

“Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a harder battle.” Plato

One of the benefits of reading is it can give you a perspective you might never have. A book I read recently did that for me: *Dancing with Max* by Emily Colson. It’s one of the most moving books I’ve read in a long time.

You may recognize the name, *Colson*. Emily is the late Chuck Colson’s only daughter. It was printed in 2010, two years before Chuck went Home to be with the Lord. Chuck wrote both the prologue and epilogue.

While I can often read a novel in a day or so, biographies typically take me time to work through. I literally couldn’t put this biography down. Often I found myself weeping as Emily shared her story and that of her autistic son, Max. It’s a sad yet wonderful story, all at the same time. It was a blessing in that it gave me insights of what it must be like to parent an autistic child.

Like me, I’m sure you’re thankful celebrities and athletes like Tim Tebow have such powerful testimonies. Yet, in our celebrity enamored world, it’s easy, even in the Church to forget Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians (I know I do), *“For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God”* (1 Corinthians 1:26-29).

One of the most important lessons we forget is God loves everyone, Jesus died for everyone and the Church is for everyone. We’re truly to be the antithesis of the world which teaches that the beautiful, talented, intelligent, wealthy, athletic and popular have greater value. The Church is to be a safe place of grace for everyone, particularly the disenfranchised.

No one seems to know why but the number of children diagnosed with autism or related disorders has grown at what many call an alarming rate. In the 1970s and 1980s, one out of every 2,000 children had autism. Today, the CDC estimates, one in 150 eight-year-olds in the U.S. fits the autism spectrum disorder, or ASD. If we are going to be the Church God has called us to be, we must find ways to love, minister and be a blessing to those others disdain and reject. What can we do as a church family and as individual believers to minister to special needs families?

Be very sensitive to the amount of stress a special needs child puts on a marriage and family. Even in a church our size, we have two critical health situations. While these are not special needs children, they are critical care children. One family has a two year old granddaughter in need of a heart transplant. The other has a five year old grandson with a brain tumor who’s had surgery and is continuing chemo. And we have other families with special needs children – health, emotional, educational limitations, etc. at different levels, and we will have more.

A crisis with a child puts incredible stress on a marriage. It did with Emily Colson. Even before they had a diagnosis of autism, the strain became too much and her husband filed for divorce.

Most young couples struggle financially. Add to that the stress of a crisis with their child. Then, their child needs extra time and attention, yet they must work, just to stay ahead. To pay the extra bills, one or both may need to take a second job BUT their child still needs them, more than other

children typically need their parents. Because of the needs of the child, attention which should be focused on each other and the marriage, often is consumed by the child and the crisis.

How can we help? First, pray...really pray for them. Let them know you are praying for them...over and over again. Then, do it.

Then, encourage them. One of Emily's spiritually mature friends, Patti, called Max a "gift." God used that to change Emily's whole perspective. Max wasn't some curse or a burden, this special autistic boy was a "gift" from God. And isn't that what Scripture teaches? "*Children are a gift from the Lord*" (Psalms 127:3, NLT). The Bible doesn't qualify it and say "perfect" children or "normal" children. Psalms 139:13-16 reminds us that each of us are designed by God. And that special child is not just a gift for those parents or that family, that child is a gift to us, to our church.

Look too for ways to help them. Just the usual stuff of going to the grocery store can be a major crisis with a special needs child. Perhaps offer to watch the child while they do needed errands. Or, do the errands for them. Caring for a special needs child can be a 24/7 commitment. Just watching their child can be the sanity respite they desperately need.

Be aware ministering to special needs children and their families help you and I grow spiritually. That's what happened to Max's grandfather, Chuck Colson. Max coming into his life helped Chuck grow in grace.

Previously, Chuck had been a lawyer and on President Nixon's staff. After going to prison and coming to Christ, he began a ministry to inmates, Prison Fellowship. But Chuck moved faster than the speed of light and kept his schedule overflowing. Max slowed him down...a lot. You just can't rush a special needs child. It taught Chuck compassion and patience and was used by God to cultivate spiritual fruit in his life. God can use it to do the same for us.

I worry about Christians who don't want to serve, particularly with children. I worry their souls are shriveling. More than that, I fear what the Lord may do, because He loves us so much, because our spiritual growth is so vital to Him...what He will do to get us to grow.

Some of the saddest comments I hear folk say, "I've done my turn with kids...I'm not a kid's person...I don't have the patience." They're very ignorant of their Bibles. Our Savior said, "*Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven*" (Matthew 19:14). The very best way to become more childlike is to be with experts – children. Amazingly, it was the spiritually stunted disciples who didn't have time for children – Jesus always did. I don't know about you but I want be like Jesus. I want to be a person who has His love, compassion and patience, even for the disenfranchised. Don't you?