

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

August 31, 2025

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## The Uninvited and Unwelcome

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Did you know that mocking people with disabilities was a time-honored tradition in the Roman Empire? The Greek philosopher Plutarch refers to “monster markets” where wealthy Roman citizens could purchase slaves with a variety of disabilities.<sup>1</sup> These slaves were often used as “fools” or “pets” in elite households for entertainment. The Emperor Caligula and his guests would frequently throw food at his uncle Claudius and mock his speech impediment and limp.<sup>2</sup>

Outside of buying disabled slaves, people who were crippled, lame, and blind were often brought in by hosts for after-dinner entertainment. Mocking and deriding people with disabilities gave guests assurances of their own superiority.<sup>3</sup> These *akletoi*, “uninvited,” are often depicted in literary sources as eating and drinking excessively, not knowing when they might next have food. In visual representation on Greek vases, they typically appear with bloated bodies.

Israelite attitudes towards the disabled were no better than Greek and Roman ones. Lepers lived lives of ostracization and fear, never knowing when they might be driven away from whatever community they were a part of. The lame were usually destined for lives of begging and hunger. There are

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<sup>1</sup> Plut. *Mor.* 520c

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/claudius.html>

<sup>3</sup> Gosbell, “*The Poor, the Crippled, and the Lame*,” 183.

numerous encounters in the Gospels between Jesus and the desperate poor, who often have accompanying disabilities. And largely the attitude held was that a person's disability was punishment for some grave sin; their own or an ancestor's. All this, despite the teachings of the Torah with its tradition of care for the poor.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus, living embodiment of God's Word, is proposing an alteration to the typical dining practices of his time. One in keeping with care for the poor and lame, even affirmed in the Mishnah: "Let your house be wide open and let the poor be the companions of your house."<sup>5</sup> And this proposal is a breathtaking one – the poor and lame have dignity and worth.

Reciprocity runs our world. "Quid pro quo" is the operative law of the land. "What have you done for me lately?" the fundamental question at the heart of many relationships. I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine. The main problem with this attitude is that it reduces relationships to transactions. Another person's worth becomes defined by what they can do for you or how they might repay you in the future.

The Way that Jesus teaches and walks is one that chooses relational structures over reciprocal ones. Reciprocal relationships are concerned with keeping score and weighing effort. Relational ones are concerned with a person's wellbeing and wholeness. Reciprocal relationships are full of judgement, while relational ones are accepting. Reciprocal relationships are inherently selfish, concerned with what I can get from the other. Relational relationships are curious about others and seek ways to serve.

Jesus also grounds this teaching in the here-and-now. So often in the history of the church the poor and lame have been told that their time will come...eventually. In some far distant future in which the world is made right

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<sup>4</sup> c.f. Deut. 14:28-29; 26:11-13

<sup>5</sup> m. Avot 1:5

and suffering is no more. But no, Jesus instructs his followers, “when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.”<sup>6</sup> No talk of the future end-times when things will be made right. Rather, invite those who have nothing to give in return NOW. Don’t wait for the coming of the Kingdom of God, Jesus is telling us that it’s here already and we can live like it!

This reminds me of a tale from adapted from one by Mullah Nasruddin: A newly assigned pastor arrived in a wealthy city and was invited to a lavish dinner at one of his elder's homes. He arrived at the dinner in worn, humble clothing. The guests and host alike ignored him, giving him no special greeting, no place of honor, and no food. After a long, silent while, the pastor quietly left.

He returned a short time later, but this time, he was dressed in an expensive, well-tailored suit, a fine shirt, and a silk tie. Immediately upon re-entering the feast, the host and guests rushed to greet him with reverence. They brought him to the head of the table, offered him the finest foods, and heaped praise upon him.

As they began to eat, the guests noticed something strange. The pastor began to stuff food into the pockets of his jacket and rub broth onto his silk sleeves. Confused, the host asked him, “What in the world are you doing?”

The pastor replied, “When I first came here, dressed in humble clothes, you paid no attention to me and gave me no food. But when I came back wearing this coat, you honored me and offered me everything. Therefore, it is clear that you invited the coat, not me. It is only right that the coat should be the one to eat.”

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<sup>6</sup> Luke 14:13 (NRSVUE)

When we are focused on reciprocity we focus on all the wrong things: power, status, wealth, influence, clothing. When we are focused on relationships we are walking the Way. The Way of love and wholeness. The Way of connection and community. The Way of welcome to the uninvited and unwelcomed. Amen.