

**Disability Emphasis
Week**

Barb Newman



**Family Devotions to
Celebrate People with
Disabilities
Volume II**

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Disability Concerns
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DISABILITY EMPHASIS WEEK

Family Devotions to Celebrate Persons with Disabilities

Volume I

Introduction

I count it a blessing to be a teacher-student. For me, my classroom and school are places of both teaching and learning. God uses the children and events at school to speak to me about many things.

Although I could write a story about each one of my students, I pray that the stories included in this booklet will serve as a springboard for you to remember the things you may have learned from people with disabilities “Come and see what God has done, how awesome his works in man’s behalf!” Psalm 66:5

Barbara J. Newman

School and Church Consultant for CLC Network, and author of nine books:

Any Questions?

Autism and Your Church

Body Building: Devotions to Celebrate Inclusive Community

Church Welcome Story

Circle of Friends Manual

The Easter Book

G.L.U.E. Training Manual

Helping Kids include Kids with Disabilities

School Welcome Story

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Disability Concerns

Christian Reformed Church in North America

2850 Kalamazoo Ave. SE

Grand Rapids, Michigan 49560

Phone: 888-463-0272

www.crcna.org/disability

Sunday Image Bearers of God

Bible Reading: Genesis 1:24-31

Key Verse: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” Genesis 1:27

How many things do you have in your home that were not there forty years ago? Look around you. Do you have a computer with access to the Internet? What about a cellular phone? How many of you had a DVD player forty years ago? Do you have remote controls for your various electronic gadgets? How about Louise? Louise? Yes, she would not have been in your home forty years ago either.

Louise is a fifty-year-old woman who has an intellectual disability. Forty years ago, Louise lived in an institution. At that time, Louise would not have been welcome in our homes or communities. That’s why she lived in a building with other people, all of whom had

intellectual disabilities. Unfortunately, the people who operated this building did not understand our Bible verse for today; they didn’t realize that Louise was made in God’s image. If they had understood this, Louise would still have some hair.

When I met Louise, she no longer had any hair on her body. Even the fine hair on her arms and legs was gone. When Louise was at the institution, she was used in an experiment. Doctors gave her medicine that they wanted to give to cancer patients eventually. Even though Louise did not have cancer, they wanted to see what the effects would be when someone took this drug. The doctors discovered that this cancer medication causes all of your hair fall out and stay out.

Louise moved out of that institution about thirty years ago, and she is now enjoying life in a small group home with good caretakers who understand that she is an image-bearer of God. She can enjoy her own living room and kitchen in place of the large hall at the institution where all of the residents had to eat together. One of her favorite places now is the bedroom she shares with only one other person, instead of a giant room where all the people had to sleep on unkempt and smelly bedding.

Although Louise is now enjoying the dignity she deserves as an image-bearer of God, her hair will never grow back. Forgive us, God, for not seeing your image in Louise. And Louise, on behalf

of us all, please accept our apology. Even though you have been unable to speak, and therefore have not used your mouth to confess Jesus as your Savior, your actions have reflected the same love and care for your abusers that Jesus showed for his. God has used your life as an example of who Jesus is.

Monday **Modern-Day Miracles**

Bible Reading: John 2:1-11

Key Verse: “This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him.” John 2:11

Do you believe in miracles? I remember the joy of holding my two sons in my arms after giving birth to them. I counted their small, slender fingers, checked their tiny ears to see if they worked, marveled at the delicate toe-nails, and put up a fuss when the nurse had to return them to the hospital nursery. The miracle of birth happens often, and it is wondrous each and every time.

I remember, however, hearing about one mother’s experience that was very different from mine. After her little girl was born, she was not allowed to hold her. Instead, this little girl was rushed by helicopter to another hospital with more

Prayer: Lord, forgive us when we fail to see your image in those around us. Give us your eyes as we look at the precious and holy people who surround our lives. Thank you also for treasuring us. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

advanced facilities. The doctor called the mother who had just given birth, saying, “Your baby probably won’t survive this trip.” This baby’s mother and father had no idea whether they had given birth to a boy or girl, or whether they would ever hold that child alive. Do you believe in miracles?

The parents found out the next morning that their baby was a girl, and that she was still alive, although the doctors did not expect her to live very long. Through a grueling three years of hospital visits, resuscitations, prayers, daily doctor calls, and various medical procedures, their daughter continued to live. During each crisis, the doctors would say, “We don’t expect your daughter to make it,” or, “Your child will never talk, eat, or walk.” Well, this child, along with her siblings, was a student at our Christian school. She could eat and run, and sometimes we had to tell her to be quiet because she was talking too much. Do you believe in miracles?

Jesus performed many miracles that are recorded in the Bible. Each time I read

about them, I am amazed. While I was growing up I thought that miracles were reserved for biblical times. I never expected to witness miracles during my lifetime. Thanks to the students in my life, I now believe that God is just as willing and able to do miracles today as he was in biblical times. Many of the students in our inclusive education program are truly living miracles. Some of you may be familiar with such miracle children in your own church or school. Each time I see one of these children, my faith in our powerful God is strengthened.

Tuesday
A Sweet Sound to God

Bible Reading: 1 Samuel 16:1-13

Key Verse: “But the Lord said to Samuel, ‘Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.’”

1 Samuel 16:7

I had the privilege of directing the Christian Learning Center (CLC) Choir, a group of thirty students who have disabilities. This group of children and adults has touched the hearts of many people in the West Michigan area by singing in churches and visually

Out of his amazing love for us, God continues to reach into our hopeless situations and change the course of nature. Do you believe in miracles? Spend some time with such children and you will.

Prayer: Our loving Father in heaven, we thank you for reaching into our lives in large and small ways. We thank you for our salvation, the miracle you make available to each one of us. We praise you for the many walking miracles in our time that remind us of your power and love. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

demonstrating the spectrum of people God includes in His family.

For a number of years, I had the pleasure of singing in the Calvin College Alumni Choir. This group also frequented churches in the West Michigan area, inspiring people with the excellence and beauty of their harmonies and the precisely delivered musical texts from inspired composers.

One week, the Alumni Choir sang at a church in Grand Rapids, and by coincidence, it was followed the next week by the CLC choir. As the CLC choir was practicing, I thought about the beautiful harmonies of the previous week and felt a bit awkward about the four numbers we would sing, quite monotone and disjointed in comparison. As I watched the faces of the choir members,

though, God allowed me a glimpse from his point of view.

From a purely musical standpoint, these two choirs could not be compared, and it seemed we had no business even performing from the same choir loft. From God's perspective, however, these students were praising him from their hearts. The joy on their faces and the enthusiasm for Jesus they so clearly presented combined to make an angelic chorus for God. The songs they sang were as pure to God as the state of their hearts. Which choir was really outclassed?

I could only hope that I had portrayed the same sincere joy and gratitude to God as I sang with the Alumni Choir the week

Wednesday **"Yeah, God!"**

Bible Reading: Matthew 18:1-6

Key Verse: "He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 18:2-3

Admittedly, I am no great basketball fan. I did, however, enjoy attending a recent Christian high school game. I was amazed at the enthusiasm of the fans as

before. I was reminded that God looks at the state of our hearts as he accepts our efforts. Our work means nothing if it is not offered with a pure heart. The students in this choir taught me an important lesson, one that I continue to learn anew each day. Even as we are tempted to evaluate people and events by human standards, God will continue to measure our offerings by looking at our hearts.

Prayer: Dear Lord, we confess that our hearts are not always filled with pure motives. We admit our pride and dishonesty. We ask that you replace our sinfulness with your purity and holiness. May our lives be sweet music to your ears as you examine and change our hearts. In Jesus' name, Amen.

they rose to their feet, cheering for their gifted team. You should have heard the cheers and noise of the crowd as their team kept sinking basket after basket.

Have you ever experienced the same enthusiasm and excitement in church? When was the last time we jumped up and yelled our praise to God because someone became a Christian? Even the excitement of winning a basketball game with a buzzer-beating three-point shot cannot compare to the happiness we should feel when see someone give his or her life to Jesus. So why is it so easy for us to jump and yell at a basketball game, when we have such a difficult time

giving expression to these feelings for God?

It was close to Easter in my classroom, and we had been discussing the “sad day” and the “happy day” all week. As we were reviewing the story one last time, I asked a student to tell us about the sad day. Although speaking is difficult for him, he answered, “Jesus die.” He has a beautiful love for Jesus, and his face showed some of the pain and sadness Jesus must have felt. When I asked him to tell me about the happy day, he jumped out of his chair, started hugging the other children, and hopped up and down, saying, “Jesus alive!”

As I remember this moving moment, I try to emulate the joy this student

expressed about the miracle of salvation. With full freedom from social constraint, he was able to tell others and God about his love for Jesus. In the midst of our “proper” lives, may we challenge ourselves to express a childlike faith. May our love and enthusiasm for Jesus be contagious as we ask him to shine through us. We would have nothing without God, but with salvation in Jesus, the forces of evil never make the winning shot. God does. “Yeah, God!”

Prayer: Dear Father in heaven, our hearts are overflowing with praise for you. May your Spirit rule in our lives so that we will give daily expression to our love for you. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Thursday **What’s So Special About This Christian School?**

Bible Reading: Genesis 12:1-5

Key Verse: “The Lord had said to Abram, ‘Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you.’” Genesis 12:1

The author of Hebrews recounts this remarkable move by saying, “By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he

would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going” (Hebrews 11:8). The writer of Hebrews goes on to explain that Abraham trusted God with everything he had.

Can you imagine leaving everything you have in order to settle in a new place? You would have to say goodbye to your family, friends, house, and possessions. Indeed, you would have to leave your whole community behind. Why would Abraham do such a thing? It must have taken a lot of trust to know that God had something truly wonderful in store for him.

I had the privilege of meeting a modern-day Abraham and Sarah. They moved across the country, leaving home, church, friends, and city behind in order to follow God's call for one of their children. They moved to our community so that their daughter who has a disability could attend a Christian school. After doing a thorough search, they discovered that Christian special education is a rare commodity in our country. Some of the children in the public schools in their former community had taught their child that "Christians have cooties," and that "You shouldn't play with Christians." Knowing that their daughter's eternal salvation is more important than all earthly possessions, this family has joined our community so that their child can be surrounded and

supported by peers and teachers who love Jesus.

This kind of Christian schooling should be available to all students with disabilities. We should be able to surround all such students with God's love in welcoming them to our Christian schools and communities. All children should have the opportunity to grow to love Jesus in an educational environment that values them as an important part of God's family.

Prayer: We thank you, Father, for Christian special education. We pray for the many children who do not have this service in their own communities. Work in the hearts of Christian people so that they will enfold children with disabilities into Christian schools in their own areas. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Friday

The Untouchables

Bible Reading: Matthew 8:1-4

Key Verse: “A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, ‘Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.’ Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. ‘I am willing,’ he said. ‘Be clean!’ Immediately he was cured of his leprosy.” Matthew 8:2-3

Can you think of anything so gross that it makes you feel sick? I’ll spare you the details, but I remember someone throwing up all over his mom after eating Thanksgiving dinner. That was disgusting. I also get a sick feeling when I think about touching a snake. Yuck!

I’m not sure, but I would imagine that people during biblical times felt the same way about touching people who had leprosy. They felt it was disgusting to touch someone who had sores on his or her body or perhaps was missing body parts. Declared to be unclean, people with leprosy were confined to leper colonies, isolated from everyone else.

One day, a man escaped from one of these leper colonies and found Jesus, having heard of his power to heal. The people probably cleared right out of his way as he came to ask Jesus to help him. Then Jesus did something amazing: Jesus touched this man, a man who probably had not been touched by

anyone in years. And then He did something even more remarkable: Jesus healed the man of his leprosy.

Although we no longer have leper colonies, we sometimes isolate people based on their appearance or condition. Have you ever been at the mall and met someone with a disability? Perhaps the person had a face that was shaped differently or a body that needed a wheelchair. Maybe you weren’t sure what to do, and so in some way you showed that you felt this person was “unclean.” This sort of experience can leave us feeling uncomfortable.

I will never forget a young student of mine who had a severe drooling problem. Although this deterred me from touching his hands, some of his friends reminded me of the healing touch of Jesus. Never put out by the wet and slimy hands, this student’s two faithful friends would hold his hands and help him out to the playground. They would grab his slimy coat and zip it up for him. These friends never showed anxiety about touching him. A little hand sanitizer and they were off to the playground. I would think, “What if the saliva passes germs,” not remembering that when we do the work of Jesus, he will protect us.

I want to thank these two friends who said, “I am willing.” They remind me of the power of touch as we minister in the name of Jesus. They communicate unconditional love and acceptance to a

child who had previously been considered “unclean.” May God bless them and the many other children who have used the healing power of Jesus to touch the lives of those with disabilities. They have taught me much.

Saturday **Andrea, John, Lana, and Theresa**

Bible Reading: Revelation 21:1-4

Key Verse: “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” Revelation 21:4

Andrea was a wonderful child. She had difficulty speaking due to the weaker tongue muscle that often characterizes people with Down syndrome. Andrea’s spark and joy in life were contagious, however, and she loved singing time, often requesting her favorites.

One day, Andrea was trying to tell us her song request. To make herself clear, she pointed vigorously to her shoes and then to her tongue. The sign language helped us understand that she wanted the song, “Have you got feet, and can you walk? Have you got a tongue, and can you talk? Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Then you’ve got something to thank God for.” We sang that song together.

Prayer: Lord, help us to touch others in your name. We want to be your servants. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Later that day, in the evening, Andrea became very ill. For some unknown reason, her lungs filled up with fluid and she died. It was quite a shock to our Christian Learning Center community. We cried through her funeral right along with the family. While the minister was speaking, I remembered Andrea’s song request. Although it did not take away the pain of a young life lost, we knew that Andrea could no longer be hindered in her praise to God by her tongue or her Down syndrome. She had everything to thank God for. The praise time in our room paled in comparison to the choir she would join in heaven.

There have been four times during my years at the Christian Learning Center that we have experienced the death of one of the children. I have been blessed personally by each one of these children fashioned in the image of God. Each child has made a contribution to the body of Christ, and I am grateful to have learned from them.

Although I miss these dear ones, they have given me a chance to picture our heavenly home. And as I picture this home, I see the entire Christian community transported to a place where

we can truly and fully function as the body of Christ. Unencumbered by the struggles of this world, we will join Andrea, John, Lana, and Theresa in living for eternity in the presence of God. They have preceded us to a place where there is no more death or mourning or crying or pain. In the meantime, may we enjoy the community of believers as we experience it together, learning from every one and valuing

each person as a member of Christ's body.

Prayer: Lord God, we thank you for calling us to spend eternity with you. We also thank you for allowing us to experience your presence by communing with the body of Christ here on earth. May your love flow to us and through us as we live together. In Jesus' name. Amen.