

# Hospitality to People with Disabilities

## Luke 14:1,7-14

The church I grew up in, in suburban Adelaide, used to conduct a ministry to people with an intellectual disability, at a place called Minda Home. Members of the congregation used to run a regular service for the people who lived there, all of whom had some form of intellectual disability, mostly as a result of Down Syndrome.



To my shame, I never visited Minda Home. Even worse to say, most of the times I heard the word Minda it was used as a term of abuse in the primary school playground, along with other words that used to describe various forms of disability, like spastic, also the name of a disability support agency. How cruel kids could be, even though most of us had never really met anyone with a disability.



My experience was a little different. My local congregation, apart from its close connection with Minda Home, was blessed to be home to a middle-aged man with Down Syndrome. He lived with his elderly mother, who must have been in her late 70's. They used to sit toward the front of the church, certainly in front of where my family sat. I was moved by his obvious and affectionate love for his mother, and he for her. Nowhere was this more clearly shown than when they went to receive Holy Communion. He would hold her hand and together they would walk down to the altar, lean at the altar rail, together receive the sacrament, and then return hand in hand up the aisle.

As I grew older, I used to wonder what would happen to him when his elderly mother died. Would he have to live in care? How would he cope without his mother's love? Yet part of the answer was that he was already part of a loving community, and a welcome guest at the Lord's table.

Some time later I remember having a discussion with an unnamed person about whether a person with an intellectual disability should even receive Holy Communion. After all, this person said, they didn't have the intellectual capacity to understand the church's teaching about the meaning of the sacrament. What about those increasing numbers of people with dementia and Alzheimers, and those with an Acquired Brain Injury? My heart felt that this question should be asked at all. I wish he could have seen this man and his mother kneeling to receive Jesus' body and blood, welcome guests at this meal hosted by Jesus.



I'm older now, perhaps wiser, and much more personally acquainted with what disability means, primarily through my own family's experience. And one of

the most precious times for me is when we together come to the Lord's table as unworthy guests, my daughter's hand in mine, as we receive the life-giving body and blood of Jesus.

Today Jesus is invited to a dinner party. Only the wealthy could host such an occasion, for everyone else was simply trying to survive from one day to the next. The idea was to use this meal as a way of staking your claim for position and privilege in the local community. You did this by inviting those people who you knew would be able to reciprocate, and maintain or develop your reputation as a big person around town.

Jesus knew exactly how it worked. First of all, he saw how people scrambled over each other to get the best spot, so as to be noticed by others. He chastises people for their power-hungry ways: "Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."



He then turns to those who put on such stage managed feasts: "Then Jesus said to his host, 'When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbours; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid.' 13 But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, 14 and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.'

Jesus' words would have stuck in the craw of his host. What Jesus was calling for subverted the whole point of these grand occasions. Sure, you could help the poor, or even feed the hungry if you felt called to do so, and that was quite admirable, but you would never extend an invitation to them to dine with you. That was far too personal, and would shame you in the eyes of those you desperately wanted to impress, the elite and the aspirational. You would never invite those who couldn't repay. This would tear down the principle of balanced reciprocity. And who knows what might happen if you did that.

We may choose to think that we are off the hook because we don't think like that anymore. Our society doesn't work along such clear class lines. Perhaps that's true, but Jesus challenges us today to explore our attitude toward "the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind." We wouldn't use such stark terms today. Instead, we talk about people living with disability. Yet how hospitable are we to these people? Do we see them clearly, or are they practically invisible?

God's starting point is that all people are created in his image. Disabled and able-bodied. Each one of us is the beneficiary of the amazing, miraculous gift of life. We stand on the same ground. We inhabit the same earthbound bodies. We might call this core value the sanctity of life. By no means is this shared by all people today. Great pressure is placed on parents to abort a foetus that is diagnosed with an abnormality. The same pressure is felt at the end of life. What right to life have those who have nothing to contribute to society? Why not euthanasia, when body or mind is not whole or fully functional?





Not only are we created in God's image, but we are also redeemed by his Son Jesus Christ. One of the most significant biblical images for salvation is a banquet: a celebration in the kingdom of God, to which are invited all people. Together we are, first of all, guests in this kingdom party. And the most profound expression of this kingdom banquet, this side of heaven, is the Lord's Supper. It's the greatest privilege of my pastoral care to serve at the Lord's Table, and to bring to you the body and blood of Jesus in bread and wine. I am incredibly blessed as the community of faith comes up to the altar. Our diversity amazes and encourages me. Some come under our own steam, others with a walker, in a wheelchair, on a stick, supported

by another. This meal is not about ability or disability; it's about our common, redeemed humanity, about the blessing of spiritual and physical healing, and the promise of a feast in heaven that will never end, where will all know the wholeness of body, mind and spirit which will never end.

We are first of all guests together before we become hosts. Loved, valued, fed by God, called to then share his hospitable love, especially, as the book of Hebrews reminds us "hospitality to strangers." And this isn't meant to be love by remote control, through donation or charitable contribution, but with a hands-on, incarnated love. Through our servant actions we show kingdom love, especially to those who feel unloved or who society marginalises.



But God promises us something further: "You will be blessed..." What blessings have we foregone because we haven't noticed a person with disability or taken the time to listen to their story or simply to be with them?



Stevie Wills is a writer and performance poet. She has had cerebral palsy since birth, and is a community education officer with Christian Blind Mission, Australia's leading Christian disability charity. She writes: "I have a lot of fatigue, so need to rest a lot. I get to hear from God because I'm not busy all the time. I spend a lot of time just thinking and reflecting on things, and I think that he gives me a lot of wisdom in talking to other people who are struggling. I'm able to pass on to other people what I've learnt through my struggles... We're so focused on doing, doing, doing. But on days when I can't do anything, I learn things from God that I wouldn't have otherwise. And that's bigger than getting things done."

This is Stevie's challenge to the church: "The church is in a unique position to reach out to people with disabilities. There are a lot of people with disabilities who only know people who are paid to be with them, whereas the church offers real friendship. My friends know what I need because they've gotten to know me. I was a friend before I was someone that needed help."

God, give us the gracious love to notice, to care, and to learn from those living with a disability. Amen.

