

## Perfectly Imperfect

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Richmond Heights, Ohio

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Access Sunday  
October 11, 2020

“You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth; and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth and will teach you what you shall do.” – Exodus 4:15

I know I’m not the only person in church this morning who loves the Britcrime dramas that PBS imports for us from the UK. Liz Duncan and I occasionally get on the phone to take apart the latest episode of Endeavour, which is the prequel to the old Morse mysteries that starred the late great John Thaw as Inspector Morse. In that series, we never knew what Inspector Morse’s first name was; he was just called Morse as he and his young detective, Sergeant Lewis, labored to bring evildoers to justice amidst the dreaming spires of Oxford.

Inspector Morse had Sergeant Lewis. Lewis, when he became a chief inspector, had his Sergeant Hathaway. If Hathaway rises through the ranks and takes over from his old boss, he, doubtless, will have his younger sidekick as well.

It’s a well-known trope: pairs of almost always male investigators leading the effort to untangle sometimes fiendishly difficult crimes. Morse and Lewis, Hercule Poirot and Hastings, Sherlock Holmes and Watson, even Hettie Wainthropp and Geoffrey.

And the literary figure goes very far back, as far back as the Babylonian epic of Gilgamesh, written about 1,800 years before Jesus. The hero is Gilgamesh but the exploits are about him and his partner and beloved friend, Enkidu, whose death brings Gilgamesh to such grief that he becomes for a time mentally unhinged. Although written by and for Babylonians, we know that Hebrews were listening to the epic, too, because copies of it have been found in Israel.

The heroic pair is a staple of human literature. When we recount heroic deeds, we almost always do so by singing of more than the isolated individual genius. True heroism, it turns out, rarely rests with a single person; experience and imagination tell us, rather, that every hero needs a little help.

So today’s reading from Exodus, from which I have taken my text for Disabilities Awareness Sunday or Access Sunday, shows a hero and his brother preparing to take on the ruler of the known world of their day. Moses and Aaron are about to confront pharaoh with the demand from God that pharaoh release the Hebrew people – Moses’ and Aaron’s people – from their Egyptian slavery.

And of course pharaoh’s going to refuse. Egypt’s economy depended on slave labor, as virtually every economic empire did in the ancient world, and as virtually every economic empire does still today. We don’t call it slave labor anymore, we call it slave wages, but it

amounts pretty much to the same thing: the inability of people to determine their own lives because they're too poor to do so. And it's very, very real.

So real, in fact, that the Hebrew people cried out to God for help, and that's where we enter the story in today's reading. We know the basic outline of the story of the Exodus, but we often overlook the detail found in today's lesson: Moses has a handicap. Moses has some kind of speech defect that prevents him, he thinks, from fulfilling his divine commission: "But Moses said to the LORD, 'O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.'"

Moses is saying in effect, I'm not a good public speaker. I get nervous in the presence of the la-di-da. I get tongue-tied, weak in the knees, cloudy in the head. I'm not the person for the job. Please send someone else.

But God sees things differently. However legitimate Moses's self-doubts may have been, he's forgetting that he's not commissioning himself. He's being commissioned by God, and to God, a speech impediment is no handicap: "Then the LORD said to him, 'Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak.'"

God reminds Moses that our ability to communicate, when we're speaking on God's behalf, doesn't depend on our having had elocution lessons or winning debate tournaments. When God uses us to speak for justice or mercy or righteousness or peace, God gives us the words to say and the ability to say them.

But Moses isn't convinced. "But [Moses] said, 'O my Lord, please send someone else.' Then the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses and he said, 'What of your brother Aaron the Levite? I know that he can speak fluently; even now he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you his heart will be glad. You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth; and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and will teach you what you shall do.'"

God lost patience with Moses's lack of courage and designated Aaron as Moses's spokesperson. Moses would remain the divinely inspired brains behind the operation, and Aaron would do the talking. Whether because of his genuine limitations or his own self-doubt, Moses can't carry out his divine calling by himself.

But who among us can? Who among us can be the person God calls us to be without the assistance of others? On this Disabilities Awareness Sunday, we need to be reminded not of the disabilities of others, but of the disabilities we all share that prevent us from living into our God-given potential.

Not one of us is whole -- physically, mentally, morally, emotionally, psychologically, or spiritually. We are all, in one way or another, in one form or another, disabled on our own -- unable to be the human one we are shown in the Christ -- and the only way for us to begin to bridge that gulf is through the assistance of others. We are perfectly imperfect only when we are in right relationship with others -- with God, with creation, with people, and with our deepest selves.

So-called handicapped people are different only in degree, not in kind. One person doesn't speak as well as another. One person doesn't move as smoothly as another. One person doesn't think as clearly as another. We know this about ourselves, which is why we form ourselves into groups that we call committees. Committees help us overcome our

individual limitations. We have more brains, more perspectives, more experience in the room and we do better than we do on our own. As Paul Wellstone liked to say, We all do better when we all do better. We are in this world together, with our differing gifts and differing abilities, and the true mark of our humanity is how we care for and include the most vulnerable, not how lavishly we praise the tough guys and the tough gals and the thugs and the bullies. One reason we are so polarized right now is precisely because of the outrage many of us feel at the adoration and power being heaped on those seeking to exclude, shut out, deny access to, make illegal, suppress, and to take more and more for themselves and their cronies. That outrage and that polarization is not going to go away anytime soon.

Those of us who have been worshiping here in the sanctuary the past few weeks have been entering by the south door and exiting by the east door. It's marvelously symbolic to me that on this Access Sunday we are all here because we came through the access door. Most of us enter on most Sundays through the main, porch door, but perhaps we should continue to enter by the access door – the door intended for those with limited ability -- to remind ourselves of the limited ability that all of us possess.

A few weeks ago, Andrew Vogt emailed me some of the history regarding the accessibility we all benefit from here at Faith Church. The names Evelyn and Alan Eisenmann, Rita and Tom Basler, Jean and Ralph Sinzinger, and Howard Rasmussen may be only names to some of us, but to others of us they were the people who, along with Andrew's parents, Ken and Mary-ellen, were instrumental in making Faith Church more physically accessible for everyone. Something as simple as adding reserved parking spaces outside the south doors for those with handicap decals or removing a couple of half-pews to allow space in the sanctuary for wheelchairs or installing a sturdy handrail along our main corridor – those may not seem like rocket science, but they can make all the difference for someone with physical challenges that the rest of us overlook. Long before we designated ourselves an Open and Affirming Congregation, many of us had been working to make Faith a place where everyone – perfectly imperfect as we all are – is welcome.

We still have work to do; there will always be imperfections to work on, but as long as we continue to do that work together, drawing on the gifts and perspectives and experience and wisdom of an ever-widening circle of kin, we will continue to move in the right direction.

So sometime in the future, when you come to the church building to worship, consider altering your routine if you ordinarily enter the building through the porch doors. Take a short walk to the south entrance, which we're all using now, and say a little prayer of thanksgiving for all those who have helped us, together, become perfectly imperfect.