



Let them lead us

Seeing who is missing in our churches

Annie and Audrey enjoy being in church. They love worship. When music is playing, they sing loudly and dance in the aisles. And when the preacher preaches ... well, Annie and Audrey are children. More specifically, they are my children.

According to medical authorities, they will never outgrow tuberous sclerosis complex (TSC). It is in their DNA and affects the body's ability to suppress tumour growths. Annie and Audrey are beautiful nine-year-old twin girls. Their faces bear the characteristic red bumps of TSC, and they both function at the level of a two- or three-year-old. They have epilepsy and autism and are globally delayed. They are not toilet-trained.

The challenges are constant, and behavioural outbursts can be extreme. At times I have cried in frustration and accepted comfort from my 12-year-old. Every day I rely on help and wisdom from my family, workers and doctors. But as hard as it is to understand why this has happened, it is unimaginable to me that anyone would see my little girls as disposable.

The fact is, though, that had they been alive in 1941, Annie and Audrey would have been among those deemed "useless eaters." This is a repulsive phrase. I don't write it lightly, nor is it a term I coined. It was used to describe people Adolf Hitler decided were "unproductive" members of society. People like Annie and Audrey.

They would have been experimented on, perhaps lobotomized or euthanized, all in an effort to save the resources of the country. Sickening but true. Shocking? I hope so. Do we find it offensive? Of course we do. But I wonder if we are offended enough.

My view of people with disabilities changed when I was nine. In the mid-1980s, my dad's job took us to Southern California for two years. It was there I gave my life to Jesus Christ. Because our pastor's wife worked for Joni and Friends, I met Joni Eareckson Tada and heard her sing at church.

I was deeply affected by her story. Joni had a diving accident at 17 that resulted in her becoming a quadriplegic. She was angry at God and wanted to die. Then Joni met Jesus and realized that her life was valuable, and that God wanted to use her life for His glory. Forty-five years later, Joni remains in a wheelchair and lives with chronic pain. But she still believes God has her here on this earth for a purpose.

Having two children with severe cognitive disabilities has forced me to think hard about how and where they fit into our community. TV shows and commercials are full of beautiful, able-bodied people. Rarely do we see models in wheelchairs or showing signs of cognitive delays. Most advertisers don't use people with disabilities to sell their products. Do we see such people as members of our community? Does the church notice they are missing or seek them out?

My twins have been accommodated, embraced, and loved by my church. ASL signing is offered regularly on Sunday mornings for the deaf community. I have noticed others there who live with disabilities, and the church has done well to welcome and accommodate their special needs.

Still, I can't help but wonder if we really want more of these people in our pews on Sunday mornings. Do we notice the lack of wheelchairs? Are we too distracted by the rocking autistic man in the front row? Do we believe that church is necessary for them? Or are we guilty of seeing the less able as unproductive citizens in our church communities?

Except for a miracle, my daughters are among those who will never understand the salvation message or say the "sinner's prayer." Their IQ is low, and their verbal ability is minimally functional. But the Bible tells us that "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27). This means that every person on this planet, regardless of ability, bears the image of Almighty Creator God. Each one is to be loved by those who follow Christ.

It makes me want to go out and tell families like mine: "Come! Come! Come to church with your autistic child who flaps his hands and throws tantrums. Bring your wheelchair bound mom or your epileptic brother who grunts and drools."

My heart aches for the many whose experience is not like mine. For those who think about going to church but quickly dismiss the notion because of fear. Fear of being stared at, shushed, or worse—ignored.

We need to take a look around our churches. Whether a person can communicate or materially contribute to a society or church cannot determine whether he or she has value. The love of God is for all people. It is a love like no other and is meant for sharing, in spite of reception, response or applause.

Annie and Audrey have a connection to the Lord which is like nothing I've ever witnessed. Their worship is the purest my ears have heard. I am different because of them. The body of Christ is theirs to be part of, to lead in. Let them lead us.