

Good morning everyone. My name is Sam and this morning I am going to share my testimony about the power of inclusion. I want to start by telling you a little bit about my story.

When I was younger I heard a lot of negative messages in the world out there. Maybe you have heard them too.

Some people think that a person like me could never have a job, that I could never work or even contribute to society. Those negative messages had an effect on me and they made me sad. I think part of me worried that I wouldn't be able to get a job, or be able to go places by myself or to be independent.

In the summer of 2015, right after I went to Camp Thrive (a camp for people with Autism) I was offered an incredible opportunity. Chris, a manager at a Starbucks offered me a job interview. What I didn't know is that Chris wanted to hire me to be Starbucks newest Café attendant! I got the job! And when I found out I got the job I freaked out! It was like a dream that I'd had for years was finally coming true! The first thing I did was tell my parents - and they were super happy too! They cried tears of joy. It was a huge deal for me. Chris's act of inclusion, by offering me a job and giving me a chance to prove myself, has changed my whole life for the better. And now I have another job too, at Community Living!

Getting that job at Starbucks was so important to me, because it showed me that someone was willing to go long for someone with special needs. To take a chance on someone who is different. I like saying that – “Someone who is different” because it shows that someone isn't worse or better, they are just

different and that's okay. It's important to me that when you look at someone, you see their humanity rather than a label. When people see my humanity, and love and accept me for who I am, it makes my life better.

I think that inclusion is always better than exclusion. Inclusion makes your world bigger. Exclusion makes your world smaller. Inclusion shares love and hope and makes your life richer. Exclusion is an act of injustice. That's why I am an advocate for inclusion.

You know who else was interested in inclusion? Jesus.

Cormac and I talked about this. Jesus lived out justice in a different way than the people before him. For Jesus, love and justice were interconnected. One thing that Jesus got in trouble for during his life was that people thought Jesus was **TOO** inclusive. He didn't mind if sick people touched him. He hung out with poor people and people no one wanted to hang out with. He didn't mind if children wanted to talk to him. He ate with women who had "bad reputations". Jesus stuck up for people that no one else would stick up for. And every single time someone said "Jesus, you shouldn't include **THOSE** people" Jesus included them anyway. Jesus showed the people around him to not be afraid of what other people think. Jesus showed them that it was more important to love **EVERYONE** no matter who they are, than it was to follow society's expectations.

We should do **THAT** more. It makes a big difference.

I am really happy and grateful that my mum brought me to a church that values inclusion. Saint John's is already an inclusive place and we are all a pretty accepting, friendly bunch of people. But we can always do more - we can challenge ourselves to do more everyday.

If you think you can be more inclusive in your life, you are right! So I challenge you to learn more, hang out more and take a chance on people who are different from you. That's what Jesus did in his whole life, and it's what my manager Chris did when he offered me a job.

No one needs to be scared of me just because I might flick my hand or rock back and forth. Starbucks is really happy they hired me, I work hard at my job and have been able to inspire people with my story.

And you don't need to be afraid of anyone who is different for any reason, whether they have special needs, or if they are people of colour, or if they're native or LGBTQ – don't be afraid. And don't miss out! Take a chance, take a risk and go long for justice and inclusion.

Today my life is better because people included me – because they knew it was the just thing to do. And your life is better because people have included you too.

People who are different from you have a lot to teach you – and if you include them, your life will be more beautiful because you did.

Thank you.

