

'Make a level path for my feet: disability equality, and love'

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Make a level path for my feet (Hebrews 12, 13)

First, everyone is welcome: Parable of the great feast in Luke 14, 21, in which the servant is instructed to “bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.” And if we’re not there, it’s not a proper feast.

And we are welcome as we are. I know in many places Jesus cures people with all sorts of mental and physical impairments. But I do not think we should today be trying to cure people. I don’t think we are called to cast our devils or look for miracles.

Because I think we are not looking for a cure like that. To be embodied is to have limitations of body or mind. This not just about disabled people: it’s about everyone. Eventually we die. Everyone. I am not saying we are all disabled. I am saying we all experience limitations.

Medicine can help remedy our afflictions and delay death, up to a point. But we should be accepting people and praying that we might all find ways of accepting our limitations and putting them to good use.

After all, the Psalmist tells us, in Psalm 139 v 13-14:

“For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb.

I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.”

So God knows us and love us and accepts us.

Second, I want to remind you of the principle of “nothing about us, without us”, which means if you want to know about disability, why not ask disabled people?

If you want to accommodate disability, why not ask disabled people?

If you want to make provision for disability, why not ask disabled people?

Third, make a level path: smooth out environmental and social barriers.

Social contexts make disability so much harder to bear. To any difficulties of having different minds and bodies are added so many obstacles in the road.

The late Nancy Eiland wrote a famous book of liberatory theology, *The Disabled God* highlighting how disabled people do not need to be fixed. She suggests a barriers model of seeing how society creates disability.

Eiland even suggests Christ’s post-resurrection body, with its stigmata and scars, could be seen as disabled. Above my theological pay grade!

Nancy Eiland's support for a barriers model connects us to the social model of disability, which was developed by UK disabled people in the 1970s and is now powerful around the world.

Let us think about barriers can be literally environments. This summer, I went to Iona, which I know is a place of pilgrimage for many and which my brother, an Anglican priest, has often told me about. But was dismayed on entering the church on Iona to discover that I could not easily move about, because it was on different levels.

There are all sorts of ways in which you can disable people:

Put steps in my way;
Make signage confusing;
Lack of alternative formats: braille and sign language;
Lack of ALT text on images on websites or on social media.

We have made choices to have things one way and not the other.

Think about spectacles. Three pictures by Pieter Breughel the Elder in National Gallery (celebrating its anniversary this year). One is a painting of Adoration of Kings. On right of painting, one character in a grey hat is wearing spectacles – new fangled in 1564 when it was painted.

2 Corinthians 4:4 “The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”

Think how people would have managed without spectacles. They would have been excluded. Unable to read or get around. Now taken for granted in HIC.
Not just physical barriers: also discrimination in employment, education, welfare benefits. For example, disabled people nearly twice as likely to be unemployed as others.

As well as physical or financial barriers, lots of attitudes exclude:

Stigma against disabled people: mockery and teasing and name-calling. Never forget the story of the pregnant woman in a wheelchair in Mali, who went into labour and arrived at the hospital to be laughed at.

There is unfamiliarity and prejudice against disabled people. But why does your lack of familiarity mean that people have to suffer negativity? It's a vicious circle: first place barriers in our way, then blame those people who manage to overcome those barriers.

But it's more than that, and here the OT is itself to blame, in passages like Exodus 20, 5: some people believe disabled people or their parents, deserve their impairment because of wrong doing: Glenn Hoddle was sacked as England football manager for believing that the sins of the parents are visited upon their children.

Love

But is it enough to remove social barriers: will we achieve disability equality that way?

It may help lots of people, people like me. As long as you remove disabling barriers, we can compete, we can be as selfish as anybody else. We can do what you do, if you make a level path.

But this will not solve all the problem for everyone. Disabled people are not all the same. Some people are much more disadvantaged than others.

We live in a very individualistic society. We think we can succeed by competing better, by finding our advantage. Fairness, a fair day's pay for a fair day's work.

I have already referred to those barriers of access and attitudes and discrimination which are a large part of why disabled people are twice as likely to be unemployed (7.1%) as non-disabled people (3.5%): more than 82.5% of nondisabled people are employed, and about 53.6% of disabled people are, according to ONS statistics. But only about 6% of people with learning difficulties are employed.

But then there's what has been called the "topsy-turvy topography of the Kingdom of God": I am making a parallel of Jesus' parable of the workers in the vineyard in Matthew 20: they get paid the same, however long they have worked. It has confused many people who have seen it as about Christians and Jews and so on.

But I prefer to see it as a statement of Christian values. In the Kingdom of God, we are all equally valued,

We do not value people by how much they can produce or how famous they are, or how many likes they get on social media.

There's a communist principle which epitomizes this: from each according to ability, to each according to need. But I think it was a Christian principle first.

There are some projects which contribute to this different way of thinking and valuing:

- L'Arche Communities supporting 300 people with learning difficulties in UK, part of an international family of 160 L'Arche Communities. Living alongside, valuing...
- people with dementia through the national network of 80 DEEP groups. DEEP stands for Dementia Engagement and Empowerment Project.
- people with serious mental illness, or all sorts of complex health conditions, and their self-organized groups.

In order to flourish and to be equal, people need their communities to be open, accessible and above all, supportive. Covid showed that we all need our communities to be like that. As John Donne said, “No man is an island”.

Approaches which recognise interdependency and mutuality.

- Feminist ethic of care – Joan Tronto etc.
- Virtue ethics – Martha Nussbaum etc
- Ubuntu – Desmond Tutu

These all connect us to each other. You could include, I think, the Gospels as another approach alongside or compatible with these.

So I think we should look for, nurture and celebrate those ways in which we build connection between different people and groups.

Caring and charity

One of these ways of ways of building connection is through caring and charity. Many of us support disability charities, in UK or in developing countries. There are many many wonderful Catholic or Anglican charities. I am not making any claims about them, but I want to talk in general terms. I want to show things which we should watch out for, and perhaps be alarmed by.

Traditionally, many charities have segregated disabled people

I think it is very important not to see disabled people as opportunities for us to show our saintliness. I worry that too much caring is more about the carer than the cared for.

Caring is a difficult topic. We know that caring can be controlling.

Mrs Doyle in Father Ted is a funny character. Maybe you remember, she offered you a cup of tea, and if you said you did not want it, she said “Go on, go on, go on, go on,” until you accepted her offer. We have all met people like Mrs Doyle.

When we wrote the relevant chapter of the *World Report on Disability* in 2011, we used the phrase “assistance and support”, to avoid some of those implications of charity.

For all these reasons, I prefer the word ‘solidarity’ to the word ‘charity’. I know that charity is derived from love, and of course I am calling for love. But charities are human entities which can be very misguided, bureaucratic and unloving.

“Solidarity’ has the implication that we need to find connection between those caring and those cared for. We can do this in various ways:

- We can remember that we were all babies and were cared for by our mother and father:
- We hope we will all get to old age and then will be cared for by others again: this is a strong age gradient in disability, for example, half of all disabled people are over 60;
- We can remember that many of those who receive support are actually also supporting others. This is particularly true of older people. Many spouses, male as well as female, support their partners. In all ages of life there is a terrible imbalance between male and female carers, but much less in old age, because there are so many caring husbands.

That’s why I think it makes sense to talk of ‘caring solidarity’, how there is an intergenerational cyclical dimension to care. Over time, we are all carers and cared for. We are investing in our own future.

One resolution of the caring dilemma is to promote personal assistance. This is a dimension of the independent living movement. In order to live independently in the community and not to have to depend on carers or charity, the self-organised care scheme entails people living in their own homes but supported by workers to do tasks which others can do for themselves, which might be personal care or cooking or cleaning or driving.

A distinction is made between physical dependency and social dependency. You can be extremely physically dependent and completely socially independent. The traditional way of doing this was to give you social status. The contemporary way of doing this is to give you money.

When you are dependent, there is asymmetry. You do things for me, and I feel grateful or dependent on you. But if I give you something back, then there is no asymmetry. And one thing I can give you for your time is money.

The idea is to take the emotion out of these ordinary tasks, so there is no need for gratitude. By giving cash for care, payment means it another transaction, like getting your groceries delivered or your boiler services. You say thank you, but you are not rendered dependent: your dignity and your choices are intact.

But it is impossible to take emotion out of these tasks. I am friends with my postal worker, my HERMES delivery person just as I am my heating engineer neighbour. As it happens, it helps to be friendly, because then my neighbour changes the wheel on my Smart Drive, or my other neighbour changes my light bulbs.

Nor do I think the answer is to commodify all tasks. I want us to help each other, not pay each other. But if you don’t think money is the solution to dependency, then it is up to us to work out how to provide help without making people feel worse off.

My neighbour frequently does things for me. He brings in my box of vegetables. He puts my wet washing into the dryer. He changes my light bulbs. I give him cups of coffee and glasses of wine occasionally. That way, it feels an equal exchange.

But that only works in small things. It would not work if I asked my neighbour to put me to bed or help me onto the toilet.

So let me conclude. I have tried to say

- Let us not disable people
- Let us contribute to a society in which you are valued because you are children of God, and not because you do this or that, or you are seen as someone important.
- Let us approach helping people in a different way, so that it is seen as solidarity, not as charity, and so that we can still be equals.

Thank you for listening.