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**PUTTING THE PUZZLE TOGETHER PIECE BY PIECE:
HOW GENUINE AND AUTHENTIC FRIENDSHIPS CAN TRANSFORM FAITH**

by

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The Missing Piece: Understanding within the Church

Kathleen Deyer Bolduc, a New York Times bestselling author and mother, shares many stories of what life is like with her son Joel, who lives with autism. In her book *Autism and Alleluias* she shares a story that depicts both the struggles and the joys of church life for her family.

We enter the sanctuary for the baccalaureate service, my gut dancing and churning with mixed emotions. On one hand, I am happy for Joel to be recognized as a graduate. On the other hand, Joel has never been fully accepted by his peers at church, and that remains a sore spot on my heart...

Hoping to remedy that, three years ago, [my husband] Wally, Joel, and I joined the youth on a mission trip to the Galilean Children's Home, which cares for children and adults with severe disabilities. This seemed the perfect opportunity to encourage Joel's peers to become more welcoming of those who are differently abled. And maybe, just maybe, Joel would make some friends...

[Upon our arrival] Joel broke away from the group and approached one of the boys in a wheelchair. He held out his hand. "Hi. My name's Joel." Wally and I looked at each other, astounded. Joel never takes the initiative with introductions. His greeting was the ice breaker our group needed. I wish I could say that the rest of the week went as well. It didn't.

One by one the youth director calls the graduates forward. All are accompanied by several friends as well as family members. The sanctuary fills with the quiet murmur of prayer. I close my eyes. Oh Lord, where are my son's friends?

"Joel Bolduc, will you please come forward?" I open my eyes and stand, taking Joel by the hand. We walk to the chancel, where Joel sits in a chair. As the family gathers around I watch in surprise as all of the kids from that frustrating mission trip join us in a circle around Joel...

After everyone has been prayed for, the youth director calls the graduates up front again. "I have a gift for each of you," he says, holding a stack of wrapped presents in his hands. "I found a wonderful book of devotions that I thought you might enjoy." My muddle of emotions starts to get the better of me again. Joel can't read! "But for you, Joel," he continues, "I have an awesome worship CD. I watch you every Sunday, and I have to say, I have never seen anyone worship with such abandon. You've taught me a lot, Joel, about how to be free in worship. I hope this CD gives you many happy hours with the Lord."¹

¹ Kathleen Deyer Bolduc, *Autism and Alleluias* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2010), 115-117.

Think about the ways faith could be enriched if people and churches were able to see past the differences that exist between people. A step toward embracing each individual for who he or she is, along with what he or she can offer, would be beneficial not only to the church but to each of us. After all, through embracing the witness of these individuals, all would be impacted in both a beneficial and beautiful manner. The church must live into its call to be welcoming to all people, identify the needs and hopes of individuals and families living with ASD, and fulfill these needs and hopes by entering into genuine and authentic relationships with them.

Instead, many churches often find themselves in a different situation, one darkened by pain and fear. The church today states that it is a welcoming place, yet often struggles with what it means to be truly welcoming to all people, particularly those living with some form of developmental disability. As a result, individuals and loved ones affected by a developmental disability turn away from the church. Parents of children living with these developmental disabilities that were surveyed said that in the past year less than 50% of their children had participated in worship at any point. Those who identified their children as participants in worship went on to share that participation in other congregational events was even lower at only 14%.² Numbers like this should be alarming for anyone, but especially the church, because in large part families that feel welcome and supported find ways for their children to be involved. These numbers reveal that very few families who have children with developmental disabilities feel both supported and welcomed enough to participate in the life of the church.

When one thinks about developmental disabilities, autism or autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is one of the most common. This is in large part because the prevalence of autism has

² Erik W Carter, *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities* (Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co, 2007) 6-7.

increased drastically in recent years.³ Ten years ago, the prevalence was estimated to be that 1 in every 150 children born would be diagnosed; today the numbers have more than doubled with current prevalence being estimated at approximately 1 in every 68 children born.⁴ Yet, as one looks at the presence of autism, one realizes that there are still many questions and misconceptions about autism. In large part, these questions and misunderstandings create difficulty within the church when it comes to being inclusive because the church has not been fully equipped to understand the needs of individuals and families living with ASD. Therefore, it is important to first look at some of the common areas where children living with autism encounter challenges, while also looking at how understanding these challenges not only offer people a greater sense of understanding, but also a greater sense of witness to the difference Jesus makes in the lives of those within our communities of faith.

The Missing Piece: Understanding Autism Spectrum Disorder

Following the restructuring of the DSM-V in May 2013, autism is now classified under one umbrella known as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) as opposed to the distinct subtypes that used to exist in the DSM-IV-TR.⁵ Characteristics relating to ASD typically begin to be emerge between the ages of one and two years old and fall into three major categories: social interaction, verbal and non-verbal communication, and repetitive behaviors.⁶ As one looks at the categories, it does not take long to recognize that each of these areas plays a significant role in

³ How much of this increase in cases of ASD is related to the diagnosis of previously undiagnosed individuals remains to be unseen. Emerging research suggests that a majority of the increase in cases of ASD is related to changes in diagnostic criteria and tools. Other causes for this increase remain to be a topic of debate and research; however, research has disproven the claim that autism is caused by vaccinations.

⁴ Mary Beth Walsh, Alice F. Walsh, and William C. Gaventa, *Autism and Faith: A Journey into Community* (New Jersey: The Elizabeth M. Boggs Center on Developmental Disabilities, 2008) 6; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Autism Spectrum Disorder: Data and Statistics," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/data.html> (accessed April 8, 2015).

⁵ Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th ed., (London: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013), s.v. "Autism Spectrum Disorder."

⁶ Ibid.

most people's daily lives. More so, the challenges in these areas that exist for individuals and families affected by ASD contribute significantly to the disconnectedness between them and the larger society.

For individuals living with ASD, social interaction is a significant challenge. Some individuals experience difficulty in making eye contact, while others experience difficulty in connecting with others at all.⁷ Because most people without ASD are essentially pre-programmed for making relationships with others, these asocial behaviors are easily misinterpreted. Therefore, a lack of desire to be in relationship can not only be off-putting, but can be interpreted as rudeness or arrogance.⁸ The misinterpretation or misunderstanding then creates a basis for future forms of exclusion and impacts the ability for genuine and authentic friendships to develop. However, we also see that sometimes it is the unexpected ways that individuals with ASD communicate that is exactly what a situation or individual needs, as was the case with Joel that day at the Galilean Children's Home.

Similar to the challenges faced with social interaction, language and communication also lead to greater chances for misunderstandings to occur. With autism being viewed as a spectrum, it is important to recognize that not all children living with ASD will behave in the same way or encounter the same challenges. When it comes to language and communication, individuals with ASD encounter a variety of differing challenges, depending on how verbal or non-verbal they are.⁹ Again, connecting back to relationships, the ability to communicate with language, whether verbal, sign language, or perhaps some other combination, is important to developing these relationships and can be a significant barrier when people are unprepared to work in spite of

⁷ Walsh, Walsh, and Gaventa, *Autism and Faith*, 6.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 7.

these barriers. Furthermore, language itself can be a barrier, as some people living with ASD tend to have a very concrete understanding of words and phrases that occur regularly in everyday conversations, particularly getting caught up or confused when metaphors, idioms, or euphemisms are used.¹⁰

The last group of challenges that many individuals living with ASD face fall under the category of behaviors. One of the things that make these behaviors so challenging are the social norms of our community that are such a large part of our everyday lives. More so, there is also the reality that there are some other behaviors that are exhibited that can be distracting, painful to observe, and/or uncomfortable to be around.¹¹ Examples of the behaviors mentioned include repetition of sentences, rocking back and forth, hitting one's self, and banging one's head against objects that can lead to great harm. The list of behaviors can be quite extensive, but these are *some* of the behaviors that lead to the uneasiness for others mentioned; however, it is also important to understand that oftentimes a behavior is a form of communication.¹² Therefore, when one begins to notice a behavior in an individual with ASD, it is important to pay attention to the events surrounding the behavior as a way of identifying triggers, such as sensory overload.¹³ More so, while some of these behaviors may be appropriate in a private setting, the ability to differentiate is often difficult for people with ASD.

Taken together, these challenges pose a significant barrier to the formation of genuine and authentic relationships involving one or more people living with ASD; yet, these genuine relationships are imperative for proper growth development and faith development. In addition, it

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Robert Segal et al. "Autism Behavior Problems," HelpGuide.org and Harvard Health, <http://www.helpguide.org/harvard/autism-behavior-problems.htm> (accessed April 4, 2015).

¹³ Ibid.

is also a bit more obvious as to why peer-to-peer relationships, and ultimately the friendships that develop from those relationships, end up missing.¹⁴ However, as one will discover, all of these people living with ASD are first and foremost individuals that are also beloved children of God. This is true of all people, and is a belief broadly held by the major world religions of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. Therefore, as Christians, but more so as believers in God, it is imperative that everyone be open to learning what it takes to invite the opportunity for authentic friendships while being willing to put forth the effort to develop and nourish the relationship.

The Missing Piece: Authentic and Genuine Friendships

Joel's story and many other experiences make it clear that people living with ASD face many difficult challenges; however, when society begins to place stereotypes on those living with developmental disabilities, but more specifically ASD, the challenges only increase in number. John Swinton shares that it is not so much the bizarre behavior or speech that leads to a reaction as much as it is the perception of mental illness that the behavior creates.¹⁵ Now, as opposed to living with challenges that they cannot control, they, the individual and their families, are also forced to try and understand why they do not have friends, why they are not welcome in certain places, and why they seem like such an outcast to society. More so, it becomes apparent that it is not only children affected by these reactions – families feel the impact of their child being rejected by others while also feeling as though there is no one that they can turn to when they too are in need of community.¹⁶ It is often a combination of these experiences that leave

¹⁴ Benjamin T Conner, *Amplifying Our Witness* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012) 28.

¹⁵ John Swinton, *Resurrecting the Person* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000) 101.

¹⁶ Robert H. Albers, William H. Meller, and Steven D. Thurber, (Eds.) *Ministry with Persons with Mental Illness and Their Families* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012) 166.

entire families feeling pained by society, including the church, which is again a place where we claim that all are welcome.

Barbara J. Newman shares that for many children living with ASD, families and individuals have found that there is a greater inclusion within schools and workplaces than there is in the church.¹⁷ For many, this is a painful reality check that reinforces the concept that many churches honestly do not know how to respond to people living with disabilities, let alone the challenges that come with them. More so, it is this lack of understanding that then creates some of the greatest pain for individuals and families affected by ASD. Therefore, as a church, we are being called to take action. As a church, one can say all of the right things, however when action is not taken to develop genuine and authentic relationships, something is still missing.¹⁸

Reflecting back to Joel's story, it was apparent throughout the entire service that Joel's mother, Kathleen, was in a panic. She was admittedly fearful that no one would be there to support Joel. She was reliving memories from other not-so-great church moments. Finally, she even panicked that the gift from the youth director would not be beneficial for Joel at all, rejecting the idea that the youth director did in fact know and understand Joel.

These emotions that Kathleen experienced are not new emotions; many families who have children living with ASD share similar stories. The emotions that are expressed in this short vignette are sadly more likely to be prevalent than the feelings of welcome that we as a church hope would be present. The emotions experienced in these situations are only enhanced based on the experiences that have been had, experiences that have often left the child and family feeling lonely and hoping for more.

¹⁷ Barbara J Newman, *Autism and Your Church* (Grand Rapids: Friendship Ministries, 2011) 9.

¹⁸ Carter, *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities*, 29.

Genuine relationships with people who have ASD can also be difficult due to the circumstances of life. Many people living with ASD, children especially, often have many time commitments that come with helping to develop a greater understanding for societal norms while also helping them to function at their best, including a plethora of therapy appointments. As a result, these children are often surrounded by their parents as well as a variety of therapists, caregivers, and aides; a group that ultimately creates their social circle.¹⁹ However, it is important to note that all of these people are people that have been *put into* their lives; they are not necessarily people that have *been invited into* their lives. Therefore, it can be very difficult to make the transition from having people put in one's life, to having the opportunity to invite people into one's life. In fact, research done by Orsmond, Krauss, and Seltzer in 2004 shows "that almost half (46%) of adolescents and adults with autism were reported to have no friendships with similar age peers."²⁰ These relationships are imperative for helping our children living with ASD grow up while remaining an important part of community, let alone a faith community.

Labels provide another key disconnect when it comes to children living with ASD developing genuine and authentic relationships. For those who are considered "normal," it is easy to develop stereotypes about ASD that are then applied to all people living with ASD. This becomes problematic in large part because ASD is a spectrum; there are many different places an individual can be along that spectrum. Therefore, the chances of two individuals being in the exact same place, while possible is not likely. Furthermore, since no two people living with ASD

¹⁹ Ibid., 124.

²⁰ Ibid.; G.I. Orsmond, M.W. Krauss, and M.M. Seltzer, "Peer relationships and social and recreational activities among adolescents and adults with autism," *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 34 (June 2004): 245-256.

are in the exact same place, it is important for individuals and communities of faith to realize that the needs of each person will vary.

John Swinton again shares that this mentality and these actions of stereotyping and labeling are really an act of oppression against people with ASD by a large portion of the general population.²¹ More so, when these labels are used and when stereotypes are created, it is easy to forget about how much this limits the relationship because of the lens that it is being viewed through. Our lens then leads individuals to believe falsely that one really understands who the people are that have been stereotyped.²² Furthermore, while many may think that labels only apply to and affect adults, research shows us that by third grade, those who are considered “popular” have almost exclusively “non-rejected” friends.²³ Timing is everything, and if authentic relationships are not developed as children, the challenge to develop them into adolescents and adulthood only becomes more difficult, especially for those living with ASD.

Benjamin Conner tells us that “bearing witness is what the church is called and sent to do, yet we rarely include the witness of young people with developmental disabilities.”²⁴ Together, we are called to be the body of Christ. Gathering together in the church, one sees that there is a disconnect between what one knows one should do and what it is that is actually done as a church when face-to-face with this invitation we are called to extend. How is it that we as a church move from this reality of exclusion towards an environment where all are truly welcome to share who Christ is for them, while also hearing about Christ from those in the midst? As one continues to ponder this, the question also becomes “where is Jesus in helping us to understand

²¹ Swinton, *Resurrecting the Person*, 89.

²² Conner, *Amplifying Our Witness*, 24.

²³ *Ibid.*, 55, The term “non-rejected” comes from a study done by Estell et al., in which it was observed that while children with disabilities have friends, almost all of their friends also have some type of disability which is what distinguishes them from what Conner calls “able-bodied peers.” In short, “non-rejected” refers to those who are similar to the “popular” crowd.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

that each person we encounter has something essential to offer, no matter the age or circumstance?”²⁵

Psalm 139 tells us “*For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made.*”²⁶ Joel’s family lives into this promise as they are reminded each and every day that though struggles exist, Joel is not only created by God, but is also a reflection of God. More so, it is in this passage from scripture that all are reminded of this promise and gift, while also being encouraged to move forward looking for the best in others no matter the gifts, needs, or strengths.²⁷ It is this that then creates space for genuine and authentic friendships to develop.

Putting the Pieces Together: The Presence of Christ

Newman shares that “at the heart of mission, is friendship. God’s friendship is a gift available to anyone who is open to receiving it. It sustains us in mission as we introduce our friends to a friendship with Jesus.”²⁸ Ultimately, friendship is a pivotal part of each individual’s relationship with God, and friendship is the encouragement for each person to move forward sharing Christ with those we love. However, in understanding that friendships are more difficult for those living with ASD, one realizes that not only will friendships with individuals be affected, but also that understanding what it means to be in a relationship with God is difficult. Therefore, we must understand that there is a greater chance that these individuals may not be as comfortable sharing their faith because they may not have had as much opportunity to share or know how to share what it is that God has done in their lives.

For many, it is this disconnect that exists when trying to understand friendships that

²⁵ Carter, *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities*, 17.

²⁶ Psalm 139, NIV

²⁷ Newman, *Autism and Your Church*, 16.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 72.

creates an even greater difficulty in understanding the importance of friendship. Yet, Swinton shares that friendship is imperative to our relationships with Christ no matter the person because for Jesus, friendship is about transformation.²⁹ A true friendship is one that is not afraid to go beyond the boundaries that others may have put in place or rejected as a way of encouraging transformation.³⁰ After all, throughout much of Jesus' ministry we see this constant redefining of boundaries and transformation of people as he gathers with Zacchaeus to share a meal with the tax collector, as he heals those who have leprosy, and as those who society viewed as different or unworthy welcome him in.³¹ Yet, when one thinks about the importance of friendship, transformation, and welcoming in the outsider, it is hard not to think of the book of Ruth and the genuine relationship that developed between Ruth and Naomi.

When one thinks about the story of Ruth and Naomi, there are many areas where people living with ASD may find themselves in a similar situation to Ruth, the Moabite. For instance, Ruth, as a Moabite, is one who was considered to be different from the rest of society. After all, she was an outsider who happened to marry the son of Naomi; nothing about her was normal when one considers the context of her time; however, as time went on, Ruth was united with the people of the community.

In reflecting on the many stories of families who have a child living with ASD, there is often this shared feeling of being an outsider, of not knowing where one fits in, and of feeling as though they should keep to themselves. Unfortunately, it is not an easy journey and it is one that is filled with many struggles; however, as one continues on, there is a glimmer of hope that begins to present itself.

²⁹ Swinton, *Resurrecting the Person*, 47.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Jesus visits Zacchaeus, Luke 19:1-10; Jesus heals the leper, Matthew 8, Mark 1, and Luke 17; Jesus visits the Samaritan woman at the well, John 4.

As one journeys through the book of Ruth, it becomes apparent that while Ruth is not favored at first, she goes about doing what she must in order to protect Naomi. Instead of returning home to her family with her sister-in-law, she insists on remaining with Naomi, offering protection and guidance during a challenging part of her life. When one connects this back to families who have a child with ASD, it forces us to consider how as a church we are accompanying families through these difficult times; times when they may feel as though they have no one present to guide them and look out for them.

In many ways, families, and sometimes even individuals, may feel similar to Naomi at the end of the first chapter of Ruth. “I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty; why call me Naomi [that is pleasant] when the Lord has dealt harshly with me, and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?”³² It would not be uncommon for an individual or family member to feel as though they have been emptied and that the Lord has dealt harshly with them as families face the difficulties of being turned away from the church and feeling as though God is not with them when they need God the most.

One of the greatest gifts that all receive is the gift of friendship with Christ. However, when the church turns people away, feelings of emptiness begin to emerge. It is this same feeling of emptiness that Joel’s mom experienced prematurely, and it is a feeling that can be detrimental to the church when the church does not invite those who have a different perspective to immerse themselves within the community. This includes individuals living with ASD and their families.

Reflecting again on the story of Ruth, Naomi is filled because of Ruth’s presence in her life. As Ruth journeys with Naomi, they encounter difficulties, but they stick together to overcome them, eventually resulting in an embrace from the greater community. The same is

³² Ruth 1:21 NRSV

true for the church; the only way that the church can truly be filled is when the whole community is present. If someone is missing from the community the church is left with a feeling of emptiness, it is left with a puzzle that is missing the one piece needed for completion. This is where it becomes imperative that like the community Ruth and Naomi experienced, the church also creates a community where all are truly welcome. In participating in a community where people are united with individuals living with ASD, a space is created where faith and witness for all people, will not only be nurtured but also amplified.³³

Through the story of Ruth and through individual experiences, it becomes apparent that friendship is something that is deeply intimate; it is a committed relationship that encompasses all people in all their fullness.³⁴ Ultimately, it is an understanding that while all are different, all have something greater to share with the community. A friendship with others, when lived out as a true Christ-like friendship, is one that leads us to stand in solidarity with people, striving for justice in the face of gross injustice.³⁵ When people leave the church because they do not feel that they and their family are welcome as a result of the actions of their child with ASD, we are showing the world a great injustice. It is not our duty to *do* something for people living with ASD or any other, but it is instead our calling to *be* someone for them.³⁶ We are to support each other, teaching and learning about what it means to be in relationship with Christ and each other. Again, as the body of Christ, we are called to stand in solidarity; we are called to remain a part of the bundle, the body of Christ.³⁷ It is when genuine and authentic friendships are created, when

³³ Conner, *Amplifying Our Witness*, 6.

³⁴ Swinton, *Resurrecting the Person*, 37.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 112.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 143.

³⁷ Conner, *Amplifying Our Witness*, 80.

one truly embodies the message that every individual is one of God's beloved children, that the body of Christ is truly united and God's will is done.

Putting the Pieces Together: Creating Space for Connection

Over time, it has become apparent that accessibility is not enough for individuals with ASD to feel welcomed into the community. Churches and other groups that create a specific program for those who are differently-abled likely have good intentions, but a program that separates and creates an exclusive ministry is not the solution. Instead of creating programs for the differently-abled, the church needs to approach ministry as a way of learning about how to develop genuine friendships, while also taking time to hear the witnesses that everybody, including children and their families living with ASD, have to offer.³⁸

Time and time again, it has become apparent that while forming and maintaining friendships may be difficult for individuals with ASD, they are imperative for developing a true community of Christ where all people can come and feel that they have something to contribute. As Conner emphasizes repeatedly, it is through the friendships that are developed that a core community is created, but more so that a space where people can come to learn more about God is made known.³⁹ When someone is missing from that community, *all* miss out. The question that remains is how does one go from a community that only creates a space for accessibility, to creating a community that truly values the presence of each individual in their midst?

For many who have done research on the church and individuals living with ASD, the answer is a focus on friendship. Conner shares that "friendship is the Christian practice that addresses the fundamental need we have to be connected."⁴⁰ After all, it was a friendship with

³⁸ Ibid., 33.

³⁹ Carter, *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities*, 73.

⁴⁰ Conner, *Amplifying Our Witness*, 39.

Ruth that helped Naomi to see God again and the lack of friendship (particularly among Joel's peers) that caused Joel's mom, Kathleen, great anxiety. Yet, it is also important to understand that it will not be easy to invest in these relationships. When one opens his or her self to working on an authentic friendship, it also opens an opportunity for pain and rejection that may come from the lack of desire or understanding for reciprocating the desire of friendship. This understanding is especially important when developing genuine friendships with people living with any type of disability, this is because it is in large part the one aspect of life where these individuals truly have an opportunity to decide who gets to be a part of their life, as opposed to being told who will be a part of their life.⁴¹ Furthermore, this too is seen in the story of Ruth and Naomi. Reflecting on Ruth the situation that the two encountered together, a large portion of the first chapter is Ruth consistently pursuing Naomi in order to let her know that she would be with her through the journey. Again, friendships that are authentic and genuine take work and can be tough; however the return proves to be worth the investment.

As the opportunities arise, should the desire for friendship be present, there are ways to continue to build on the genuine nature of this friendship. Carter shares throughout his research that one of the key factors in moving a community towards authentic relationships, is the inclusion of genuine invitations.⁴² It is through these genuine opportunities, where individuals with ASD can truly feel that they are wanted and that they matter, that change begins to happen. These moments give an individual value and create social identities, something that is impacted by existing relationships.⁴³ Invitations to help us better understand who God is, and more so what

⁴¹ Ibid., 41.

⁴² Ibid., 122.

⁴³ Swinton, *Resurrecting the Person*, 27.

it means to be a part of a faith community, are also pivotal to the relationship from a Christian viewpoint.⁴⁴

What these genuine friendships will look like for each individual will vary because every person living with ASD experiences life in a different way. Rosie King, an individual living with ASD and a TEDMED speaker shares that for her, she enjoys being creative and incorporating art into her environment.⁴⁵ She mentions that she loves being able to use art as an outlet for her vivid imagination; therefore, someone seeking to connect with Rosie may offer an invitation or opportunity that relates to art. Someone seeking to connect with Joel may be better suited inviting Joel to a concert or some other musical event because of his love for music. The reality is, like any friendship, it takes an investment, one in which people become familiar with each other so that friendships can evolve in an ordinary way. Furthermore, like any other friendship, no matter the effort, sometimes it will evolve into something beautiful and sometimes the friendship will fail. Without effort however, a friendship will never have the opportunity to flourish.

In Joel's story, these genuine friendships that Conner talks about were the missing piece. Though the students surrounded Joel that day in the front of the church, there was never an investment into the relationship at church or outside of the church. These moments of disconnect left Kathleen, Joel's mother, wondering whether anyone beside their family would be there on that day, praying for their son. Though the students may have been acquaintances, the genuineness that comes with developing and maintaining the friendship were missing.

The church is being called into action, recognizing that all people, including those living with ASD, have something important to share. One of the ways this can be encouraged is

⁴⁴ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁵ Rosie King. "How Autism Freed Me to be Myself." TEDMED. United Kingdom, London. 21 Apr, 2014.

through open communication with the individuals and families. Newman offers many opportunities to connect with the individual and family to first evaluate the needs, but to also invest in ways in which the community can become a welcoming place. In her book *Autism and Your Church*, Newman provides church workers with interview questions that help to get at the heart of who the individual is, seeking out interests and strengths, hopes for the future, and areas that may be more challenging.⁴⁶ In obtaining this information, all parties involved are better equipped to work with the child, youth, or adult and can be better prepared to help facilitate growth in faith and friendship.

Another important aspect shared by Conner that is imperative to helping the church move forward is understanding that ministry is not done to youth and to individuals with ASD, but is instead done with them. This distinction is important because when ministry is inclusive, each person's differences are appreciated, boundaries are broken in a good way, and their presence is affirmed as their witness is heard.⁴⁷ Furthermore, as each individual is heard and respected, he or she also becomes known as the person he or she truly is, instead of the label that has been attached to him or her as a result of a diagnosis.

Each of these opportunities shared by Newman and Conner offer an insight to the church as to how one can truly embrace the individual and his or her witness; however, each perspective also offers an opportunity to understand how each person will be impacted when boundaries are broken down and a true community is built. The day that this understanding shifts is a day that will show how we as Christians are truly living out our call to be open and welcoming to all people. Furthermore, the church will be enriched not because of what the church has done, but because of what those who enter the church have to share with everyone in their midst. As

⁴⁶ Newman, *Autism and Your Church*, 99-102.

⁴⁷ Conner, *Amplifying Our Witness*, 63.

individuals, we are blessed to be unique, each having something different to offer to the larger community.⁴⁸ When these gifts go unrecognized, eliminating these unique opportunities as the church, we find that we are missing out on what could be with a different approach. Newman shares that when exclusion is practiced as a faith community, we take away some of God's greatest gifts for us as individuals and the larger faith community where we belong.⁴⁹

Therefore, as a church, and as individuals, we are being asked to think about what it really means to be genuine, authentic, and welcoming to all. Once an idea has been created, it is then time to take action, investing in education, but more importantly investing in friendships that are authentic, for when high-quality friendships are developed, all benefit. For individuals living with ASD, these relationships have a great impact in all areas of their life as they tend to have more positive attitudes towards school and more importantly, the chances of being bullied and victimized by peers is diminished greatly.⁵⁰ When one truly invests in these relationships, he or she is granted a self-affirming presence, but God's presence also shines through showing what it means to love others, including those that may be different than us.⁵¹

Ultimately, as church, if we do not live in community with people who are different from us, no matter the difference, we miss a key opportunity. As a church, it is imperative that we are welcoming to all, especially those individuals and families living with ASD, because without them, a hole will remain. The friendships will develop if we open ourselves to letting God work in us and through us so that we may better understand how individuals with ASD are not a hindrance on our lives, but are instead one of the greatest blessings we could ask for as these individuals witness to us about their own relationship with Christ. When relationships are

⁴⁸ Albers, Meller, and Thurber, *Ministry with Persons with Mental Illness and Their Families*, 170.

⁴⁹ Newman, *Autism and Your Church*, 18.

⁵⁰ Conner, *Amplifying Our Witness*, 39.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

developed, both people benefit as we offer the opportunity to teach and to learn from each other, but more so as we discover ways in which our gifts can be used together to further our relationship with Christ.⁵²

Returning to Joel's story, growing up was not an easy journey for Joel or his family. Repeatedly, they faced struggles and painful realities for all involved when it came to friendships; however in the end, Joel and his family found a place where Joel is truly embraced as a beloved child of God. The youth director in their church had gotten to know Joel and his own needs, and it is through that understanding that Joel and his family are able to see the witness that Joel proclaimed not only on them as his parents, but on the greater church community of which he is a part—a community that values Joel for who he is, a beloved child of God, who worships with abandon.

This is what the church is being called to do, to open its doors, but more importantly to be a space where every person is valued and recognized as a child of God who has something greater to offer to the kingdom. When the witness of all who enter the doors is heard, everyone is offered an opportunity to grow. More so, a genuine welcome into the space and the life of the community permits every individual, no matter his or her challenges, to realize that this is the place where he or she belongs. Furthermore, as a church it is imperative that each individual realizes this to be a space where he or she will hear the message “You are a wonderfully made child of God.” Once this sense of belonging has been found, genuine and authentic friendships can be embraced and built upon, and the missing piece of the puzzle will be returned, completing the beautiful picture of who and what the church embodies.

⁵² Ibid., 27.; Carter, *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities*, 31.

Again, it is imperative that the church live into its call to be a place that is welcoming to all people by taking the necessary steps. This form of welcoming is one that requires the church to identify the needs and hopes of individuals and families living with ASD, while striving to fulfill these needs and hopes by entering into a genuine and authentic relationship with each and every individual. Furthermore, it is necessary to find ways to communicate to all people that not only are they welcome but that God each person is a beloved child of God.

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