

The Group Forgotten by the Church

I consider it an honor to be a pastor's wife. It is a privilege to be allowed into people's lives: their hurt, pain, devastation, joy, celebration, transformation. This church, this body of Christ—with all of its broken pieces along with its many gifts and talents—is beautiful. But it can also be so ignorant that it pushes away the most vulnerable.

Recently, I was talking to a friend who attends a large and thriving church. She wanted to ask me about a comment her pastor said from the pulpit, because she felt uneasy as soon as it was said.

"It saddens me to see people with disabilities in our church," he said. "It is a reminder that we do not have enough faith."

Now let that sit with you for a minute.

I wish this was the only time when well-intentioned church leaders show their ignorance on disability or their lack of understanding that all life has value and purpose. I wish this was an isolated incident in which someone failed to recognize that we are *all* flawed—*all of us*. Because what about the man that carries lust in his heart? Or the woman who is full of bitterness and jealousy? Are those not more damaging to our souls than a physical or intellectual disability? Do we not *all* need healing from the addictions, selfishness and pride that we carry?

Perhaps we have forgotten that life is a journey and the ultimate healing will come as we stand before the Lord, our bodies restored, our brokenness gone. All of us, every single one of us, healed!

My heart breaks as a member of this beautiful church when I

see us failing the most vulnerable. When I see our ignorance crush a people group that needs us to come along their side and offer support, rather than judgment, of what we perceive to be a lack of faith.

So what do we say when someone prays and prays and prays for healing? That they don't have enough faith? That there must be hidden sin in their lives? Isn't that ultimately what we communicate? And what does that say about God? Doesn't this attitude foster a perception of an uncaring, detached, judgmental God?

When my daughter was born with Down syndrome, one of my friends confessed she thought I deserved it. She said that I must have done something wrong for God to give me a child with a disability. Sadly, this is the message she had heard from her church, the same church I had attended growing up, the same message I'd heard. Thankfully, at that point in life I had personal experience with children with disabilities. I also had a real, deep relationship with God, the same God that whispered to me, *I don't make mistakes*.

So I clung to this verse:

Oh yes, you shaped me first inside, then out;
you formed me in my mother's womb.
I thank you, High God—you're breathtaking!
Body and soul, I am marvelously made!
I worship in adoration—what a creation!
You know me inside and out,
you know every bone in my body;
You know exactly how I was made, bit by bit,
how I was sculpted from nothing into something.
Like an open book, you watched me grow from conception to birth;
all the stages of my life were spread out before you,
The days of my life all prepared
before I'd even lived one day (Ps. 139:13-16, MSG).

So how does the church receive us families living with disability?

Here is a sad reality: 80 percent of families that have a member with a disability do not attend church. Yes, 80 percent!

Why?

There are several reasons, and I will let you hear from other families:

- My child is not welcomed in any of the children's activities; they said he is too disruptive.
- I took my child to Sunday school class, but they wheeled him to the corner, and he sat there until I came to pick him up.
- They said I had to keep my child with me because they had nobody that could help care for her during children's church. I tried, but she can be noisy, so an usher asked us to please leave the sanctuary because she was disrupting the service.
- I asked the pastor if we could possibly have someone help my child during Sunday school; they told me they were not responsible to find me babysitters.
- It's not worth it. My child cannot handle the sensory overload.
- When my child is loud, people stare at us and shake their heads. I even had people tell me that my child needs discipline. My child has autism, and they know it! I'm not going back.
- My child is welcomed, but almost every Sunday they call me and I have to go get her from her class. Why bother?
- I tried starting a special needs class for kids, but the church leadership did not support me; they said there was no need.
- For 20 years, my wife and I took turns going to church. One Sunday she would go and I stayed home with our son;

the next one we switched.

Sadly, there are many more stories like these, and I often wonder, "Why is it that nobody offered to babysit their child during the service? Or in their home? Nobody thought it would be good for the parents to go to church?"

I am especially astounded when I hear people say, "There is no need for a special needs focus in the church."

I'm going to switch gears just for a second here.

There is a strong home-schooling Christian movement where parents are concerned about the negative influence their children receive attending public school. Yes, it is a scary world out there, and I have considered home schooling myself. What our children get exposed to is devastating. Thankfully, there are so many Christian churches that fully support the home-schooling movement, investing time and resources to help this little community.

So isn't it sad, isn't it puzzling, that the only classroom where our kids with special needs are fully included is the public school classroom rather than the Sunday school class? Isn't there something wrong when the public school setting is more accepting, loving and supportive to kids with disabilities rather than the church?

Take a moment. Think about it.

Did you know that 80 percent of marriages end up in divorce when there is a child with a disability in the family? So shouldn't the church support these families?

Did you know that special needs families feel isolated? So shouldn't the church be the place where they feel included?

Did you know that special needs families feel constantly judged? So shouldn't the church be a place where there is no judgement?

Did you know that people with disabilities are the largest minority in the world? Yes—the largest minority!

Disability ministry is a huge need! Let's wake up. We are the church!

Disability is a part of life. It has nothing to do with faith. It has nothing to do with healing. It has everything to do with being human. It has everything to do with being the body of Christ. People with disabilities are part of the body, and we need them. We need them just as much as they need us. We are all connected in this journey—all of us. *All of us!*

We have an unreached people group in our own backyard. A people group that has been marginalized by society for too long. It is time that as a church, we embrace them, we accept them and we celebrate them!

Instead of praying for healing, let's pray for God to open *our* hearts and *our* eyes to the needs of people and children living with disability. Let's figure out how to do life together. And let's embrace, forgive, celebrate, accept and love unconditionally.

And let's never forget that people/children with disabilities are people first, fearfully and wonderfully made.

This beautiful church has much to learn about disability. We need to create awareness and educate our leaders, and in doing so, it is important that we extend grace and forgiveness. You and I can be a part of the solution. Grace and forgiveness—we all need it.

Adapted from Ellen Stumbo's blog at . Ellen is a pastor's wife and she writes about finding beauty in brokenness with gritty honesty and openness. She is passionate about sharing the real—sometimes beautiful and sometimes ugly—aspects of faith, parenting, special needs, and adoption. She has been published in Focus on the Family, LifeWay, MomSense, Not

Alone, *and* Mamapedia *among others*.