*Ministry to the Handicapped*

*Global Leadership Summit*

*Kiev, Ukraine 2-9-17 Devotional*

Luke 4:16-ff. Cf Rev 14:6-ff

Jesus came for everyone, for everyone needed the salvation, the healing and the freedom that only he has the power to provide-. Just as true is the 3rd ange’ls message for everyone, for everyone needs to be reminded of the urgency that only a study of prophecy can provide; but also for the peace that passes all understanding that also results from a study of prophecy when prophecy is properly understood in light of the gospel.

 Prophecy without the gospel is pretty much doom and gloom, and legalism often results. On the other hand, the gospel without prophecy can lead to mere puff and fluff, a cheap grace may well eventually take over.

But my assigned task this morning is to spend some time considering the disabled, the differently abled, the special needs among us in light of who we are and why we are. Every nation kindred tongue and people certainly must include those of every society who are for whatever reason, somewhat less than fully independent. Now of course all of us are at least somewhat dependent on someone, something, or other. But those who are blind, deaf, mute, lame, developmentally challenged, orphaned, held captive, trafficked or otherwise more obviously in need of special support are the ones that I am thinking of today.

The Bible is not silent on the matter at all. Clearly Jesus claimed them for the purpose of bringing salvation, healing, and restoration-both here and in the life to come—we saw that in his reminder to his childhood friends already in his message to the synagogue at Nazareth.

But I want to spend some time looking at some specific biblical examples of ministry to those who we would consider special needs. The language we employ is important. Not to be politically correct per se, but rather to give ourselves open doors to their hearts rather than needless barriers erected by poorly chosen words.

If you would recall this morning a couple of key verses from the life of David… 2nd Samuel 5. As David is preparing to conquer Jebus and make it his new Capital Jerusalem, the Jebusites taunted David and his army saying, “The blind and the lame will repel you.” It sounds sort of like the trash talking that goes on between sport stars of opposing teams. “We could defeat you with our hands tied behind our backs.” Apparently David took the bait as it were and used it as a motivator for his troops. But in the KJV it is noted that the lame and the blind are hated by David’s soul. Now there are different ways to understand that including the idea that the residents of Jebus were considered as blind and lame to David. But it is an interesting choice of words. We think of David most of the time as a kind shepherd king who was benevolent in most ways. With of course some notable exceptions.

But to either hate the lame and the blind, or to hate the Jebusites as being as though they were lame and blind betrays the warrior like heart that David must have had to get him through the rigors of the road to the kingdom. So it is surprising that we read a completely different attitude in chapter 9. Verse 1 and following.

Mephibosheth, through no fault of his own was completely unable to walk. Dropped by his nurse as she in panic fled at the news of death of both Saul and Jonathan at the hands of the Philistines on Mt. Gilboa, at the age of 5, he knew what it was like to walk and run like everyone else but he couldn’t. And his depression is aptly described by his words, “dead dog” as a description of himself in his condition.

If you think about it—Mephibosheth likely survived to reach this moment in David’s presence because he was crippled. Had he been totally “abled” as we might say he may well have been a target of David’s armies as a potential rival, a rightful heir to Saul’s throne.

If you read the stories in 1st and 2nd Samuel, the blood-letting for the slightest of reasons is truly amazing. And the arbitrariness of even David in who he lets live and who he orders killed is hard to wrap at least my head around. The lame and the blind were impediments to victory, they took up space, slowed down the march, and cost large amounts of energy and resources. And yet Mephibosheth through his injury lives long enough to receive the blessing and beneficence of a very generous king.

Now the story doesn’t yet end. We won’t take time to read it all, but he comes up again in the story of the treason of Absalom. Mephibosheth can’t get out of town when David flees. But when David returns, he runs into Ziba, the steward the guardian if you will of Mephibosheth’s assets. And upon being asked about Mephibosheth, Ziba says, “Well Mephibosheth stayed behind because he thought you might lose the kingdom and in that moment it would be restored to him as the last heir to the house of Saul.” Which is a complete fabrication. Mephibosheth would have in that moment betrayed not only David’s trust in him and his lack of appreciation for the king’s largess, but he would have betrayed the memory and honor of his own father Jonathan. So was Mephibosheth being disloyal, and capricious? I don’t think so. And when David runs into him later and asks him, Mephibosheth basically says the Ziba left him behind.

So while the handicapped Mephibosheth is treated well by David he is used and manipulated by the one who was to care and provide for him. Really it isn’t all that unusual that such happens.

A year or so ago I was called for Jury Duty in a case where a care giver for an elderly lady was accused of bilking her out of several hundred thousand dollars because in her lack of mental capacity she was powerless to do anything to stop him. I was not allowed to serve on that jury because I have had no small exposure to geriatric mental illness and I had had some dealings with the defense attorney’s law firm. But it was an ugly case nonetheless and the jury deadlocked leaving everyone dissatisfied.

But the people with special needs are often used and not infrequently abused. Mephibosheth had well experienced both the good and the bad of treatment at the hands of others. His last mention is when David spared his life while giving 7 of his relatives over to the Gibeonites for them to get their revenge against the house of Saul.

Mephibosheth is an example of those whose special needs are the result of accident through no fault of their own. And it appears from this example that God’s people today have a similar duty as did
David.

We go to the New Testament for 2 other stories—I will just mention them, we won’t take the time to look them up but the first is found in gospel of Mark chapter 2 and finds a man brought to Jesus on a mat, let down through the roof because he was paralyzed and needed healing. Jesus doesn’t heal him immediately, as you know. He forgives him. Hmmm. While his friends brought him for healing, he allowed them to do so because he really wanted and needed heart healing, forgiveness from sin. All kinds of things happened as a result of Jesus providing the forgiveness of his sins, not the least of which was the eventual physical healing too.

The second story is from John chapter 5. Again we know this well. I won’t rehash the horribly Darwinian theology that drove both the thinking and behavior of the special needs population around the pool of Bethesda. The man is so desperately depressed after 38 years of paralysis and failure to make it first to the troubled waters that when Jesus asks him if he wants to be healed he can’t even say “yes.” Jesus heals him. But then a few verses later they converse again and Jesus tells him to leave his life of sin lest something worse come upon him.

In both of these stories, we have representatives of those special needs people who brought their condition upon themselves. That doesn’t seem to be a problem for Jesus—He takes care of both sides of the negative equation.

And in John 9 we have the man born blind. Again no fault of his own. The disciples are quick to ask the burning question of the day- who sinned this man or his parents? Jesus said, neither but that the works of God might be displayed.

Well we could talk about the prisoners, and the orphans but I am thinking today that perhaps we should look at the differently abled as Jesus did. And treat them as he did. They are after all as it were a pallet or rather a canvass upon which the glory, the grace and the power of God can be portrayed in powerful ways.

James was about 5 years old the day he visited the church of which I was pastor for the first time. He was an orphan. His mother had died shortly after he was born leaving him and a seven year old sister with their dad who re-married shortly thereafter. And sadly the step-mother who was certainly no angel to the kids, also developed a terminal illness. A couple of days before she died, the kids were in the hospital to see her for what turned out to be the last time. “I wish you kids well.” She said, “but it is because I have had to put up with you that I am sick and am going to die.” The kids were separated, and James went to live with some folk who were his great-grandparents. I never met his sister. While we worked at arranging an adoption for James, he was a serial liar and his adopted father could not deal with that and he went to an orphanage. I have reflected on that story from time-to-time. James would be well into his 40’s by now. What if we had been able to write on the canvass of his life the story of Jesus?
Some of us tried, but our time with him was so sporadic and ultimately so short. The widows and the fatherless—James says “pure religion” is to minister to them.

It was my very first year in ministry… When I learned so much. In that part of our Conference we had an extensive prison ministry. And it was my privilege to go in and out of 2 major prisons and one jail several times a month. I learned to love and appreciate those who responded to the multiple people from our churches who reached out to them.

I was waiting in a holding area one Thursday to see Thomas, Wilbur and David. All in for murder, all in for a very long time. My job that day was to tell them that their baptisms had to be put off once again as the administrative red-tape continued to delay and delay and delay. Mostly because of the chaplain who did not like us much. The chaplain did not know me. But as I waited for them to be brought down, that very chaplain walked in and sat across from me. He introduced himself and asked “who are you here to see?” When I told him, he completely came unglued—totally undone. It was amazing to experience. He began nearly hissing at me through his teeth in an attitude that I would not have believed if I had not seen it. “Mr. Lemon you are wasting your time. We cannot let you baptize those men because they are not converted. And the fact is that no one ever gets converted in this place; no one, not me and not you can convert these people.”

I had to be careful because we had already gone over his head to higher authorities to get the baptism accomplished and I did not want to set back that process any further, but I could not just be quiet. So I replied, “you are telling me that the gospel has no power in this place. That the Holy Spirit cannot work on the hearts of the men in this place.?” He stood up to tower over me and then to leave: “Mr. Lemon, you forget this is Maximum Security, even Jesus himself cannot convert people in here.” Two weeks later the senior pastor baptized those 3 precious souls in the prison infirmary bathtub. They became even more powerful witnesses in a very dark place. Often abused by the guards, they were amazingly resilient in their faith.

Why do we minister to people with special needs? The blind, the deaf, the lame, the orphan. Some of whom are reaping what they sowed. Why notice them? Why reach out to them? Why provide a chaplaincy ministry one purpose of which is to reach out to the sick, the disabled, the incarcerated, and in a different category the members of the armed forces of the nations of our world. Another purpose of which is to open doors to those who would be willing to be totally involved in this special ministry, open doors with training, and with contacts on the institutional inside that most of us cannot get to without their help. Why do we do it?

To answer that question, we can do no better than the words of Jesus there in John 9. “… this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”

The world is a dark place, but there is still enough light to enable our work. Those with special needs can and will display the works of God in powerful, powerful ways. Perhaps they will be and indeed are the ones, the living stones that will cry out the praises of the One who comes in the Name of the Lord, the Lord himself in power and great glory.