Stephanie Kate Judd 0:01

Welcome to Two Cities Podcast, a podcast about theology, culture and discipleship. And this is episode one. In this episode, we're talking about visibility in the Greco Roman world, and the new test to blaze gospel. Dr. Gosbell is principal of Mary Andrews College in Sydney, Australia. She serves on several boards and committees of organizations in the disability space, such as embracing ministries in Canberra in Australia, and is a member of the core Council Institute on theology and disability in the US. She's the author of the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the land, physical and sensory disability in the Gospels of the New Testament, published by mercy back. Team members on the episode from two cities include Dr. Grace Emmett, Dr. Chris Porter, and myself, Stephanie Kate Judd.

Well, guys, that was quite a tour de force. I really enjoyed that conversation. I enjoyed just hearing Louise go do a deep dive into both particular texts in the New Testament, but also zooming out and doing some of the landscape contextual setting work to help us better understand and better read those texts in in the Gospels. What were your reflections on that conversation?

Grace Emmett 1:31

was lots of things I sort of want to pull out as highlights, I love the breadth in terms of the approach that she's bringing, looking at biblical texts in particular, but then also doing that sort of the bridging sort of pastoral side in terms of thinking about how does this How does a model of inclusion apply within Christian communities? And how does she translate some of that academic work into that setting? I think I particularly appreciated the way that she nuanced the fact that disability is not static. So you know, what does it mean to think about disability in a modern context? What does it mean to think about that and an ancient context? What's the distinction between an impairment and the fact that a society itself can be disabling that it has a disabling effects, that there's not necessarily something inherent about an impairment that makes it disabling? So I just found that clarification really useful, particularly then as a lens for coming to look at particular biblical passages?

Christopher Porter 2:24

Yeah, I really liked that engagement with disability not just as something at arm's length, as is so often the case in with academic study, as a lived experience, as well as sympathetic experience, where she is both drawing from her own experience of disability as well as her experience of working with people with disability, and then seeing what happens in the text. So it's not reading it back into the texts, as much as it is using that to inform a reading of the texts. And so I really thought I found that great engagement, and a great one to model, especially if someone's coming to tax base.

Stephanie Kate Judd 3:08

If you haven't already, please subscribe wherever you get your podcasts and leave us a review. And you can also follow us on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, or visit us at our website, the two cities.com.

With that, here's our conversation

with Dr. Louise Gosbell

Louise, thank you so much for joining us on the two cities. It's so good to have you here.

Louise Gosbell 3:40

Thank you so much for inviting me.

Stephanie Kate Judd 3:42

The ways I think that's something that we've observed is that most people who come to disability theology disability studies, have a have a personal reason as to why they've started that journey. Could you share with us some of how you have come to this space?

Louise Gosbell 3:59

Sure. So quite a few years ago, now, I had finished up a degree in theology, a Bachelor of theology. And the head of the theology department said to me, you know, you're a really good student, I think you should go on to consider doing an honors year, it's a short 12 to 15,000 word thesis. But you'd need to really think about what you want to do what you want to write about. And I can vividly remember thinking, What can I possibly write about that 2000 years of biblical scholars haven't already written, you know, 1000 times over. But it was really interesting because it was only a couple of days later, in the middle of all this pondering that I received a phone call from my mother in law and she was quite distressed. So my husband has a brother with Down syndrome. And he was he was a foster baby. So he came to live with them when he was two weeks old. So John was given up by his birth parents, they didn't want a baby with a disability. And he came to live with my in laws as a foster Star stayed for two weeks stayed for two months, over two years, you know, eventually was adopted by the family. So by this time, John was in his late teens and had been involved in their local church community for a number of years, just handing out bulletins at the door, welcoming people as they came in to church carrying in candles for liturgy. But a new minister started at their church at this time and rang my mother in law and said, John needs to stop are all of the ways that he's been contributing to the church and not able to serve any longer, because his belief was that someone with an intellectual disability doesn't have the capacity to understand the gospel. And so should shouldn't be able to or can't really identify as a Christian, and so shouldn't be able to, you know, welcome people at the door, because that's representative of the church or of their faith more generally. So he believed, obviously, there's some kind of IQ prerequisite, apparently to be able to accept the gospel. And so really, that was the first moment for me that I went, Well, what is the Christian response to disability if a minister can argue that the gospel is for everyone, except for these people over here who don't have a high enough IQ, to actually respond to the gospel, so that was a really significant moment for me. So I literally thought I would write my honors thesis one year fast track onto a PhD, leave the topic of disability behind, you know, 20 ish years later, still, here in the world of disability, God obviously had different plans. I just never left this topic. And I think, because the more I studied in the Bible, the more I felt like it was a topic that wasn't being addressed enough, you know, you pick up most academic commentaries, you won't read the word disability in there at all, despite the large number of occurrences of disability that are in our biblical texts. But it was also the experiences of people with disability that I met people being on the margins of church communities, or feeling completely excluded from church communities because of the experience of disability. So just really feeling like, I wanted to do what I could to advocate in that space. But the reality is to disability is inevitable, we treat it like it's this marginal thing that happens over here away from everyone else, or those are those people with disability over there. And we are the rest of the able bodied community here. And it actually doesn't work like that at all. And because of its inevitability, you know, the experience of disabilities become closer to home for us again, over the years. So we have a 15 year old daughter who is on the autism spectrum. But even for myself, when I gave birth to my daughter, I my pelvis was quite significantly damaged, which means I do use a walking stick at times. But this year, I had a significant heart condition which has left me with problems with my heart and my respiratory functioning, which has completely turned my world upside down. So while the experience of disability was once one sort of step removed, in my husband's family, it's, you know, that lived experience has really shifted for me over this last 12 months in particular.

Stephanie Kate Judd 8:19

And I think we'd love to unpack more of the the work that you've done in trying to equip churches to prevent that awful story about what happened to your brother in law, John, happening again, and trying to equip churches to be inclusive of all, all members of the Body of Christ. And we'll, we'll get to that soon. But I just wanted to ask, how given you've been doing this academic work for some time, how that personal experience of different types of your own limitation and disability, how has that shaped your academic work?

Louise Gosbell 9:00

Yeah, I guess for me, it's always been a combination, I feel that for me, it's really important to have that academic work combined with what I'm doing in a practical way. So I've always been involved in different kinds of disability ministry in the church. I feel like what I do and the experience of, you know, friendships with adults with intellectual disabilities, for example, shapes, what I do in academia, I think it's one thing to write about it. It's another thing altogether, to actually be in the real life circumstances of families and individuals who live this on a on a daily basis. And so for me, it's important not just to sit in the academic space of writing about the experiences of, you know, people with disability 2000 years ago without trying to make an attempt, you know, to try and, you know, connect that with a real life situation now, and I guess it helps to put yourself in that situation that you're not just reading random text around. You know that that's not a real life person, but you're actually in when reading historical accounts, reading genuine circumstances or people who lived with disability in their own time and faced certain challenges or struggles. So I think it helps you import that real life situation when you're doing that academic work. But there's also something really something really important, I think about doing academics in a way that will help inform practice, because I think that changes the way that you read the texts, because you're not just coming up with an academic theory, you're trying to understand a text, so that you can apply it in a real life context. And so there's all sorts of academics that exists for its own purposes. But it wouldn't actually work in a real life scenario. So trying to actually understand biblical texts with a good academic framework, but in a way that's going to make sense and impact the real life experiences of people with church, you know, in churches, today in the world today who are living with disability. So I hope they both inform each other that academics and the and the practical work that people sometimes use that term prac academic, you know, that idea of it being a combination of academics and practical ministry.

Grace Emmett 11:22

Prac-academic is a new one to me, I love that. I wonder if you could tell us a bit more about in terms of thinking about your academic work and thinking about biblical texts, how we read them, sort of through a lens of disability studies? How do you sort of articulate that? What's your sort of methodological way into approaching text and looking for themes of disability?

Louise Gosbell 11:43

Yeah, it's a really good question. I think the Biblical studies began, really with looking for very overt examples of disability and trying to understand them within that ancient context. But But even so even doing that, you know, it was quite unusual when I was first. First working in Biblical Studies and disability because the experience that I noticed is that most people either just skip over references to disability, they don't actually sit and pay attention to what might be going on in the text, the way that the issue of disability might be key in a narrative, or the other thing that people often do is turn it into a metaphor or an allegory. And so disability is often kind of seen as a metaphor for sinfulness, for example. So that's how people read it without actually spending the time to do a nuanced reading and try and actually grapple with the presentations of disability that might be in a particular biblical text. So I guess what, you know, one of the things that I talked about in my PhD, which was eventually published through mosey back, is that, I guess it's not so much about employing a new methodological approach. It's a fairly traditional Biblical studies approach. But it's about trying to foreground the issue of disability without just skipping over it or giving it you know, an unreflected, a nuanced understanding. So actually trying to spend the time in understanding why is this reference to disability here, but I do think it's expanded over the last few years, it's not even just, here's an overt example, or reference to someone who is blind or lame, but looking further to try and understand the way that the body is represented more broadly in biblical texts, and the way that the experience of non traditional bodies or bodies that differ from what's accepted, what that might actually tell us when we see that presented in biblical text. So when we see a body with disability, or when we see a body with chronic illness or a body that doesn't look like what we expect it to, or what they would have expected it to in the ancient context, and what that might tell us. So just what what were the expectations of the body in general? And how might this body differ from those standard expectations? So Biblical Studies and disabilities kind of broadened in that respect, so not as narrow as just here's one reference to someone who's blind and blind or lame, but it's, it's bigger, and a bit more complex than that now. And what's useful is I think, you know, Steph, you said at the beginning, I think we we start off with an experience of disability that leads us into disability studies in the Bible. But I think when you recognize how important disability themes are in biblical texts, the hope really is that it won't just be people who have a personal experience of disability, but that will go Oh, wow, this is actually a really significant topic throughout Scripture. And it does tell us something about our expectations of the body might challenge some of expectations of the body, which then is hopefully applicable to everyone, not just people like me who have a vested interest in wanting to understand this topic.

Christopher Porter 14:57

So Louise, you've mentioned that if From a framework of displaying what people might expect it within the text, certainly we have examples in our biblical texts of the disciples, for example, expect that the man born blind is is blind because of some form of seeing etcetera. But outside of the biblical texts in the ancient world, how have you found a disability was being treated? And what were the understandings there in?

Louise Gosbell 15:31

Yeah, so I started really looking at that Greco Roman background to the biblical texts, to try and set the scene. You know, I think for a lot of us who read the Bible, we read it without all of that context, we read it without knowing all of that, what was happening in the ancient world and what ancient texts were like. And so this is only our, our only examples of reading stories about someone with a disability from the ancient world, for example. So I felt like setting the scene well with the Greco Roman background. And, you know, the Jewish world as a way of introducing the topic of disability in the in the New Testament was kind of really key for me. So I think what we see in the Greco Roman world is, again, their stereotypes, it's Oh, everyone with a disability was marginalized, or would have been horrific for every person with a disability. And it's not quite as straightforward as that, you know, it's, we have a lot of references to disability, you know, kind of anecdotally, in Papyrus, and letters and inscriptions. We do have in written texts, as well. So there are lots of examples of disability. But I think people's experiences vary, I think in the ancient world, the family was the, the, you know, the primary core of your life. And so if you had a disability, it was your family who cared for you, not, you know, government payouts and so on. So you've worked together as a unit to be able to do what you needed to do. For that reason, someone with a disability would have probably still tilled the ground, you know, you know, served in the markets, if you are an artisan with a physical disability, you could still sit there and make shoes or build other things, I think disability would have been quite visible in the ancient world, people would have seen people with disabilities all the time, because you think about accidents, diseases, you know, things that would have happened that don't have the same medical cures, then as we have now. So I think there would have been a lot of people with disability would have been a normal part of seeing that as you walk through the marketplace, or, you know, around the temples, for example. And I think they just would have gone on with life as much as possible in the context of their own disability with the support of their family. And I think that's a lot of what we see in our ancient sources about disability. However, I think it gets to the point where someone can't work in the field or can't sell the goods in a marketplace, or when they're not able to do the things that their society expects of them. So for women, you know, you're expected to marry and give birth, you're not able to do those things, then I think it starts to become a problem for someone, or you know, you can't serve in the military or serve your civic duties as a male, I think that's where it would have really started to impede on people's functioning in society. And I think that then we see examples of people being marginalized. And, you know, really left on the outer, and I think it's those people who couldn't just get on with their lives who were on the margins of Greco Roman society. I think those are the people that we actually see depicted in the gospels, a lot of the time, it's these people who are marginalized because of their disabilities. But that doesn't mean every person with a disability was marginalized. And I think it's helpful to kind of distinguish those things. And we don't do that enough when we read the biblical text. So I hear people say things like, well, you know, the example there is the man born blind in John nine, he was a beggar. Because what else could you do if you were blind in the ancient world? Well, that's not actually what our Greco Roman sources tell us. There are examples of people who were blind in different kinds of fields, you know, doing different sorts of things. So it's a stereotype because we're not familiar with that Greco Roman background. So I think it's mixed. There was still an understanding people would get on with their lives if they could, but there was an extent to which someone might have been marginalized because they didn't meet society's expectations. But there was also a belief in the beautiful body and the Greco Roman world. And so if you deviated from that, if you weren't symmetrical if you weren't beautiful, there was obviously a lot of derision and mockery of people that we see in our ancient sources as well because of disability. So it's not to say there All love did accept it and everything was wonderful and peachy. But I think there was an extent that people just kind of got on and did things the best that they could within. Yeah, within their own context. And as a result of their own particular disability,

Stephanie Kate Judd 20:14

though, is something that's come up sometimes in the ways that people read, particularly the gospel texts. But I understand it's more broad than that is the kind of moral freighting. To that, that observation of deviance. Just wondering if you could unpack a little bit about Well, was there this divine overlay to that in in, in the Greco Roman world? And what were the kinds of things that people would assume that that someone if they had a disability, then?

Louise Gosbell 20:49

Yeah, absolutely. So in terms of the Greco Roman world, that's absolutely the case. You know, there was certainly a sense in which people might have had a disability because it was divine punishment. They could have believed that someone had a disability because someone had put the evil eye on them, and they'd been cursed, for example. So there were these spiritual powers that might have been at work, causing people's disability. That's certainly certainly the case. And I think that had an influence on, you know, as well as some of our Jewish background as well, which I think we'll probably get to after this in a moment. But that the idea that some people would look at a disability and try and work out understand what does what, you know, sin, what, what was it that someone committed, that might have led to this particular disability? So I think that that is there. And I think the fact that John, in John's Gospel in this story of Jesus with a man born blind to the fact that Jesus kind of refutes this discussion, who seemed this man or his parents that he was born blind, and Jesus is like, no, that's not the way this conversation works. It's about you know, God being at work, I think shows us how prevalent those views really were amongst the disciples amongst their peers in that time that there was almost a one to one correspondence, if you did this scene, then this is the kind of disability that you might end up with, for example. So I think it definitely existed in the Greco Roman world. Yep.

Grace Emmett 22:22

Would you tell us about maybe a sort of a story that you find particularly interesting that you looked at in your thesis that's been published as a book, perhaps that kind of particularly was intriguing and sort of different dynamics of disability in the text?

Louise Gosbell 22:36

Yeah, okay. Well, there's lots of different things. Look, I, I really loved the story of the woman with bleeding. And so that is one of those passages, I don't think people jump to immediately when they think about a disability context. And that was part of the reason I actually chose that, because I wanted to try and expand people's understanding the whole concept of what disability actually is, you know, for a woman who had long term bleeding, the stigma associated with her condition would have been significant. And I think when you read most of the commentaries on the woman with bleeding, it's the focus is the purity elements of this. So she was ritually unclean, she shouldn't have been in the crowd. But my experience of the vast majority of male scholars who actually come to this passage go, well, women's bleeding, okay, let's just quickly look at ritual impurity. And let's move along as fast as we can, so that it won't actually sit there in that text for an extended period of time. So I think it's taken a lot of feminist scholars to really sit and wrestle with that text well, and so I'm very indebted to a lot of the, you know, great, scholarly work that was done by feminists in this passage, you know, ahead of me looking at it, you know, so the lens that I brought to was was disability, trying to understand that from a disability perspective and understand, not her exclusion from society on the basis of ritual impurity, but on the basis of, you know, this stigma, the shame, the embarrassment, perhaps, of having this bleeding, even from a chronic illness perspective, if this woman had perpetual bleeding for 12 years, you know, it's it's likely she would have been very, very unwell, very tired. You know, someone who lives now with chronic fatigue as a side effect of my heart and respiratory functioning. You know, that's it's hard to live when you are really exhausted all the time. And so I feel like this is something that woman would have experienced, that you don't really hear the commentators talk about very much. The fact that it was 12 years probably meant that she was unable to bear children, because it had gone on for so long. So I think there's a whole lot of social things that are going on that are not often picked up on. What's really, really interesting in the text, is that right at the beginning of this passage, you know, you can At the inner thoughts of the woman in Marks version anyway, where she says, you know, her desire in wanting to see Jesus is that she wants to be made whole. And so that Greek word soit. So, so sometimes translated healed. But I think it's better to understand it as wholeness, she wants to be made whole. As she goes up into the crowd, she touches Jesus robe. And it says that the flow of blood stopped at that point when she touches Jesus cloak. But, you know, just kind of let her just go off through the crowd. Well, the bleeding stops, that's all she needed, right. But actually, I think he makes her publicly announced the fact that the bleeding has stopped. He public, you know, makes it publicly announced that something significant has shifted in her body through her interaction with Jesus. And it's only after she publicly does this. And he sort of makes a comment about her faith, that then Jesus says, Your faith has made you whole essentially or again, we might, we might translate it as your faith has healed you or your faith has saved you. But actually, it's at this point after the interaction with Jesus that I think she gets what it is that she's after. This point after the interaction with Jesus is when she's made hold that same concept that she has, in her mind right at the beginning of the passage, not at the moment, the bleeding stops, that's not when she's made whole. But after this dialogue that takes place place with Jesus, where she gets to publicly announce that that bleeding has stopped. And I think that's significant, because I think what it shows to me in this passage is healing is more than just the physical curing that might take place in relation to a disability or an illness. But there is a social factor to that. And my take on the on the reason that Jesus does this is because she carried this stigma, this shame, of the bleeding and being unclean for 12 years. But even if that bleeding had stopped, how do you publicly prove that you're better now after you don't, there's no way for you to be declared publicly clean like a leper was when they went to the temple, and they were declared clean, she had no means of being declared clean. I think part of what Jesus does is make this social statement, he announces to people, essentially, by making her speak up in the crowd, that she has received a physical QR, at the moment that she's actually touched Jesus, that's amazing. But I think that goes towards her reconnection with society, this kind of social internet interaction that will take place as a result now with the fact that she's received this physical cure. So I think it's a really beautiful story, because it tells us something about the physical side of disability. But it also tells us something about that social element. And you know, anyone who knows anything about disability theory, and the idea of how we try and define or understand disability today recognizes there is both of those things at play, there is an impairment in the body. But there is also this social world of a society that isn't set up to cater well for people with disabilities. So I think in this beautiful healing account, Jesus is addressing very clearly both of these elements, the physical Cuba, but also trying to help her bring down those barriers so that she can socially connect and participate once again, because of that physical Cuba.

Stephanie Kate Judd 28:27

The ways something that, as you were speaking, I wanted to hear more from you about is, yes, the experience of a disability changes depending on the social ecosystem that you are inhabiting. And you've unpacked a bit before about the Greco Roman, kind of, if you if you were a person with a disability in the Greco Roman world, these are the kinds of things you'd come up against how was that different in the Hebrew world? And I imagine there might be points of difference. But you've mentioned some the aspect of, you know, you've got ritual claim this. But I'd like to hear more from you about, well, what were some of the narratives that would have been spoken explicitly or implicitly, about, or to someone with a disability?

Louise Gosbell 29:24

Yeah, so I think that there's obviously an overlap. There's a similarity. So I think, for women in particular, that notion of childbearing as being a key, function or duty of someone as a woman, and as a result of that. The inability to bear children was particularly disabling for people in the ancient world, and there's been some really good writing done on this topic. Candida Moss, for example, Rebecca rafaelle, there's a few different people who've talked about the experience of it. I barrenness and how disabling that condition would have been for women in the ancient world. So again, we don't talk about, you know, Baroness or infertility. Now in terms of disability language, it's foreign to us. But you think about if this is your society's expectation of you as a woman, and you can't do that, then that is actually a very disabling condition. So not might not cause your physical pain, you might not have a limitation in terms of everyday activities. But if you can't meet your society's expectations of what you're supposed to do, then that is a particularly stigmatizing and disabling condition to experience experience. So I think, you know, for women, that's definitely a key one. And some of those scholars working, you know, in detail in that area, talk about it as being, you know, the most prevalent depiction of disability for women in the biblical texts overall. And so again, it's an area that's been under researched under written about and the, again, that social element of it, the stigma, the disenfranchisement, you know, you can't do what all of those other women around you your age are all the things that you're supposed to be doing. So what have been particularly stigmatizing. I think what we see from the biblical texts from the Old Testament, you know, the key passage that comes to mind is Leviticus 21, which is a passage that limits the extent to which a Levitical priest with certain kinds of disability could participate in the Israelite cold. So to what extent can they serve as a priest. And then there's a list of particular conditions that are listed that might preclude someone from being able to do that. So there are limitations, it doesn't mean they can't be a priest at all. That's not actually what it says. But it does talk about some restrictions and limitations that are placed on someone with certain kinds of conditions. It's debated the extent that the particular conditions have and why they are the particular conditions. That's there. A lot of scholars say that they're things that you can visually see on the body. So is it something about the visibility of something in the body that might be distracting to a congregant? You know, as these priests are serving in their capacity, that's one debate, although the crushed testicles are the things that everyone throws everyone out to wait, they're not going to be saying that in the congregation, how can that be affected here? But, you know, others would say, it is still a factor, it's a visible thing, even if most people don't see that most of the time. So is that something about that idea of wholeness and purity being represented in in physical wholeness, and, you know, purity of the body, because the next chapter then goes on to talk about, you know, blemishes in sacrifices, for example. So, that's a key passage. So we see those kinds of limitations that are or those restrictions that are placed to some extent on Levitical priests. But I think, you know, throughout the Old Testament, we you know, we do also see a lot of passages that talk about, you know, making sure you're not putting a stumbling block in front of the blind, or, you know, people like Jobe who are, you know, talk about the fact that they are guides to the blind, that they look after those with disabilities and those who are on the margins. So while we do or we see this concepts of disability, that exist, we also see guidelines, you know, codified in Old Testament law about looking after people with disabilities and those who are marginalized in the community.

Christopher Porter 33:49

I think that's one of the areas where your work really has had a big impact. Certainly, certainly, from your own experience with your brother in law, and their engagement with disability in the church. And in that, I guess, we'd say, the social model of disability and thinking about what are the impacts there? I was wondering if you can talk a bit more than about, not just think about the social and or the medical model, but also the cultural model of disability, thinking about how, how do we see disability work out work its way out as groups of people who we would consider all who may consider themselves to say we'll gather together within the gospel, some one of the things that comes to mind immediately is the leper concept for leper colonies and things like that.

Louise Gosbell 34:43

Yeah, so I talked about the cultural model of disability in my dissertation, because I think we were, I think, we're we're trying to grapple with, you know, historians, wrestling with a concept of disability. So disabilities always exist. it but we're trying to understand ancient text through modern definitions or modern models of disability. And so questions arise about the appropriateness of doing that. And so the cultural model was developed as a way of saying, Actually, we, we don't know, for certain the exact lived experience of people with disability in the ancient world, but we can see the way they're depicted in our ancient texts, which tell us a lot about, you know, the values of people with disability or the way that they're treated, because of the way that they're represented or the way that their body is represented as meeting or not meeting particular social norms. And I think the cultural model of disability that is helpful for us in recognizing, we just have to approach historical text slightly differently than we do the experience of disability in the modern world. Part of that is recognizing that every society in every culture has a different expectation of what the human body is, and what it does and what it's supposed to do. And if we overlay our concepts of disability from our modern context, you know, from our modern Australian context, in particular, we have really good funding, the NDIS system here, National Disability Insurance Scheme, other things that work to support people that didn't exist in the ancient world. So trying to understand what were the expectations of the body? And in what ways did people's bodies meet or not meet those expectations? You know, so examples of that might mean, you know, we look at at a really muscly body today, in the modern model, some people do is particularly attractive, you know, very muscley man, in the ancient world, if you weren't particularly muscley, it might have been that that was the case, because you were involved in physical labor, that doesn't make you attractive, that makes you lower class. And so there is an association between large muscley man and lower class status, you know, because you're a laborer, you do physical, manual labor. So that's an expectation of the body that is quite different to our expectation of the body. You know, if you live in a, in a society, where there's some cultures, where smell is kind of the the most important sense that you can have in your society, there are some cultures that, you know, taxonomies their world based on different kinds of scents in the year, in that society, if you can't smell, obviously, that's gonna be the most disabling condition you could possibly have. So when we're approaching biblical texts, any ancient texts, trying to look at them within their cultural context and understand what were the expectations of the body for that particular culture, and how might this person's body meet or not meet that I think is really key to the cultural model of disability. What that means then is, there wasn't this term like disability, which is an overarching term that covers you know, this really vast variety of experiences, disability, people who are blind, you know, as well as people who might be hearing impaired, who might you know, others who have mental illness, or come under the same umbrella for us in the modern world. So there's some questions about how we do that when we're looking at ancient texts. But even in ancient texts, we do see people with different kinds of disability being grouped together in different contexts. So we see people, as you said, like the people who come together in a leper colony, that's a very classic example. But it's amazing how often you read language where different kinds of disability are grouped together. So the blind and the lame, the blind and the deaf, you know, they labels we read over and over throughout the prophetic sources of the Old Testament. And obviously, in our New Testament texts in the gospels, these are people who are always grouped together, I think this shared experience of marginalization is quite key in in bringing people together, even though they handle these very different kinds of conditions. So it does tell us something about about the experiences, as I said before, I think if you can get on with your life, that's great. But if you couldn't, and your marginal, I think there is then this linking together of these marginal kinds of characters that we see, you know, as outliers in the background of, you know, gospel texts or other ancient sources.

Stephanie Kate Judd 39:18

Thanks so much the ways and it seems that one of the big subversive narratives in in the New Testament is the banquet. And I know that you've done a lot of work on on that particular narrative, and I just wanted to hear from you how does that subvert those those expectations about what it is to be part of God's people and, and what that means for how we can be challenged in how inclusive we are in our church communities? Well,

Louise Gosbell 39:58

I just like to say it's dangerous territory. were to ask me about this passage stuff because I could talk about for a really, really long time already. How long does the podcast go for? You, I'll try and keep it brief, shallow, I was really drawn to this passage. So obviously wanting to write about disability in the gospels, this seems like a really natural place to start. What was really interesting was, as I was just starting my research on my PhD, I was invited to a church to actually preach. And I spoke on this passage, and someone came up to me at the end and said, are this disability inclusion stuff? You know, that's all really nice, but you can't actually apply this passage to disability inclusion, because it's clearly not actually about people with like real life disabilities, like it's a metaphor. It's a metaphor for the experiences of the Gentiles been brought into, into God's people. So you can't actually talk about the experiences of people with actual disabilities. So I was really challenged by that, as I began, my research was really helpful as to keep poking me as as I was researching to go, what kind of evidence is there that this person is right or perhaps not? Right? So I started I just started with looking at banquet and culture in ancient Well, that's really where I began to try and understand the banquet more generally, that this kind of interaction between people with disabilities or you know, Jesus, discussion of people with disabilities might make sense, you know, is it just anecdotal? That just coincidence that it happens at a banquet? Or is it something bigger going on? And so I was quite intrigued as I began to read about banquet and culture, to read all of these stories from the ancient world, where people with disabilities were actually present at banquets, but there are only ever present as the server's you know, bringing in plates of food to invited guests, or as the entertainers who would, you know, dance or sing, or, you know, do kind of the work of a court jester, to entertain those who had been genuinely invited to banquets. Over and over again, these references came up. And I thought, that's quite fascinating, isn't it, I started to explore the artwork of the ancient world. And again, you see these images of people with disability being portrayed as servants and as entertainers at banquets. And I just found that quite fascinating imagery to think about the flip, then that takes place in Luke 14, where Jesus talks about people who are the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame, not just being entertainers not just being the servants, to those who are genuinely invited, but becoming recipients of the invitations themselves to actually participate in that banquet themselves. And I think we've read that so often, you know, as people in churches, we know this passage so well. But I think we missed How shocking that would have actually been to its first century audience that Jesus is pushing back against banquet in culture in the here and now to say, do not invite those who are your social peers, but invite those who would never normally even be on your radar? Those are the people you should be having meals at. That's shocking enough in itself. You know, and as you read through this passage, it starts off in this physical, why are you taking the places of honor? Why are these people even here, you should be having the marginalised here that you're dining with, you feel this kind of palpable tension in the passage and you have someone at the dinner table go, right? Well, wouldn't it be wonderful when we face together in the New Kingdom? Like let's change the topic here, shall we? But Jesus doesn't let it lie and then moves into this parable of the banquet and the story of the banquet host sending out invitations, you know, but what I love about the two stories that go together, then is Luke 14 is, you know, on one hand, you've got Jesus saying, You need to change current practice, you need to change what you're doing so that the marginalized are here in your communities in that every day. But then the second story, this parable about the banquet is about inviting those who are marginalized to participate in the eschatological banquet in the future banquet, and they have, you know, in heaven, as the people of God. So he's got both this physical here and now concept in mind, as well as these marginalized people being recipients of the gospel message so that they too can be the people of God. So it's a really powerful passage. It's not good enough just to be sharing the gospel with people. That's great. But part of the reality that lived experience now for believers in this world is you you need to change what you do to be modeling that future kingdom in the here and now and make sure you're giving precedence to those that our society might normally overlook, forget neglect, and sadly, sometimes our churches do the same. So Jesus is challenging both of those things current practice and the way the gospel message might to actually go out

Grace Emmett 45:01

that emphasis or not just saying, Oh, that's a metaphor for just kind of breezed past that. So important. But at the same time, I was wondering if I could ask you about the way that some metaphors function, that kind of trade on dynamics or disability, particularly the way that they're used to express sort of knowledge or understanding. So thinking about having ears to hear that sort of thing. And just wondering, kind of what do you think it looks like to read those sorts of metaphors? Well, within devotional communities, how do you sort of tend to approach pastors like that?

Louise Gosbell 45:33

Yeah. Thank you. That's good question. Going back to Luke 14, for a moment. What is helpful about that? Is that I think it it sort of defies that metaphor, in some sense, in the scholars that I read, who said, Oh, this is clearly a metaphor for Gentiles being brought into the community of God. You know, nowhere in the Old Testament, is there a precedent for using Disability language as being applied to Gentile people. It doesn't exist in the Old Testament. It's not like this metaphor that every Jewish person knew that it was the Gentiles who were blind and lame, for example. So we've got no grounds upon which to say that this was a clear metaphor for people for Gentiles. But you're right in saying what we do have in our biblical texts, is metaphorical language, disability, metaphorical language to, to talk about, you know, the people of God, perhaps when they're listening well to God, that they have listening ears, for example, or if they're not listening, that they might be, you know, deaf and mute to God's call to their behavior, for example. And that disability language is really, really tricky. You know, I think we have to accept it's there in our biblical texts. But I want to always tell people to be very careful in the way that we use it. And so to not to continue to perpetuate that language, I think we have to read it within its ancient context. Some scholars will say, Oh, the Bible is horrible about disability because it uses these metaphors. But I think we have to accept that these are ancient texts. And those kinds of metaphors were acceptable in that context. But it doesn't mean we have to perpetuate them and continue to use them. So I always cringe when I sing AmaZing Grace, I've got to say I always stop it there, I was blind. But now I see, I kind of just think I can't sing that line. So I don't like to sing those lines about. Yeah, disability language being used metaphorically like that. So I think it's helpful to recognize it's there. It was acceptable in its social context. But I think we have to avoid using it in worship music, in our sermons in the way that we kind of do it in devotional readings, or whatever else kind of challenge that us because what happens is, often it does get weaponized against people with disability, whether that's intentional or not, I can be very well meaning. But what I see is is, you know, the assumption that comes across is you wouldn't ever want to be blind. So why would you ignore God's call and be blind to or be deaf to God's message, you know, the worst thing that you could be is to be deaf essentially, is what comes across when you make statements like that, which is really hurtful for people with disabilities, you know, if you're sitting there in the sermon, and this is what it's about, that's your experience of disability, you know, you can only imagine, you know, what must be going on for someone in that in that context. And I have literally sat through sermons with people who are, you know, visually impaired, who are deaf as this kind of sermon is coming down, and it's incredibly awkward. So I think we have to be careful in the way that we talk about that language and recognizing that it's there. Yeah, and how we might apply that to real life scenarios now. So we're not listening to God, or were ignoring God, let's use that very overt language when we talk about the experience of God rather than talking about people being deaf or mute, to God speaking to them today, that that also comes down to, again, I think, often I hear that too, when when people are preaching on the gospel healing narratives and thinking about things like people being marginalized, and everyone was marginalized with a disability comes down to those stereotypes again, too, because people do talk about it. These are the worst kinds of experiences you could possibly have. And everyone with a disability was marginalized. I think we fall into those traps simultaneously of metaphorical language because we assumed that disability is the worst experience anyone could possibly could have had in the ancient world. So why would you? Why would you want to be that don't be that so we're coming from a framework when we use those metaphors of disability equals bad, you know, and so we want to try and I think nuance those discussions a little bit as we have opportunity to do that and to speak differently about those passages, I guess.

Christopher Porter 49:57

Yeah. Thanks, Louise. I think this is is one of those areas where I suspect a lot of people listening to this will be quite shocked if they haven't heard this before. Yeah, certainly from hearing about your brother in law's the experience of being excluded from serving at church. And then yeah, hearing people preaching about these things. Personally, I heard a sermon years ago, as an Advent sermon on Isaiah 44, and the sermon songs 43 and 44. With with the, the, the pastor employee for a team where their eyes are plastered over, so they cannot see as specifically addressing the fact that people who have who are blind, it is causative. This is very much a approach that blind people cannot see the gospel, which was quite, I mean, quite, I think quite damaging, in a lot of ways. So, with that in mind, I guess what are the what are the engagements that you would like to see the church? Do? I know, You've had a lot to do with advocating in Sydney, where you are? What are the what are the areas where you'd like to really see good engagement in this space?

Louise Gosbell 51:22

Yeah, I think, you know, as I said, early on, I think disability isn't inevitable experience, but we treat it in society and in our churches, like it's his marginal thing that happens over there away from everyone else. And when we treat it like that, it means that we have no impetus to go and do a great deal about it. Because we think it's rare. You know, we might have someone who comes to our church with a disability, if we ever do, I'm sure we'll be welcoming. These are things that I've heard from church leaders over the years, I'm sure we would be welcoming if we actually had someone with a disability. But that comes from a framework of assuming that it's, it's rare, you you don't already have people with disabilities in your churches, it fails to recognize you know that your current Australian stats are nearly 18% of the Australian population have some kind of a disability. So that is, you should already have a significant number of people with disabilities in your church. And if you don't, there is a problem, because you are not reflective of the society around you, if that's actually the case. You know, the other stuff that's really interesting is, you know, they're in societies like Australia, where we have an average lifespan over 75, there's an expectation that the average person will spend over eight years of their life with some kind of a disability. And so whether that's just the, you know, diminishing vision and hearing that might happen as you age, or whether that's an accident or illness like mine that's led to a disability. Disability is inevitable. And if it's not in your own body, it will be your spouse, your parents, your children, it is absolutely inevitable that you will encounter disability, but we don't do ministry, like disability is inevitable. We don't do ministry, like we are expecting people with disability to be part of what we do we treat it like this anomaly. There might be someone you know, I once met, someone's cousin's friend's Uncle, you know, like, it's this thing that's far away, rather than an ever present reality as part of our church communities. So then we need to shift our framework, you know, as churches to recognize the inevitability of disability, and to be thinking intentionally about the things that we do, or don't do that keep barriers in place that prevent people with disability from being able to participate and engage with church communities. So if we, we might not mean to, we might not even be aware that we're doing it, but often it's church communities, we have practices that that exclude people with disabilities, whether that is, you know, we ran all the women's Bible studies during the day. And so, you know, you might not be able to, are there a women's houses that have stairs and no ramps, and so if you're a wheelchair user, you can never get to those groups or, you know, whether it is everything is done verbally, and someone who has, you know, auditory processing, for example, or other kinds of learning difficulties or autism might have trouble trying to keep up with everything that's particularly verbal, so that people aren't intentionally trying to exclude people with disability. But because it's not on their radar, they don't think about the processes and the things that they do that might inadvertently exclude people or make it harder. And so, you know, I talk about it in terms of barriers, are we keeping those barriers up? Are we perpetuating those barriers? Or as church communities are we actively working to reduce and remove those barriers to participation? You know, my experience through co If at lock downs was, you know, some really positive things came out about the experiences of people with disability in that time that online church made a huge difference for some people, not everyone with a disability want to make that clear, you know, for my daughter with autism, online church was amazing for her because she could be at home in an environment where she's comfortable, she's got a condition, that means she can't moderate her own body temperature. So here she was at it at home and an environment that is the right temperature for her, the lights are right for her. She's got volume control. And then we could pause it whenever she wanted to ask a question to clarify something. And she could actually listen and concentrate so much better than she could in a church building where it's noisy, you know, the lights aren't quite right, there's too many people. And so there was something positive that came out of that for her in in being online, I spoke to a lot of moms with children with disabilities in that season, who had experienced some stigma with, you know, not being able to get to Bible studies or not being able to get to Bible studies regularly. You know, that people would say, oh, you should really be able to come every week, suddenly, having Online Bible Study meant that the women in their groups could actually get a window into the life experiences of these mums with disability, who could see them still trying to wrangle their kids. You know, at seven o'clock, when Bible study starts shoving them with their medication, trying to get them up to bed, taking the backup 50 times whatever it is, you know, other moms suddenly went, Oh, my goodness, I'm so sorry, because I didn't actually realize how complex your life is with a child with a disability. And it was seeing that little window in their life's resume that they actually understood for the first time some of those challenges that are my mom might understand. And I know I've experienced that for myself as well, I tried to join a Bible study group a few years ago. And my pelvic injury was quite bad at the time. But I was told I could only come to the Bible study group, if I could promise that I would be there every single Tuesday night. And if I couldn't commit to being there every Tuesday night, then I couldn't be part of the group. And so my entry was that I couldn't commit to being there every Tuesday night. And so I wasn't able to join that. And I think there's great sorrow in that, for me, because I missed out on the community of those women, there's great sorrow, you know, for them, because I didn't get to go and participate with them and contribute to those Bible studies. But just that misunderstanding of the limitations that go with disability or chronic health, that I would say, I would want to say, I recognize those things that are in place there, please come when you can, because we'd love to see you whenever you're able to get there rather than sorry, that's it. These are the rules. So the way church practice works. And if you can't meet them, that's it. And so we were not being intentional and trying to cut out people with disability, I think most of the time, but we do put these barriers up, or we keep them up, when those are so easy to pull down. These are just things that we've developed. These are not hard and fast rules about biblical doctrine. This is just culture. This is church practice, that we've just gotten so used to we think it has to be done like this. And so I think we need to ask questions of the way we do things where we might be inadvertently accidentally putting things in place that might prevent people with disabilities or their families being able to Yeah, be be a meaningful part of a church community, to belong, to serve to be served, you know, to be loved by others, instead of actually being left out and feeling alone and excluded from the church.

Stephanie Kate Judd 58:38

Louise, thank you so much for the work that you are doing to equip the church to be the body in all its wonderful diversity. I know that I've really benefited from reading that resource that you mentioned, that the Sydney Anglican diocese commissioned. But thank you so much for speaking with us today. And thank you for all the work you're doing to make sure that we are being the body that we are meant to be.

Louise Gosbell 59:11

Thank you so much for having me really appreciate your time and your willingness to focus on the topic of disability for this series as well.

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