

Dear Church,

Some stories bear repeating. I've spoken and written more than once about my dear friend Ryan Mathews, who was confined to a wheelchair his entire life due to a condition called arthrogryposis multiplex congenita. At first glance, Ryan looked very disabled, but he found a way to live a very normal and independent life. He moved from Ohio to St. Louis to attend Eden Theological Seminary, lived independently, and drove a unique vehicle into which the wheels of his automated wheelchair would lock, while he used his hands to drive. He was a brilliant preacher, counselor, theologian, friend, and musician (he played the trumpet). He had extraordinarily thick skin, and never hesitated to speak up on social justice issues in the classroom or at the state capital. He was a powerful figure. Unfortunately, he had a car accident the fall after he graduated from seminary, and complications from that accident eventually resulted in his death at home in St. Louis.

Ryan was one of the most eligible candidates for ministry I have ever met, but he died without serving a church. In fact, his ordination took place as a part of his funeral. The reason Ryan struggled so hard to find a position was because of how few churches would be able to offer him the accessibility he needed to be their pastor, or at the very least to access their pulpit.

On this past February 22nd, I walked into our sanctuary to see the framing of an ADA compatible ramp that leads to our new chancel. I cannot begin to articulate how proud I am of this church for making the decision to incorporate this accessibility into our sacred space. I immediately thought of Ryan, and how it would bring him tears of joy to drive into our parking lot on Ransom Street, press buttons to open the doors, ride up the elevator, and power his wheelchair up the ramp to preach in our sanctuary.

Our new ramp is not just for people like Ryan or those who want more stability than stairs offer. The ramp is a sign and symbol of an extravagant welcome: the unobstructed invitation to stand on Holy Ground and speak the Word of God. Since the beginning of Christianity, human beings have instituted barriers about who can speak in church and who can't-- not just because of stairs, but because of close-minded rules. Only men. Only those who are heterosexual. Only those who are celibate. Only those who can read. Only those who are old enough. Only those who are young enough. Only members. Only baptized. Only ordained. But now our church, the First Congregational UCC of Ripon, is making a bold statement: nothing is stopping you. Come, make music... read God's Word... profess the Gospel... tell the Story... tell your story: nothing is stopping you.

Thanks be to God,  
Pastor Joanna