**Shiny Happy People: The Importance of Including Everyone**

*Ruth Wilde- Inclusive Church*

**Song**

There is a song by the band REM – do you remember them? – called Shiny Happy People.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYOKMUTTDdA>

Here are some of the lyrics if you didn’t catch them:

Shiny happy people laughing

Meet me in the crowd, people, people  
Throw your love around, love me, love me  
Take it into town, happy, happy  
Put it in the ground where the flowers grow  
Gold and silver shine

Shiny happy people holding hands  
Shiny happy people holding hands  
Shiny happy people laughing

**Break out groups** – 10 minutes

How does that song and/or video make you feel? Included or excluded?

Did you notice anything interesting about the lyrics or the video?

**Talk**

When I was a teenager, I went to a church that my parents thought I’d like. It had loud, charismatic worship music for young people to enjoy. Most of the young people enjoyed it. I quite liked the music, but I was a shy child and, although I didn’t know this at the time, I was also gay and neurodiverse. I felt quite different and the young people around me felt quite shiny and happy. I didn’t fit in. I wasn’t happy there and the pressure I felt to be happy just made me feel guilty on top of not feeling happy or comfortable. I almost felt like Christians were supposed to be happy at all times and if we weren’t, we were failing as Christians. That was the message I took away from that church. It’s a little bit toxic when I think about it now.

Joy is a wonderful gift of the Spirit, and I actually love that song. When I listen to it now, it makes me want to dance! I love feeling happy and ‘throwing my love around’ as the song says(!), but only when I truly do feel happy and comfortable not when it’s forced upon me! I also feel sad when I need to feel sad or when sad things happen and there is a need for grief or a need to comfort or be there for others who are grieving. It is not appropriate to be happy and shiny at all times and churches like that can be quite traumatising for many people, resulting in a lack of proper pastoral care for people who need it.

I know you don’t need me to tell you that Christians telling other Christians that they are not good Christians because they are not shiny and happy all of the time is not inclusive. I felt uncomfortable in that church, but how many others would have also felt uncomfortable and excluded there? What about people with depression? Instead of supported and loved for who they were no matter what, they would have felt judged and like a failure and like God hated them. In churches for only shiny, happy people, you’re not allowed to be disabled. My grandmother had chronic fatigue or ME for the last 10 years of her life. She never got better despite trying everything. Back then, in the 1990s and early 2000s, the doctors didn’t even believe her and the Christians she told said her faith wasn’t strong enough to get her healed. So she kept trying. Every time she tried and it didn’t work, she thought a little less of herself and her depression got worse. Every time, because chronic fatigue is often linked with depression, her physical illness also got worse. Their total lack of pastoral care made her worse, not better.

This is what happens when you have a shiny happy people theology of the in-crowd. It is bad theology. It is broken theology. It is a damaged and a damaging theology. That church from my youth and the churches my Grandma went to thought, with their focus on literal physical healing and being joyous at all times, that they were being very good and very Christian, but they were, in the words of St Paul, loud ‘clanging cymbals’ hurting people, because they put those things above all the things that matter much more to God – things like being alongside people in their grief,loneliness and pain, making sure everyone is included and enabled no matter what.

One of our regional volunteers at Inclusive Church told me the story of someone who came to his church a few years ago. There are steps up to the place where everyone drinks their coffee and tea. One Sunday, they had a new visitor. This visitor was a wheelchair user. Everyone walked past him and looked at him helplessly not knowing what to do, as they had no ramp in the church and no way of helping him up. The volunteer said he didn’t know what to do himself either and he felt really uncomfortable about the whole situation and resolved to get the church to change from that day onwards. I asked what happened to that poor excluded man. He said ‘nothing’. He just stayed there a while. No-one said anything to him. And then he left. There was silence in the group he told this story to. I was in shock. There is no reasonable explanation for good people to have just carried on as if this person didn’t exist. That is what you call dehumanisation. The disability charity Scope did research a few years back which said that a majority of people in the UK do not speak to disabled people because they don’t know what to say to them. This is the reality for disabled people in their day to day lives. But disabled people are just people. Why do we treat them like this? We need to educate ourselves, because there is so much increased likelihood of loneliness among disabled people.

Even if there was no ramp, people did not need to abdicate responsibility and do nothing in this situation. There are so many other things that could have usefully been done to include this man. Let me give you a simple answer here as to what could have and should have happened with a little bit of awareness and education in that probably well-meaning but very under-educated congregation. I recently had a birthday party. One of my friends is a wheelchair user. Unfortunately, I trusted the venue when they said the main part of the venue with the tepee (like a tent) was wheelchair accessible. It was only accessible to manual wheelchairs and her automatic wouldn’t fit on the ramp. She had to stay down in the area which was not for our private party but was for any member of the public to sit in, so what did we do? We all moved there and took over the public area to be with her. Why did people not just move to be with the man in the wheelchair and bring him a drink?

All of this is very important for us to grasp as a church, because God is calling us to inclusion as part of our mission in the 21st Century, and inclusion and mission are intertwined. The Methodist Church in the UK has understood this and the Lutheran Church in Sweden has understood this. You are two churches which I have seen which have really taken this call very seriously- I’m sure there are others too, but you are the two where I have seen it the most clearly so far. The Methodist Church here brought out a report followed by a strategy. The report was to do with some research they did in the North-East of England which showed that one of the main things growing churches had in common was that they were inclusive. I can send the report to Erik if you are interested in reading it. The Methodist Church is now following a strategy which links mission and evangelism with inclusion. It is very exciting to see.

It doesn’t surprise me at all that churches grow when they are inclusive. I have had many stories from volunteers and ministers in churches which tell the same story – and they often tell me that inclusion is intersectional in their churches, so they have Nigerians, Farsi speaking people, LGBT people, French speakers etc all together in their churches happily mixing. Churches grow when they are inclusive because they are open to change and to learning from the other, and because they care about people. Churches also grow when they are inclusive because, very importantly, they are open to the movement of the Spirit. Churches don’t grow when they are un-inclusive, because they are set in their ways and shut to the movement of the Spirit, closed to new ideas, lacking in pastoral care, and don’t actually need God because they think they have all the answers already. They are shiny and happy – and cold.

Yes, there are stories in the Bible of healing. And, yes, it can be problematic and painful for disabled people when they are read in church. But when Jesus heals, notice that he tends to ask first ‘what is it that you want?’ He doesn’t assume that the person wants physical healing. He sees the person as already whole. Also, the healing he does has more meaning that physical healing. Disabled people were cut off from society, much more than we can imagine nowadays. They were in much more pain as well, as they didn’t have any modern medicine! We shouldn’t assume that someone disabled nowadays needs healing, or that they’re not whole or just fine how they are, but someone in Jesus’ day may well have thought it was a pretty good option for acceptance into their community and freedom from pain. Jesus was thinking mainly holistically about the person – he always and most especially wanted them to be part of their community again, which is why he always asked them to go and find their community and tell them about what had happened. When we think about healing, let’s think about all types of healing and harm. I think the shiny happy church I went to and the church my grandma went to did a lot of harm to people and no doubt people had some healing to do from those churches afterwards. Healing from exclusion is an important type of healing we need to do and the church has been guilty of excluding on too many occasions.

I asked you at the beginning how you felt about that song. Did you like it? I have to say that, when I’m feeling in the mood, I love to dance along to that song. It makes me feel happy and joyful. But if I was feeling sad about something, it would be jarring. Churches need to be there for everyone, which is why shiny happy churches can never be inclusive. Churches need to try, as far as they can, to include every person in their midst. They need to think about how someone who is a shy teenager might feel or how an older lady with chronic fatigue might feel, or how someone who’s just lost their mum might feel, or how an LGBT person might feel if they’ve just come out to family. What about the feelings of a disabled person who might have to ask for a different entrance because you don’t have level access in your church, or of an autistic 50 year old who struggles with sudden loud noises? How might the experience of church be for a single mum when people are grumpy about her loud three-year old, or for a person who’s always late and people look round at them, when it’s not their fault they have ADHD and time blindness? How do we make church comfortable for someone who’s grieving the Queen of England even thought they never met her, but also for one of the 25% of republicans in the UK who might feel alienated by the monarchy being everywhere? How might someone who lost someone close to them on the same day the Queen died feel about it all, or what about the overworked priest?

It is extremely hard to include everyone. But it is the work of the kingdom, and I am so glad to be doing it with you. God bless you.