

Rondebosch United Church

Disability Sunday Address given by Andrew Hartnack

26th August 2018

A few years ago I was on the Harfield Road station platform waiting for a train. I noticed a few people on the platform also waiting. I heard them speaking Shona and recognised them as the Zimbabweans who ride the trains every day in pairs singing in return for small donations. Typically, this couple consists of a blind or partially-sighted person, led by a sighted person who acts as a guide, and shepherds them through each carriage and off and on the trains. They often wait at Harfield Road because there are fewer railway police on the lookout for fare dodgers.

I got talking to one couple – a man and woman. I noticed that the man was reading something out of a book to the woman, who was recording what he was saying in braille. I learnt that he was reading sums from an exercise out of the Zimbabwean O-Level mathematics text book. The woman was recording these sums in braille so that later than night she could work them out and complete the exercise. She told me that she was going to return to Zimbabwe in a few months to sit the O-Level maths exam.

I failed O-Level maths. In fact, I got the lowest grade it is possible to obtain. Yet here was this supposedly disabled “blind beggar”, probably in the country illegally, studying maths using a language I do not understand, with just a little bit of help from her “guide”. I have no doubt she went back and passed that exam. The incident brought home to me the fact that being “able” is multi-faceted, and should never be judged on surface-level assumptions.

I am not an expert on disability or people with disabilities.

As some of you know, I work as a social science research and evaluator. Earlier this year, I had the privilege of being invited to conduct an evaluation of a project initiated by The Leprosy Mission, Southern Africa (LMSA). Given that cases of leprosy have fallen to negligible levels in South Africa, the LMSA has broadened its focus to include all persons with disabilities and their issues.

About a decade ago, in partnership with a KwaZulu-Natal disability advocacy project called disABILITY Connexion, LMSA realised that the issue of people with disabilities accessing and feeling welcome in faith communities was a major problem in South Africa. It is estimated that as few as five percent of people with disabilities attend or participate in Christian faith communities. Yet, as one of the key figures in disABILITY Connexion, Barbara Watt, points out: without her faith, she might not have survived and made the life she has despite being a wheelchair user since the age of four. The sad reality is that many people with disabilities do not even try to attend church because they know they will have problems with physical access, or with how the church and church-goers relate to them.

In many South African churches – and in society broadly – it is still common for disability to be stigmatised. Disability is associated with sin and divine punishment. A mother with a disabled son may be told that because of her sin, God has punished her by giving her a child with a disability. Instead of accepting a person with a disability as a whole person in their own right, such churches believe a person with a disability is sinful, unclean or cursed by

God. For others with disabilities, going to a church becomes an ordeal because as soon as they enter, the pastors latch onto them as a “challenge” to heal. People who have often come to terms with their disability and are looking for other things are told “today is your day” when they attend church, and without permission, they may be wheeled to the front for a “miracle prayer” by the pastor. When such prayers fail, the person is made to feel they do not have enough faith, or are sinful and impure.

While some may indeed seek physical healing in a church, what people with disabilities often primarily want is acceptance for who they are, recognition of their abilities, personalities and talents, and full inclusion in the community.

Even in churches such as RUC, where we try to be welcoming and open-minded with a vision for inclusion and outreach, many of us do not know how to truly welcome a person with a disability. We may even ignore or patronise them. Our toilets are not suitable for wheelchairs, so we may also humiliate or embarrass them. The problem with privilege (in this case, able-bodied privilege) is that it tends to hide itself from those who have it. We therefore often do not know that we are relating to a person with a disability in an exclusionary or patronising manner through our language and ways of physical and social relating. Thus, even if we for example change the pews so that wheelchair users might feel welcome, we may never invite them to participate in key aspects of the worship, and thereby set up some subtle exclusions which we are not aware of.

Our language, too, can be problematic. The following is an excerpt from an article on Steven Hawking, that makes this point well:

Erasing Stephen Hawking's disability erases an important part of who he was

Jessica Roy

In the days since Stephen Hawking's death, obituaries have described him as being "confined" or "chained" to a wheelchair, as someone who "overcame" his disability and succeeded in spite of it.

None of those things are true. Stephen Hawking had a disability, and Stephen Hawking used a wheelchair. His work was possible because of those things, not in spite of them.

In fact, Hawking — a tireless advocate for disability rights when he wasn't busy unlocking the secrets of the universe — viewed those things as a positive.

"My disabilities have not been a significant handicap in my field, which is theoretical physics," he wrote in *Science Digest* in 1984. "Indeed, they have helped me in a way by shielding me from lecturing and administrative work that I would otherwise have been involved in."

People with disabilities and advocates for disability rights have been particularly chagrined by one image making the rounds on social media: an upright man

silhouetted against a backdrop of stars, with an empty wheelchair in the foreground. It has been frequently accompanied by references to Hawking "finally being able to walk among the stars" or being "free" of his wheelchair.

The image makes it seem "like every disabled person dreams of shedding their disability," said Virginia Knowlton Marcus, the director of legal advocacy for Disability Rights California.

"I think that able-bodied people often see the technology disabled people use as a burden," she said. "His wheelchair was his tool. He wheeled all over Cambridge. It wasn't a burden."

Thus, in a world in which being able-bodied is seen as the default state of proper humanity, what will it take to truly include and accept people with disabilities on their own terms?

If we cannot do this, we stand to miss out on all the tremendous gifts that people with disabilities have to share with us.

I am reminded of that wonderful Swedish film from a decade or more ago – "As it is in Heaven". If you recall, there was a church choir who had the good fortune to have a leading classical orchestra conductor as their leader. The choir members soon had visions of competing in international choir competitions. But what follows was a journey towards true humility and humanity. One member of the choir had a severe learning and physical disability, but he was nonetheless always present at rehearsals. As the choir became more proficient, certain members thought he should be excluded on the grounds that he was not competent enough and likely to be an embarrassment and an impediment to their success. After some conflict, the community learnt that he was an integral member of the choir who could be included on his terms, and with all he had to offer. Indeed, at the end of the film, when the conductor suffers a heart attack and cannot come to lead them, it is this disabled choir member who starts the choir singing, and they sing a song that becomes a true transcendent spiritual experience of unity with all the choirs present in the huge hall. This would not have happened had this member not been allowed to bring his gifts to the choir.

So, as a congregation, this Disability Awareness Sunday is a start of our own journey in exploring how we might also become truly inclusive and accepting, and set an example to other churches in this regard. I look forward to taking this journey with you.