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WHY YOU SHOULD NOT WELCOME MY SPECIAL NEEDS CHILD TO YOUR CHURCH

by
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I realize this may be one of the most controversial posts I have ever written. It has taken me months of writing, stopping, coming back, re-writing and I'm still not positive it's perfect. But it is my heart. Every fiber of my being burns with passion over this topic. I want to share with you why you should NOT welcome my special needs child to your church.

I write this from what I believe is a unique perspective. You see, I have worked in ministry for over ten years now. I have been on staff as a youth minister and a children's minister. I have helped to develop a special needs program within a church setting. I have also been a teacher for six years collectively. I have taught classrooms full of children from all kinds of backgrounds, strengths, and weaknesses. Most importantly, I am a mother to two beautiful children, one of whom has Autism. That's right, I am the parent of a special needs child. So why on earth would someone with my background write a blog like this? Allow me to share my heart with you. These are the reasons I believe you should NOT welcome my special needs child to your church.

-YOU SHOULD NOT WELCOME MY SPECIAL NEEDS CHILD IF YOU BELIEVE THE HOLY SPIRIT IS ONLY ABLE TO WORK IN THE HEARTS OF SOME PEOPLE, BUT NOT OTHERS. Any good church goer would most likely read this and immediately say "Oh no! Not me! I believe the Holy Spirit can work in the hearts of all people! I would never limit what God could do!" And I would challenge back with this: Many times we (the Church) say such things with our words, but our actions do not hold up. Does your church offer anything for special needs children? Do you know? Instead of preparing a Bible story for special needs children, does your church place them in a nursery setting and give them a toy and some movies? As the parent of a special needs child, I beg you, please do not pre-determine who is able to be reached by the Holy Spirit. Church leaders, I want to encourage you that your job as an ambassador for Christ is to prepare to the best of your ability, to teach God's word, trusting that the Holy Spirit will do exactly what He has promised to do: "But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you." – John 14:26 You do not have to be a special education teacher to share about Jesus' love with these children. You do not have to have sensory activity based learning, Bible centers, or offer ABA therapy. Your job is to present a sacrifice of your time and preparation, your love for others, and your love for Jesus...and share it. Share it with children as best as you can. Tell them a Bible story, tell them about Jesus' love and sacrifice for them, tell them how God created them with a plan and perfect purpose for their lives! And then trust that the Holy Spirit is going to do what He says He will do. Yes, some parents of special needs children are just thankful for the respite of having a safe place for their child to stay while the rest of the family goes to worship. But why would the church want to miss out on the great opportunity of sharing Jesus with these special children? These are children who are often times excluded, laughed at, looked at, and pushed aside. For those of you who DO prepare a lesson for these precious children, thank you. I want to tell you something very important: they are listening. They may not be making eye contact with you, they may be singing, spitting, or spinning, but they are listening. I firmly believe that God's Word does not return void (Isaiah 55:11). It is not man's job to determine who is able to be reached by God's Holy Word. His Word is for everyone and His love is all encompassing.

-YOU SHOULD NOT WELCOME MY SPECIAL NEEDS CHILD TO YOUR CHURCH IF YOU BELIEVE THAT CHURCH IS NOT A PLACE FOR THE “MESSY”. It should always be for the great love of our Lord that we would want to present the Bride of Christ, the church, in the best way we can by taking care of church facilities. I understand this completely. But my heart breaks for the church that has lost sight of the God given mission of the Church. The Church was never meant to be a pristine, social gathering of perfect people sitting in Church bookstores or coffee shops. These outreach tools in and of themselves are fine, but let us never replace the gift of human compassion, connection, and our mission to serve with only tools. This I know: Jesus knew how to get messy. Jesus placed His hands into the wounds of the hurt, He surrounded Himself with the “unclean”, He loved the “least of these”, He cared for the broken, and He washed the dirty feet of the disciples. Jesus knew that ministry is messy. I can promise you this, special needs ministry is messy too. There is nothing very cute about changing a five year old’s poopy diaper. It is not very glamorous to wipe drool or to help change soiled clothes. My special needs son is not going to sit quietly during your Christmas Cantata and he very likely will hurl his sippie cup up on the stage in the middle of your sermon (it’s true, it happened). Welcoming those with special needs into your church will cause you to have to think about wheelchair ramps and points of accessibility. Welcoming those with special needs into your church might be a little more noisy, might require more volunteers, might cost your church money, and it WILL be messy. But Oh, dear Church, do not forget that Jesus loves and came to serve the messy. What if the Church began to serve “the least of these”? What if Church was a place where those who cannot care for themselves would be cared for? What if Church was a place where dirty diapers were changed, drool was wiped, and the outcasts were accepted? If Jesus, the Messiah, Lord of all Creation, came to serve the “least of these”, shouldn’t we? What if we have it all wrong? What if Church could be a haven for the “messy”?

-YOU SHOULD NOT WELCOME MY SPECIAL NEEDS CHILD TO YOUR CHURCH IF YOU DO NOT RECOGNIZE THAT “SPECIAL NEEDS” IS A MISSION FIELD. In the book of Matthew, Jesus gives his disciples the “Great Commission” telling them to “Go and make disciples of all nations...” (Matt 28:19). As the church, as Christians, it is our mission to share with others the unconditional love and grace of Jesus Christ. We send out missionaries all over the world to share the good news of salvation. Praise the Lord! But did you know that there is a mission field, right here in America, that is not being reached? Did you realize it is estimated that nearly 90% of special needs families do not attend church? I can give you a pretty good reason why this statistic is what it is just based on personal experience. It’s so hard. Did you know that most parents of special needs children who actually make it to church on any given Sunday have probably had much less sleep than you, many have faced several huge obstacles, and are literally hanging on a prayer that “this whole church thing works today”. It’s hard to take your special needs child into a huge crowd because (usually) it overwhelms them. It’s the look of panic or sheer terror on the church worker’s face when they see your child bounding through the door. It’s worrying if the ministry workers will truly care for your child while you are at worship. It’s wondering if I can truly say “let’s go to church and learn about Jesus!” or if my child will actually just be sitting in a room while the volunteer nervously watches the clock. It’s wondering if anyone would actually be able to relate to you and your family. It’s worrying about the safety of my non-verbal child who cannot tell me how he was treated by those who care for him. It’s wondering if you’re truly going to be accepted or just tolerated. My husband and I both grew up in church and are quite determined to have our family there each Sunday, but even for us, it can be discouraging at times. Dear Church, there is a mission field of tired, overwhelmed, and often times questioning people who are just waiting to be loved, included, noticed, and accepted. But let me warn you, this is not a mission trip that you can just donate to or visit for one week and walk away. If your church should accept the mission to minister to special needs families like mine, it will

be a continuous labor of love. I beg you, Church, to not claim to have a “special needs ministry” unless it is truly the heartbeat and conviction of your church. I have seen what it is to have a church with a “special needs ministry” but it is not the passion of the congregation or the passion of the pastor. I have been the guest of churches who have a “special needs ministry” where there is no heart behind the ministry. Parents of special needs children pick up on this very quickly and for many, it is their first and very last time to “try church”. I have visited churches that have an undeniable passion for special needs families. I have seen what can be when a congregation embraces this mission as their own. It can be a very beautiful thing! Special needs families just like mine are not welcome very many places. As a whole, public places are not our friend. Special needs families long for community and connection because it is rarely offered to us anywhere else. Would your church please pray about this widely un-reached mission field? If your church will not reach out to a family like mine, who will? We are falling into the cracks, unnoticed.

- YOU SHOULD NOT WELCOME MY SPECIAL NEEDS CHILD TO YOUR CHURCH IF YOU BELIEVE THAT GOD DOES NOT SPECIALLY CALL EVERY MEMBER OF THE BODY OF CHRIST TO SERVE. 1 Corinthians 12:27 says “Now you are the body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it.” If you are a Christian, then you are a part of the Body of Christ. If you are a part of the Body of Christ, then according to 1 Corinthians 12, you have a “part” or a job to do. You see, God has given all of us gifts and talents to be used for His glory. The Church is supposed to function as one body of believers with all of its different members serving through their gifts and talents for the sole purpose of glorifying God and furthering His kingdom. I am not a super gifted person, but even I have been given “strengths” in some areas. These strengths or “gifts” as the Bible calls them, were not suddenly zapped out of my system when I birthed a special needs child. On the contrary, I, like many other parents of special needs children, have gifts that God says are important to the Church. What’s more is that I still greatly want to serve. I believe there is a supernatural, wonderful thing that happens when a believer is serving in the very way that God created and called them to serve. It fuels my heart and uplifts my spirit. It’s true, many special needs parents want to serve. What is also true is that many times we are not able. We are desperately searching for a church that will allow us the opportunity to serve, a church that values us, a church that believes we have something special to offer. We are also desperately searching for a church that will look upon our special needs child as part of the Body of Christ...which means that he too has something very special to bring to the body. In many ways, special needs families are being “cut off” from the Body of Christ. Oh Church, please do not let this be! If the Church does not find a way to include special needs families, it will hinder any possibility of these parents or children being able to contribute to the Body of Christ within the Church. It will make it very hard for these parents and children to do the very thing that God has charged us to do.

The truth is, I wish you would welcome my special needs child to your church, but for many, there is a work to be done first. Please check your heart and the heart of your church. There are families slipping through the cracks...90% of special needs families to be exact. The Church has a great opportunity to be the hands and feet of Jesus. Who will take up this cause? It will take work and preparation, it will be hard, it will be messy, and it is not glamorous. But, dear friends, it will be so worth it.

“The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’” –Matthew 25:40