one another become like Jesus.



### Engage: Seated at the Table

#### Dimensions of Belonging: Supported, Cared-For

**Supported**—I feel like I belong when people know me well enough to know what support is needed so that I can be part of all that is offered in that community. Support is the pathway to being present. The support you are providing tells me that you want me there and you are willing to make the effort that is required to support that presence. Congregations that are committed to being places of belonging see that support as essential, not optional.

**Cared for**—Care for my flourishing 7 days a week. You are not just involved in my life for 3 hours on Sunday morning, but you know what is going on in my life and you are meeting other needs we have as a family; needs for respite, needs for relationships, just times of having fun together. Needs for jobs, or housing, or practical help, those kinds of things. Care is really about what happens beyond the walls of our building.



### Explore Scripture: Feast on the Word

#### Scripture

- Mark 2:1-12

#### Key idea: God's care for us is 24/7.

He never slumbers nor sleeps. There is never a time when He is not providing for our welfare. Likewise, in community we do whatever it takes to help one another flourish in Christ.

Discuss:

**What do these passages say:**

- **About God?**
- **About people with disabilities?**
- **About the church?**

**So what: Why is this important?**

Use one of the images of the scene to guide your discussion, if that helps you visualize the scene (see [Appendix C](#)).

## **Embody: Set the Table for Others**

### **Option 1**

**Video:** [Disability in Heaven](https://youtu.be/g4a4IxLtEEA), found at [youtu.be/g4a4IxLtEEA](https://youtu.be/g4a4IxLtEEA) (10:18)

Consider the possibilities for how to care for someone who has a disability and may feel very differently about it than others seem to feel.

Reflect on who is “on the mat” and what matters to Jesus: physical bodily ability, or spiritual cleansing and wholeness.

### **Option 2**

Reflect further on the story in **Mark 2: 1-12** using “Living the Story” ([Appendix Resource B](#)). You will spend time considering the story from the perspective of the 4 friends and from the perspective of the paralytic.

If possible, invite a person with a disability or a family member to come share with your group. Listen to their needs. What feels like support? What isn’t helpful?

### **Option 3**

Reflect on Kevin’s story as told by John Swinton in *From Inclusion to Belonging* ([Appendix Resource C](#)).



## Pray

- Praise God for times when He has cared for you. Praise God for people who have cared and supported you.
- Praise God for the vulnerability of the paralyzed man. Ask God to open your eyes to those who need to know the healing touch of Jesus.
- Are there people in your congregation that need care and support right now? Pray for them and pray that God will show you practical steps to take.
- Commit to the Lord to do whatever it takes to bring a friend to Jesus. Pray for a specific person and for one next step.



## Ideas for Varying Ages

### Discuss:

- What stands out to you in this story?
- What do you notice?
- Can you imagine what it would be like to have been the man on the mat?
- What about to be one of his friends?
- What would you want to say to Jesus?

Using LEGO, blocks, or another building toy, create a scene and retell the story of Jesus healing the man who couldn't walk.

Or draw a picture of the story, or a moment of the story that stands out to you.

### Read Psalm 121. Discuss:

- What does this passage tell you about how God cares for you?
- Can you remember a time God has cared for you?
- Share that with someone. Do you know someone who needs to experience God's care?
- What can you do to help bring them close to Jesus?

**A Prayer:** Jesus, you have the power over sin, Satan, and death. Help us to remember that you are always caring for your people, even when we cannot see it. Make us free to care for others. Amen.

## Lesson 5: No Longer Strangers

### Introduction

Watch this video:

**“Befriended”**, found at [youtube.com/watch?v=a7VI2xH70ts](https://youtube.com/watch?v=a7VI2xH70ts) (7:38)

We were made for relationships. The intimacy and the support and the reciprocity that comes from friends is essential to our thriving. It’s a part of flourishing. And yet the friendships so fundamental to our own flourishing are elusive for so many kids [and adults] with disabilities.

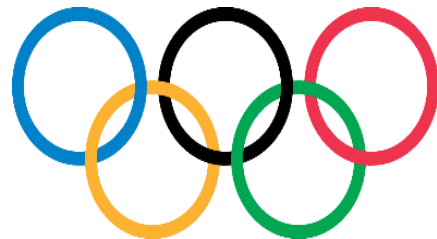


### Dimension of Belonging: Befriended

I know I belong when people name me as a friend, and when I can name them as friends. People to do things with, to go to the mall with, to have a meal with.

Discuss:

- Consider how these images make you think about being chosen, special, empowered, highlighted, and recognized.



- What might a symbol be to show you are chosen by the Lord?



- Consider what these symbols mean about being chosen, special, empowered, highlighted, and recognized.



- Does the Lord choose based on any of these things?
- Who does He choose as His friends?
- Does our church choose its friends?



## Explore Scripture: Feast on the Word

### Scripture

- John 15:12-16

### Key idea: Friendship is reciprocal.

Jesus calls us his friends. When we are friends with Jesus, we can be friends with all of God's people. Because of Jesus, we are brothers and sisters and friends.

#### Discuss:

#### What do these passages say:

- About God?
- About people with disabilities?
- About the church?

#### So what: Why is this important?

As Christians we are commanded to love one another. Jesus demonstrated the depth of His love for us by laying down his life for us. Friendship with Jesus involves the obligation of brotherly love. Christians grow by caring for and nurturing one another. (vs. 12)

## **Embodiment: Set the Table for Others**

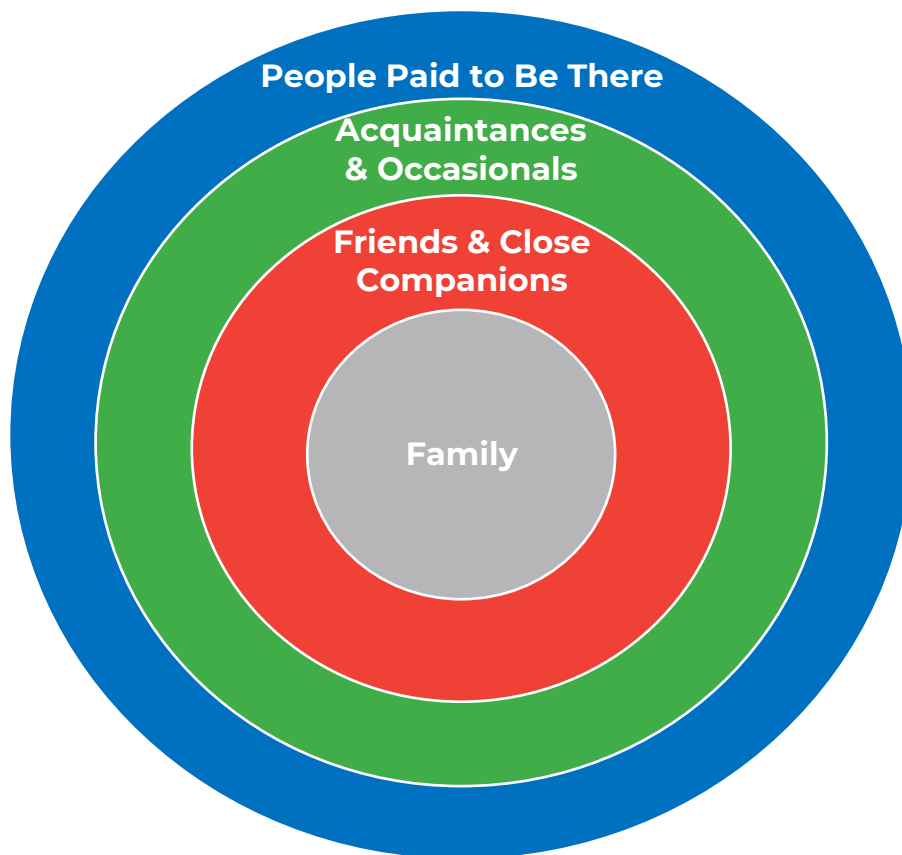
Our friendships with one another are to reflect the self-giving love and sacrifice of Jesus. (vs. 13-14). Friends know one another (vs. 15). They have a close relationship. They know what one another is doing. Friendship is mutual, reciprocal. Friends share a common life together because we are brothers and sisters in Christ.

### **Network of Relationships**

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*One nationally representative study of adolescents with autism found that 51% had not been invited to any other kids' social activity at all in the last year, not a birthday party, not a sleepover, not a football game, nothing. And more than one out of every four adults with intellectual disability who are in our service systems have no friendships or caring relationships in their life beyond family members or staff who are paid to be there, who are often a revolving support staff.*

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This graphic was originated by Erik Carter and adapted for legibility by All Belong.

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*When we think about befriending people, we are talking about the importance of what takes place between Sundays. You can't address a friendship in three hours on a Sunday morning substantively. This is about life lived together beyond the walls of the congregation. It's really what pushes us from acquaintances to friendships. And that means inviting someone to share a cup of coffee, participate in a favorite hobby, watch the big game, visit the mall, go for a walk in the park, join the same small group. And those ordinary gestures are things that rarely take place outside of the service system unless we step into that space. And what's great about this is being someone's friend requires no training, no expertise, no Ph.D. here. This is something we all know how to do, but we may not see how important it is to be intentional about it. -Erik Carter*

---

**Discuss:**

- **What are some gestures of friendship outside of Sunday worship or the school day that you could extend to someone?**

**Video:** Watch this video, one of the Stories of Belonging from First Presbyterian Church Aurora: [Richard and David](https://vimeo.com/605669280), found at [vimeo.com/605669280](https://vimeo.com/605669280) (2:02)

**Discuss:**

- **How did they meet?**
- **How does Richard's disability impact their friendship?**
- **How do they experience belonging at their church?**



**Pray**

- Spend some time sharing with the group stories of friendships you may have with a person(s) with disability.
- Spend some time in praying for your church to be a place where friendships are cultivated.
- Pray for one another asking the Lord to place a name of an individual with a disability that you could get to know in your church or community on your heart.
- Commit to one step towards developing that friendship.



## Ideas for Varying Ages

Read John 15:12-16

Discuss:

- What does it feel like to hear that Jesus calls you, his friend?
- What is special to you about Jesus' words here?
- What invitations from Jesus do you hear in these words?

Watch [this video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hdLVQwJNmW8) created by Living Stones Academy, found at [youtube.com/watch?v=hdLVQwJNmW8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hdLVQwJNmW8) (3:28)

This video takes place in a school, but if they can build friendship and figure things out for whole schooldays for Ruby, perhaps your church can be inspired to think about how to include someone with needs like hers. Have each person create their “Circle of relationships” (see Appendix [Resource B](#)).

Take turns sharing with the group.

**A Prayer:** Jesus, thank you for loving us, for calling us your friends. Make your love flow from us to those you bring into our lives. Please give us friendships with those who are different from us that we might all be blessed to experience and understand your love better. Amen.

## Lesson 6: Better Together

### Introduction

When we're convinced that every part is dependent on every other part, that when one part hurts, every other part is involved in the hurt and in the healing. And if one part flourishes, every other part enters into exuberance, we no longer think about inclusion as a nice thing to do because it's good for someone else. We start thinking about inclusion as important because it actually strengthens the Body.

When we believe this is true, we're not satisfied to wait until people arrive. We start extending new invitations. We start pursuing people whose gifts are missing. And we start extending invitations widely and wildly throughout our community.



### Engage: Seated at the Table

#### Dimension of Belonging: Needed

The church doesn't see me only as a focus of ministry, that designated recipient of support, but sees me as someone who has gifts and talents and support to give to others. Reciprocity in ministry.



### Explore Scripture: Feast on the Word

#### Scripture

- 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

Read: Ask 3 Readers to read.

**Reader 1:** Christ is like a single body, which has many parts; it is still one body, even though it is made up of different parts. In the same way, all of us, whether Jews or Gentiles, whether slaves or free, have been baptized into the one body by the same Spirit, and we have all been given the one Spirit to drink. For the body itself is not made up of only one part, but of many parts.

**Reader 2:** If the foot were to say, "Because I am not a hand, I don't belong to the body," that would not keep it from being a part of the body.

**Reader 3:** And if the ear were to say, “Because I am not an eye, I don’t belong to the body,” that would not keep it from being a part of the body.

**Reader 2:** If the whole body were just an eye, how could it hear?

**Reader 3:** And if it were only an ear, how could it smell?

**Reader 1:** As it is, however, God put every different part in the body just as he wanted it to be. There would not be a body if it were all only one part! As it is, there are many parts but one body.

**Reader 2:** So then, the eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!”

**Reader 3:** Nor can the head say to the feet, “Well, I don’t need you!”

**Reader 1:** On the contrary, we cannot do without the parts of the body that seem to be weaker;

**Reader 2:** and those parts that we think aren’t worth very much are the ones which we treat with greater care;

**Reader 3:** while the parts of the body which don’t look very nice are treated with special modesty, which the more beautiful parts do not need.

**Reader 1:** God has put the body together in such a way as to give greater honour to those parts that need it. And so there is no division in the body, but all its different parts have the same concern for one another. If one part of the body suffers,

**Readers 1, 2, and 3:** all the other parts suffer with it;

**Reader 1:** if one part is praised,

**Readers 1, 2, and 3:** all the other parts share its happiness.

**Reader 1:** All of you are Christ’s body, and each one is a part of it.

**Key idea:** The body of Christ is made up of many parts; all unique, all needed for the body of Christ to be complete.

People of all abilities are co-laborers in Christ. We are better together.

Discuss:

**What do these passages say:**

- **About God?**
- **About people with disabilities?**
- **About the church?**

**So what: Why is this important?**

## **Embody: Set the Table for Others**

Discuss:

- **So...do we operate in our churches as if we NEED the disabled?**
- **As if the disabled are “indispensable”?**
- **As if the disabled are to be treated with greater honor?**
- **If we did, how would...**
  - **...our leadership look?**
  - **...our facilities look?**
  - **...our fellowship need to change?**

### **Option 1**

Video: [Worship as One](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Goiumi_CxLI), found at [youtube.com/watch?v=Goiumi\\_CxLI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Goiumi_CxLI) (12:15)

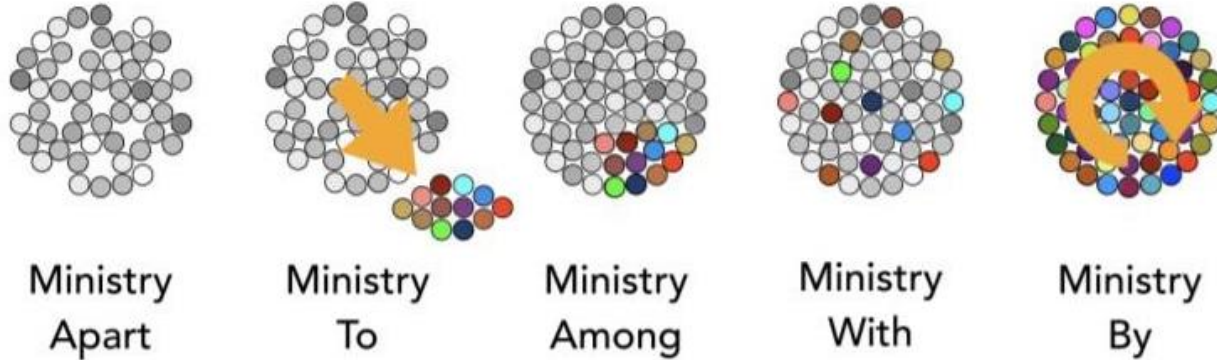
Discuss:

- **How could people with disabilities be encouraged to use their gifts in ministry at your church?**

### **Option 2**

Use “Profiles” (Appendix [Resource B](#)) and discuss how each individual could use their gifts at your church.

Take some time to discuss this diagram.



- Which circle best represents your church right now?
- What is one step you could take for your church to move to the next circle?



### Pray

- Pray for that next step.
- Praise God for individuals with disabilities who are already using their gifts for the Kingdom.
- Pray for more opportunities for people of varied abilities to use their gifts in the various ministries of your church.





## Ideas for Varying Ages

### Discuss:

- How does it feel to hear that you are an important part of God's people?
- How have you experienced this?
- Have you ever felt like you were not an important part of God's people?
- What was that like?



Puzzle Piece Perspective Handout puzzle pieces to each person in your group and share your “pink” and “green” areas with one another.

Consider how each person is a piece of the puzzle of the Body of Christ. Perhaps you would like to identify 3 things that are your “greens” – areas you are gifted, your strengths, things you enjoy doing, and 3 things that are your “pinks” – things that are hard for you, you don’t enjoy doing them, they are a struggle for you.

This video can help you visualize the activity: All Belong Puzzle Piece Animation, found at <https://vimeo.com/540229688> (3:15)

### Discuss:

- Could you share your areas of gifting with the church?
- Could there be someone in the church who would bring gifts in the places you struggle?

**A Prayer:** Jesus, you say that every person in your church is important to you and to what you are doing in the world. You say that we need each other to live like Jesus. Jesus. Please make our church this kind of place, where everyone is needed and welcomed and known, for your glory. Amen.

## Lesson 7: The Way of Love

### Introduction

Watch this video:

**"Loved" -Story of Mike and John**, found at <https://vimeo.com/605668259>  
(2:54)

Discuss:

- How would you describe the relationship between Mike and John?
- What does belonging to First Presbyterian Church mean to Mike?
- How is love being expressed?

---

*Wolf Wolfensberger, an advocate for people with disabilities, offers the observation that healing for wounded people with disabilities begins with three messages:  
that you're valuable,  
that you are as valuable as any other person,  
and that you are loved by those around you.*

*And as Henri Nouwen reminded us, that what lies among all of our deepest questions is that question of, is there anybody who loves me?*

*Well, the Scriptures remind us over and over and over that all we do and all we are, has to be marked by love. And the public service systems are not designed to love. But the church is. And that's a place we can step in uniquely to promote belonging. -Erik Carter*

---



### Engage: Seated at the Table

#### Dimension of Belonging: Loved

Love permeates all aspects of belonging. The command to love one another fully extends to people with disabilities. When people talk about communities that matter most to them, they often talk about the love they experience there.

## Explore Scripture: Feast on the Word

### Scripture

- 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

### Key idea: Love is the most important thing.

Love is the motivating factor. If I am welcoming, but not loving, my welcome is meaningless. All these dimensions of belonging will be evident in the life of our congregation if we are actively practicing love. Love bears all things. Everything else will pass away.

### Discuss:

#### What do these passages say:

- About God?
- About people with disabilities?
- About the church?

#### So what: Why is this important?

## Embody: Set the Table for Others

Loving not only in word, but in action and deed. We love through what we do, not only with what we say. Our actions prove our love. Ask the Holy Spirit to be with you as you reflect on your own life.

- Where do you see evidence of love?
- Where do you not see it?

As this study concludes, discuss “Reflecting on Our Community” as a tool to create next steps for yourself, for this group, and for your congregation (Appendix [Resource A](#)).

## Pray

- Pray for each of those next steps. Pray for the specific people who could participate in each of those steps.
- Pray that the Lord will use this group to share a vision to the whole congregation.

Video: [Carried to the Table](#) as found at [vimeo.com/478656244](https://vimeo.com/478656244) (4:02). Watch this one final time to conclude this study.



## Ideas for Varying Ages

Discuss:

Love is the most important thing. We can't be welcoming if we are not loving. The love of Jesus can make our church a place where all people are welcomed, included known, cared for, befriended, and needed

Read 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Discuss:

- What stands out to you in these verses?
- What do you notice?
- Write it down or draw a picture of what stands out to you. Can you think of stories you know of Jesus being the things described in this passage? When was He patient, kind, etc.?

As a group project, prepare notes to send families something they love—a candy, note, picture, something their favorite color, etc.—just one small thing that helps them know they are known and loved. Have supplies on hand.

**A Prayer:** Jesus, your love for us has changed our hearts and our lives! Make us people who love others with the things that we do and with the things we say. Amen.

# Appendix

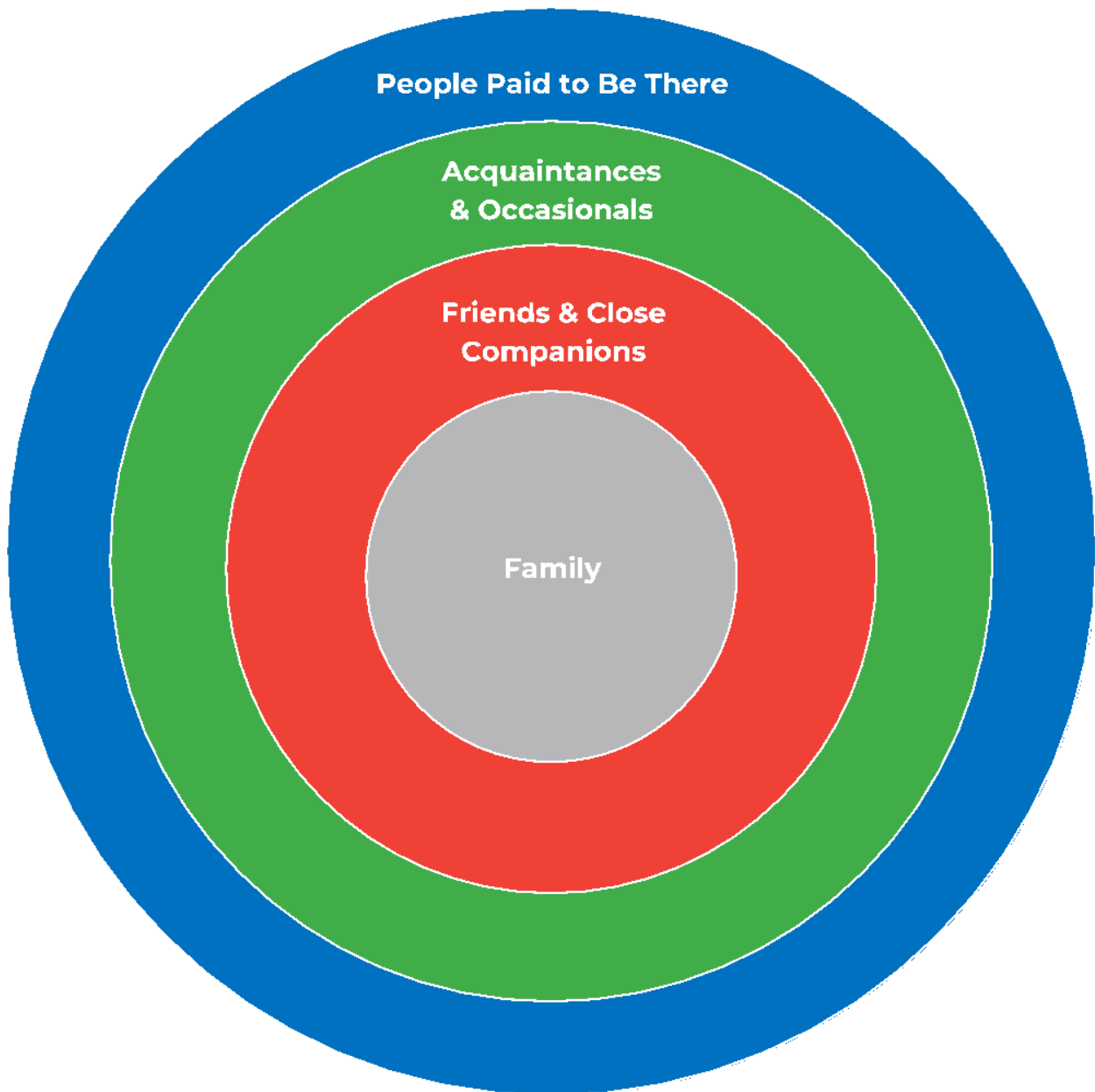
## Resource A: Reflecting on Our Community Tool Created by Erik Carter

Are people with disabilities and their families...	What are we doing <b>really well</b> right now?	What could we be doing <b>better</b> or <b>more of</b> ?
Present		
Invited		
Welcomed		
Known		
Accepted		
Supported		
Cared for		
Befriended		
Needed (valued)		
Loved		

# Appendix

## Resource B: Support Tools

### **B1: Circle of Relationships**



This graphic was originated by Erik Carter and adapted for legibility by All Belong.

# Appendix

## B2 Living the Story

### A Script, by Keith Scherer

To see this done, watch the video, [“Living the Story”](https://youtu.be/VOVOIDBsn5g), found at [youtu.be/VOVOIDBsn5g](https://youtu.be/VOVOIDBsn5g). (9:32)

Let us return to today’s Gospel story one more time.

You may want to close your eyes as we let our minds and hearts imagine the scene nearly 2,000 years ago.

You are entering into Capernaum, a good-sized village but not really a full-blown city.

- **What do you see as you are walking?**
- **What do you hear?**
- **Are there smells that catch your attention?**
- **What do you feel inside?**

You’ve come into town to head to the house where you’ve heard this one called Jesus is.

- **What do you notice about the house?**
- **What does it look like?**
- **What is it made of?**
- **How small or big is it?**

As you arrive you see a large number of people crowded inside and it seems like it’s so packed you won’t be able to join them. While you’re pondering what to do, you notice four men carrying a fifth on a pallet bed. You approach them and look at the man on the bed, a paralytic. It’s obvious why they are here.

- **What do you feel as you gaze at him?**
- **What do you want to say to him?**

There is no entry for them into the home where Jesus is. They leave you and head to the roof. You turn and somehow you manage to squirm your way inside the house.

- **What do you notice?**
- **Who do you see first?**
  - **The townspeople? How many are there? What are they doing?**
  - **The scribes? How are they dressed? Where are they seated**
  - **Jesus? What do you notice about him when you finally see him?**

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All of a sudden there is a commotion from above. Someone is removing a part of the roof! And then you see the four men from earlier, lowering the paralytic man down into the room.

- **What is the response of the people inside?**
- **What do you think is going on inside the paralytic man? How vulnerable he must feel!**

Jesus says, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” Whoa! What a shocking thing to say!

- **What’s the atmosphere inside the house now?**
- **What do you see on the people’s faces?**

Then after the silence, Jesus seems to rebuke the scribes! He tells them they’re questioning him in their heart and challenges them by saying, “Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise, take up your bed and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to give sins,” he says to the paralytic, “I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home.” And then the man did!

- **What happens in the room now?**
- **What’s the energy level?**
- **What are people saying?**

Let’s step back a bit in the story. Imagine that you are the paralytic.

You want to be healed and your friends are taking you to Jesus.

- **How are you feeling on the journey to where Jesus is?**
- **Excited? Vulnerable? Hopeful? Scared? Alone?**

Before you know it, your friends have taken you to the roof, have torn part of it apart and are lowering you down into the room!

- **What do you see as you are being lowered?**
- **What do you hear?**
- **What do you feel?**

When you come to rest on the floor, you notice a man looking at you. This must be Jesus.

- **What is your heart saying at this moment?**
- **What do you see in Jesus’s eyes?**

Jesus tells you that your sins are forgiven.

- **How does that make you feel?**
  - **Joyful?**



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- **Skeptical?**
- **Disappointed?**
- **Confused?**

Before you realize it, Jesus is telling you to get up, grab your pallet, and go home! And you are able to!

- **What do you want to say to Jesus right now?**

Imagine now that it's really you that's there. You're not a paralytic, but you know your own brokenness and need. You're standing in this really vulnerable place in front of Jesus.

Look into Jesus's eyes.

- **What do you see?**
- **What do you feel?**
- **What do you want to tell him that you need?**
  - **Spiritually? Physically? Emotionally? Anything in your life.**
- **Are you able to trust Jesus in your vulnerability?**
- **What does Jesus say to you?**
- **What do you want to say to Jesus?**

Finally let's enter into the story as the friends of the paralytic.

Imagine that after you've lowered your friend down into the home, and before Jesus turns his attention to your friend, he looks at you, the real you.

- **What do YOU see in Jesus's eyes?**
- **What is Jesus communicating to you?**
- **If you could say something to Jesus right now, what would it be?**

And then after the paralytic is healed, and you're turning to go, Jesus looks up at you again and asks, "Who else needs to be seen? Who else can you bring to me?"

- **How do you answer? Ask Jesus to help you answer.**

Jesus meets us in our vulnerability. And Jesus asks us to do whatever it takes. Let us continue to live the Gospel story.

# Appendix

## B3 Profiles



Each profile given below is made up of both the strengths and the struggles that an individual might have. Think of each one as a puzzle piece that is half green (strengths) and half pink (struggles). For more information about puzzle pieces, see [allbelong.org/church](http://allbelong.org/church).



### Profile 1

#### Strengths:

- **Dancing**
- **Dressing up, creating outfits, accessorizing**
- **Hula-hooping, jumping rope, bouncing balls, running**
- **Sharing hugs, foods, and anything else she has to give with those around her**

#### Struggles:

- **Reading is difficult**
- **Writing takes great effort and is frustrating**
- **Paying attention for more than a few moments**
- **Speaking words comes slowly**

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## Profile 2

### Strengths:

- **Laughter and infectious positivism, with a few pranks for his own amusement**
- **Patient with everyone, kind and gentle, a great listener whether he understands all that is said to him or not**
- **Enjoys counting, especially money, and keeping it organized**
- **Easy-going, even in new situations and with new people**

### Struggles:

- **Speaking words**
- **Understanding concepts and multi-step or multi-faceted instructions or ideas**
- **Social boundaries are difficult to comprehend and perceive**
- **Transportation limitations**



## Profile 3

### Strengths:

- **Technology, whether new or old, computer or small device, it all “makes sense” to him**
- **Strong memory**
- **Hard worker and thrives on routine**

### Struggles:

- **Fear of transitions and unknowns**
- **Social skills are difficult, unnatural to him, he does not read body language or social cues well**
- **Staying calm is difficult in loud situations, especially when there is a lot of commotion**

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## Profile 4

### Strengths:

- Faithful friend and prayer warrior
- Highly intelligent
- Writes a blog with a strong following

### Struggles:

- Sensations quickly overwhelm her: sounds, light, touch, smells can all cause her body to react intensely
- She cannot eat gluten, dairy, sugar or other foods that affect her health conditions
- Depression often affects her interactions with other people, particularly in large groups



## Profile 5

### Strengths:

- Intellectual discussion and sharing of his deep understanding of the Catholic faith
- Singing in the choir
- Prolific reader

### Struggles:

- Hearing is getting increasingly more difficult
- Vision is waning, and he sees best only what is directly in front of him
- Physical mobility is slower, more laborious and requires more assistance

# Appendix

## Resource C: Stories and More

### C1: Stories

Excerpt from *I Choose Adam: Nothing Special Please* by David Winstrom.  
Copyright ©2017 by David Winstrom. (pp. 109-113).

*This book is the amazing and emotional journey of David, Jetta, his wife, and Adam their very special son who was born with Autism and Down syndrome.*

#### **New Friends, New Churches**

As our rhythms and rituals changed to include Adam, many of our friends no longer recognized us as belonging in their own rhythms and rituals. Friendship changed. Adam added to our world by creating a condition to move us out of our old circle of friends into a new circle. We avoided the *special* world of mother's groups and groups that accepted the parents of children with Down syndrome. There is a palpable difference between being included and being placed in social supports.

As Adam began to grow, we slowly became involved in two communities, and each had their own rhythms and rituals. With each visit to the chiropractor, we got to know Mark a little better. He was Lutheran and invited us to come to church with him. Jetta was raised as Lutheran and wanted our family to belong in a church community, so we went. Naturally, Adam cried, and I couldn't get him to stop, so I got up and took him out of the service. One of the ushers followed me and suggested that "next time I could just start out in the *special* anti-room rather than disturb others. I would probably be more comfortable anyway." It made no sense to me to go to church and not be included as part of the body. The next week Jetta and I sat in the back, but I could tell I was not in the right place.

Jetta kept putting her hand on my knee because Adam and I were making noise. I told her I supported her going to church, but Adam and I would wait for her outside. Mark was an elder in the church and did what he could to influence the church community but found himself in opposition to the church's positions. When the church leadership didn't like Mark's approach, they told him that a committee was going to be formed to decide the best procedures to deal with a situation like ours. Forming a study committee is the typical response a system makes when it encounters opposition. Active disagreement is not a welcoming experience. Mark and his family remained our friends, but it was clear this church did not want us.

Richard and Julie as well as Mary Beth, another one of Jetta's friends from school, remained our friends. One day Jetta, Adam and I were visiting with Richard and Julie when Toby the Rabbi from the Temple just happened to come over. He came in and immediately walked over to Jetta and asked if he could hold Adam. Jetta handed Adam to Toby, and we all watched as he with

## Appendix

gentleness and assurance looked Adam all over. Then he held Adam up and said, “HaShem...Adam, you are a perfect creation!” and danced Adam around the room. He did the same dance Richard had done with Adam in the hospital. Then Toby turned to me and asked, “Have you started blessing Adam every Friday evening. It is never too early to start, you know!”.

He invited us to the Temple, and I choked out, “You know...we aren’t...um...Jewish.”

Just as I said “Jewish,” he said, “members, it’s oaky everyone is always welcome.” Then he added, “And if Adam makes noise...ahhh we can sing louder. Let him join in. If he needs to be bounced, bounce him. If you need to walk around, walk. We are 400 men and women; do you imagine we cannot find a way to include a baby? But you are not Jewish...Christian then?”

I said, “Yes.”

“All Christians are Jewish first.”

Jetta, Adam and I only went a few times, but the Rabbi was right when he said, “sit or walk during the service, but just come and be part of community.” Sometimes Mary Beth would take Adam to church with her, but she said she never held Adam through the whole service because someone would always ask if they could please hold him. A community was affirming Adam. A community was wanting him to belong. A community was welcoming us, and it was not a program or technique; it was a fundamental knowing that all belong and all are welcome. I learned that I will always be a good Jew first and then a Christian. Jetta, Adam and I were always welcomed and had an open invitation to come to Temple, parties and gatherings. Good people found us. I began blessing Adam every Friday night, and I thanked HaShem for loaning me Adam, His perfect creation.

Jetta wanted a community in Grand Haven for her family. The Temple was in Grand Rapids and did not offer her the day-to-day experience she hungered for. She found a small church led by a preacher named Andy DeJong. She went to her new church in Grand Haven and Adam and I enjoyed what I called the Church of the Big Sky—nature. We would walk and see what God was doing today.

Eventually, Jetta’s desire to include Adam and me in church culminated in a home visit from Pastor Andy. I liked him right away. He was bright and caring and had just the right edge of uncertainty to make any smug piety impossible. He told us Adam was welcome. Andy told us his brother also had Down syndrome and that we should come whenever we can and sit, stand or stay as needed. It was just what Jetta wanted to hear. She and Adam would go to the new church. Andy and I talked, and I explained to him that I found God in my Church of the Big Sky and would trust the safety and well-being of Jetta and Adam to him. And what an impact Adam had on that church.

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### Remembering Adam's First Sunday

*The first time Adam showed up with his mother, Jetta, at church, there might have been some worshipers that Sunday who hoped it would be his last.*

*Music can be a very sensory experience. This is especially the case for a person with Autism like Adam. Although Covenant Life Church had already made the transition from more traditional hymnody to contemporary worship music, most worshipers kept their hands, arms and hips fairly disengaged, leaving the voice to do all the work of worship. That might have lasted for quiet some time had Adam not shown up that memorable Sunday. The worship team had lined up some high-energy songs and Adam could not have been more pleased. Adam's arms were thrashing the air, his hips were gyrating, and his voice was entirely discordant and loud. But it was authentic!*

*And that's really the point. Adam brought into our presence his authenticity. His free expression was Unbridled by social or religious decorum, and his demeanor was always non-judgmental and his love Unconditional. Adam incarnated so much of Christ's teaching and lifestyle and that it spooked some people in the church. It was almost too real this Christ-like presence.*

*After several weeks went by with what I perceived to be a growing discomfort with Adam's presence I decided through God's grace not to become upset with People and their negative responses to Adam. It was too tempting to say something from the pulpit and risk even further disturbance among our people.*

*So, one morning, after the singing was finished I came forward to extend a welcome to everyone. I did this verbally. But then I walked off the raised platform, walked down the aisle in which Adam and Jetta were seated, put my hand on Adam's shoulder and said simply, "You are welcome here!" Adam jumped up and there, in that holy moment, we hugged each other as though we were long lost brother who hadn't seen each other for far too long.*

*And that's all it took. Love not spoken but physically expressed.*

*It became the turning point for the church as well as for Adam and Jetta and eventually David to all of us as belonging to the broken body of Christ where each person fulfills a necessary function for the body to thrive. I like to think of Adam as the heart. But if not that, he certainly was for us our rhythm, our de facto "spirit of soul."*

*-Pastor Andy DeJong*

**Kevin's Story by John Swinton**

## Appendix

Excerpt from John Swinton (2012) *From Inclusion to Belonging: A Practical Theology of Community, Disability and Humanness*, *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health*, 16:2, 172-190 (Excerpt pp. 180-181).  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15228967.2012.676243>

### *Thin Models of Inclusion*

Thin definitions of disability and thin understandings of disabled people lead to thin forms of inclusion. Take Kevin's story for example. In a study I conducted with Elaine Powrie (Swinton & Powrie, 2004), we highlighted a not untypical situation:

One group of carers spoke about their experiences with Kevin, a young man who has profound intellectual disabilities. After much debate the staff group decided to take Kevin to a local faith community. They viewed this purely as a social opportunity as they did not feel justified taking him on religious grounds. Nevertheless, they recognized this as an important dimension of Kevin's life and were keen to help him explore it. During the three months he attended, not one person spoke to him. One person patted him on the head in passing but that was it! The staff wondered if people were scared of Kevin, or embarrassed, or uncertain how to approach him. Either way the experience was not a good one, and they decided there was little point in Kevin continuing to attend. One member of staff said: Kevin gets a more positive response in the local coffee shop. Kevin has not been involved in any faith community since.

Kevin was perceived by the church as disabled—a thin person; someone (it seems to have been presumed) without a personality or the longings and desires that so called normal people take for granted. He was a stranger, a member of that odd group of people we call the disabled. Kevin was included, but he did not belong.



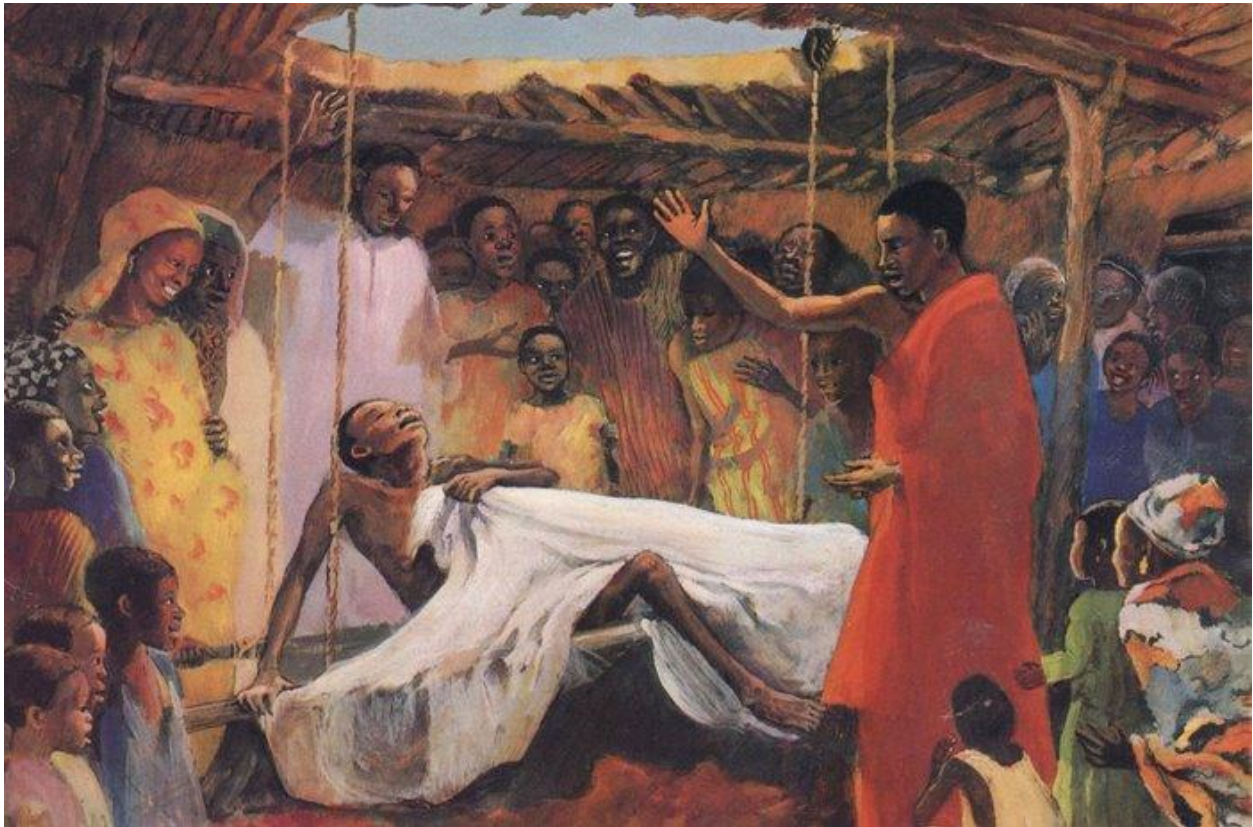
# Appendix

## C2: Images of the Healing of the Paralytic

*Jesus Heals the Paralyzed Man: ESUS MAFA.* Jesus heals a paralyzed man, from [Art in the Christian Tradition](#), a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN.

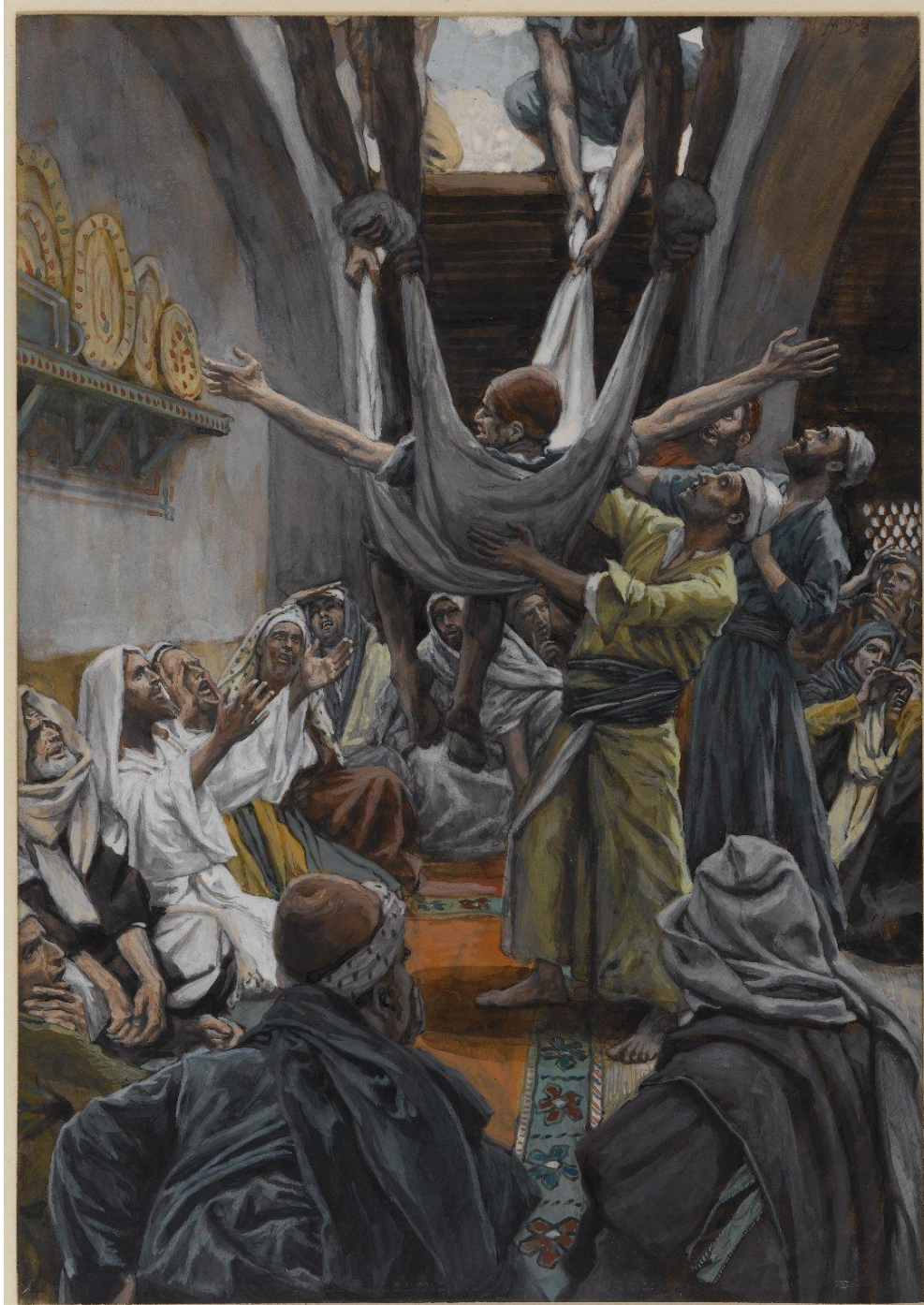
<https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=48306> [retrieved September 18, 2021].

Original source: <http://www.librairie-emmanuel.fr> (contact page: <https://www.librairie-emmanuel.fr/contact>).



## Appendix

*The Friends of the Paralytic*, James Tissot, (Public Domain) found at <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/4504>





# Appendix

## Resource D: Books & Ministries

### Books

- Abbs, Deborah Meyer. *Belonging: Accessibility, Inclusion and Christian Community*; 2021, InterVarsity Press.
- Bolt, Sarah. *Your Feet, My Shoes*; 2009, All Belong.
- Gehan, Mary Beth. *Irresistible Invitation: A Bible study on God's Extravagant Love for People with Disabilities*; 2018, Mary Beth Gehan.
- Grcevich, Stephen. *Mental Health and the Church*; 2018
- Hardwick, Lamar. *Disability and the Church: A Vision for Diversity and Inclusion*; 2021, InterVarsity Press.
- Hubach, Stephanie. *Same Lake, Different Boat*; Revised and updated 2020, P & R Publishing Co.
- Newman, Barbara.
  - *Accessible Gospel, Inclusive Worship*; 2014, All Belong.
  - *Body Building: Devotions Celebrating Inclusive Community*; 2009, All Belong
  - *Circle of Friends*; 2009, All Belong.
- Philo, Jolene and Weatherbee, Katie. *Every Child Welcome*; 2015, Kregel Publications.
- Roberts, Tony. *Delight in Disorder: Ministry, Madness, Mission*; 2014
- Winstrom, David. *I Choose Adam*; 2017, Lightning Tree Creative Media.

### Ministries (links to resources)

- [Ability Ministries, abilityministry.com/](http://abilityministry.com/)
- [All Belong Church Resources, allbelong.org/for-churches/church-resources/](http://allbelong.org/for-churches/church-resources/)
- [Joni and Friends Church Resources, joniandfriends.org/ministries/church-training-resources/](http://joniandfriends.org/ministries/church-training-resources/)
- [Key Ministry Church Resources, keyministry.org/churches](http://keyministry.org/churches)
- [Nathaniel's Hope, https://nathanielshope.org/about-us/](https://nathanielshope.org/about-us/)
- [The 5 Stages: Changing Attitudes, the5stages.com/resources/](http://the5stages.com/resources/)