

# Season 3 | Episode 7 **Changing the World One Heart at a Time** Emily Colson

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## **Crystal Keating:**

I'm Crystal Keating, and this is the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast. Each week, we're bringing you real conversations about disability and finding hope through hardship and sharing practical ways that you can include people living with disability in your church and community. Be sure to subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts and find all of the resources mentioned at joniandfriends.org/podcast. Emily Colson is joining us on the podcast today to share how her son Max, who lives with autism, started a very special ministry during the worldwide coronavirus shutdown. Welcome to the podcast, Emily.

Emily Colson:

Thank you, Crystal. I'm really thrilled to be with you.

# **Crystal Keating:**

Emily, you've been a longtime friend of the ministry and of Joni and Ken's. And before we hear about Max's heart ministry, I'd love for you to tell us about your 30-year-old son Max and your journey together as a family with autism.

# Emily Colson:

And on that note, Joni's influence in our lives has been so profound. We love Joni and Ken. I remember hearing Joni when Max was just six years old. We were struggling in the church, struggling in every area, and I remember sitting in that church and hearing Joni speak about her church, and I remember her saying, "Your church would be so blessed to have children with autism running up and down the aisles."

Crystal Keating:

Yes.

# Emily Colson:

And I remember hearing that and I felt like my head went up like a periscope like, "Somebody gets this. Somebody understands what's kind of been brewing in my heart, but I didn't really knowhow to say it," and there was Joni saying it. And those words from Joni have paved such an extraordinary road for us in our lives. Max is an amazing young man. He is. He is more than a conqueror in Christ Jesus. He's 30 years old. He was diagnosed with autism very young. He was about three, but it was clear there was a pretty significant issue early on. My life looked pretty



tidy when Max was born, but as many of us know when disability strikes, life changes pretty radically.

And we went through some extremely difficult times. For me, going through divorce, and on the heels of divorce, Max was diagnosed with autism. The autism was so severe that we really lived in isolation for many years, much like we're in isolation right now. We lived in that isolation. When everything stopped, he couldn't make it through a day at school. We couldn't go to the grocery store, couldn't go to church. We stopped going to church. And I think back on that time now and going through this year of isolation, this year of everything stopping, and I think how interesting it is that God has us right back here now.

We're a little bit practiced in this, but it's been obviously, for many of us, extremely difficult. But what I look back on is those years of struggle and isolation were really the blank canvas that God would paint his story in our lives and his story of victory. Now, today at 30, Max is this... He's just a remarkable young man. Everything for Max is big, so his joy is big. His love for the Lord is big. His love of memorizing scripture is big. His love for people is big. I love listening to him pray at night because every night he prays... And he always prays this. He'll always pray, "Please, God, please help all the people come for a party."

Crystal Keating:

So he's a people person?

## Emily Colson:

He's a people person, yes. It's also, in that big personality, struggles are big and anxiety is big. And when something is upsetting, it's big. And so there's really nothing sort of lukewarm about Max, but it's been a remarkable journey and I've watched God shine through Max's life over and over in unmistakable ways. I love him so much. There are days I might like to kind of erase, but I wouldn't trade it for the beauty God has brought through it.

# **Crystal Keating:**

I think that's your testimony over and over again, is seeing God's power in the midst of great challenges and the joy of the Lord in the midst of real life that is hard. Does Max live with you?

#### **Emily Colson:**

He does. Yes, he does. He lives with me. He went to public school for a little while when he was younger, but I use that term loosely because oftentimes he didn't go, so I can't say that it really worked all that well. And then went into a private day school specifically for autism, which really met his needs and graduated at age 22. We live in Massachusetts.

Crystal Keating: Wonderful.

Emily Colson: Our families are so plagued with enormous decisions, aren't they?

Crystal Keating: Mm-hmm (affirmative).



# Emily Colson:

What to do, and what's the best decision? And so many pressures. The decision... It seemed right for him to live at home, and it's worked. Interestingly, I've always said it works because we've had a team.

## Crystal Keating:

Tell us about your team.

## **Emily Colson:**

Well, it's interesting that that God kind of took all the people out in COVID, but we've had wonderful teachers over the years who have come in and have been a really important part of our lives and felt like family. And that we, I hope we'll stay in touch with for the rest of our lives, even if they were only with us for a season. Very grateful for our church. Oh, my goodness. The victories in our church, that's just a glorious story, and to see Max's face glow, that's probably been the one thing that I would look at and say, "What an extraordinary story God has written."

#### **Crystal Keating:**

Absolutely through his testimony. I remember you talking about his excitement even over baptism.

## **Emily Colson:**

Oh, it was just amazing. Max was 13. At the time, we were not in church. We'd been home from church for many years at that point because we just couldn't figure out how to get in, which is what happens to our families. If you don't have the spiritual gifting of sitting still and being quiet... We really don't have those. Then it's very hard to even make it across the threshold. You don't know how you're going to be received. You can't quite figure out how to do this at all. So we were home, but we were with my dad in Florida at his church, and we were sitting out in the lobby, and Max saw a woman on television being baptized. The next thing I hear from him is that he wanted to be baptized. My dad and I just wrestled with this. Does he understand? Max's language was so significantly impaired, and we didn't really know what does he understand and what doesn't he understand?

We really grilled him on questions. He's a fact factory. And finally, there was a moment when I remembered something the pastor of my church had said to me. I'd approached him one day and said I was heartbroken that Max wasn't in church because he loves to memorize scripture and he loves his Christian videos. And the pastor of my church said, "Emily, the Holy Spirit speaks Max's language." And so my dad had the privilege of baptizing Max. And every time Max gets in the water since that time (he's 30 years old now), he reenacts his baptism. I mean, do we think that meant something to him?

Crystal Keating: Absolutely.

Emily Colson: It's just glorious.



# Crystal Keating:

Absolutely. And what a hopeful truth that your pastor shared for all who are listening who have children with special needs who may not be able to communicate verbally, or we wonder how much are they taking in? But the Holy Spirit can go deeper than that. What a comfort. Well, Emily, let's talk about COVID-19. I mean, you've touched a little bit on the team of people around you, people in your educational circle and your church circle. How was your family impacted by COVID-19?

## Emily Colson:

The impact of COVID-19 has been profound in our family like it has I'm sure been for many, many families living with disabilities. All supports stopped. All of our in-home teachers and support people, that stopped. Max's day program stopped. His ability to be in our church stopped. Everything in the course of one day completely spun on a dime. Of course, many of us thought it was two weeks, which was...

Crystal Keating:

Oh, yeah.

#### Emily Colson:

I'm still thankful for that. I am so thankful. I had this idea initially, "Oh, we can do two weeks." At first, I was a little shocked and panicked, and then I thought, "Okay, we are going to pull that guitar out from our basement and learn how to play guitar. And after two weeks we're going to come out like the von Trapp family, lederhosen and all.

**Crystal Keating:** 

Get creative.

#### **Emily Colson:**

Right. And then suddenly the reality was setting in, and this has been hard. I will not sugarcoat this because I don't need to sugarcoat this. There have been struggles so great that I didn't think I would physically survive. I really thought I might simply expire from complete exhaustion.

#### Crystal Keating:

Wow. Was anyone helping you? I mean, did you have anybody else besides just you and Max? I mean initially.

#### Emily Colson:

Well, no. Not at all. Initially, we didn't have anybody come and help. After about three months, we began to see my mom who lives not far from us, and is almost 90, and she felt comfortable enough that we could be with her. We were, I think, seven months before we even brought help to come outside on our porch.

#### **Crystal Keating:**

Oh, my goodness. It was taking a toll on you. It was really taxing you.



# Emily Colson:

Tremendous, tremendous physical toll and on Max as well. I know that for him, for everything he needs to stop was devastating for him. But as a public speaker, I've spent the past 10 years traveling and speaking in churches and talking about disability and hopefully opening the door a little more for our families within the church.

Crystal Keating:

Absolutely, yes.

Emily Colson:

And all of my speaking stopped, and I became 100% Max. That was what I could do. And it didn't upset me really. I was more curious like, "Well, this is interesting. This is a very interesting dynamic. I wonder what God is going to do in the midst of this." Because I kept thinking, "Well, Christians run in. Christians are on the front lines."

**Crystal Keating:** 

That's right.

**Emily Colson:** 

"Christians defend and protect the weak and the vulnerable."

Crystal Keating:

That's right.

# Emily Colson:

And I thought, "Well, what if you are the weak and the vulnerable? Do you just hide and wait until it's over?" And I thought, "That doesn't make sense," because as it turns out, God has a mission for each of us as unique as He has made each of us, and that's where Max's heart ministry began.

## **Crystal Keating:**

Well, tell us about it. Tell us about Max's heart ministry, because I love what you're saying. We can sit and feel afraid and try to be cautious, but there's something deep in our spirit calling us to reach out, to go forth, to move forward. So how did it come about?

#### Emily Colson:

Yes. I began praying, "God, help us to be a blessing to someone else." And as I prayed, we tried a few different avenues of in our small ways that we could do something. In the midst of that, I began painting with Max. I gave him some paints. Really as something to do when everyone had hearts on their doors and their windows, and I thought, "Well, we'll paint some hearts." But I thought, "Well, why would I just give him red paint on a white background?" So I gave him all kinds of paint to use. And these first hearts he painted were so beautiful. He loved it so much. They went up on our living room wall, and then that moved into Max painting on yard signs so that he could paint a beautiful joy-filled heart, and we could take a few of those around to his teachers who were really struggling being home and one of our pastors.



We delivered about five of those, and I didn't know if that was it, but then Max kept painting. He just kept painting on yard signs, and we kept delivering them, and he has now painted and planted about 125 hearts around the community.

**Crystal Keating:** 

Oh, my goodness.

Emily Colson:

Some have gone in the mail. One went to Joni and Ken, and it's been remarkable. The response has been remarkable of this simple gesture. I mean, they're everywhere. They're in front of homes, and hospitals, and businesses.

Crystal Keating: Wow.

Emily Colson:

And horse barns. He even planted one in front of our town dump, which I love. He is planting beauty in the hard soil of this Earth and doing it in a way that is a blessing to others. I think, "Oh, my goodness." I didn't connect it initially that God was answering that prayer, "How can we be a blessing to someone else?" But Max has been blessing others. The response has been so amazing. People began asking for a Heart by Max. We were flooded with requests from around the country. People wanted...

Crystal Keating: Well, they're really beautiful.

Emily Colson: Oh, aren't they joy-filled?

Crystal Keating: Yes. The colors. The way that it's... I mean it brings joy just to look at it.

Emily Colson: It brings joy.

Crystal Keating: And that's what we need right now.

Emily Colson: That's what we need.

Crystal Keating: You can get in your head, and you feel just... Many people are wrestling with depression.



Emily Colson: Yes.

Crystal Keating:

And how is God using that heart to show love and hope for the future?

Emily Colson:

It's been such a remarkable thing to watch. For me, evidence of God's limitless creativity. The one who set the stars in the sky, the one who created the giraffes and the jellyfish. That creativity is still at work in our lives today. I've never experienced something where I've watched God create something out of what seems like nothing to me. Max wasn't a painter. This really wasn't his area at all. He wasn't just waiting for this opportunity. Ididn't have some great plan of what this was going to be, but we've watched God unfold this beautiful ministry. We had so many requests for a Heart by Max that this past October, I had printed notecards with some of Max's hearts so that we actually could send a Heart by Max to other people. But in the spirit of the mission, we wanted other people to give it away too, to bless someone else.

So the idea is that people get the notecards. All proceeds go to charity. This past year, we were able to bless Joni and Friends and Prison Fellowship's angel tree with the proceeds from the cards.

Crystal Keating:

Awesome.

Emily Colson:

It's an opportunity for others to use those hearts and send a note of encouragement, be a blessing to someone else. We now have over 14,000 cards in circulation.

Crystal Keating: Oh, my goodness. Wow.

Emily Colson:

Across the country and reaching around the world. God always has just such an awesome way of doing things that are... It's really beyond what we could possibly come up with. My mom, who is 89 and lives by herself and became extremely isolated with COVID, she is the one now making up all the boxes of cards.

Crystal Keating:

Oh, my goodness.

Emily Colson:

She loves it. She's turned her dining room into what we jokingly call our manufacturing plant. And God has given her a mission of lovingly boxing up all of these notecards. I said to her the other day, I said, "Mom, do you realize that every note that goes out with a message of love has first gone through your loving hands?"



# Crystal Keating: Oh, so true.

Emily Colson:

And she smiled a little and she said, "You know what, Emily? I thought of that the other day."

Crystal Keating: That's beautiful. A family ministry on mission.

# Emily Colson:

It's extraordinary that God has met each of us in the midst of isolation and he's brought collaboration in the midst of isolation.

# **Crystal Keating:**

That is so true, and there's something that really boosts our spirits when we have purpose once again.

Emily Colson:

Yes.

# **Crystal Keating:**

Because I feel like coronavirus shutdowns have really dampened that sense of purpose and connectedness, so I love this. If our listeners want to order a set of Heart by Max notecards, how can they do so?

# Emily Colson:

You can go to <u>emilycolson.com</u> and you'll find the notecards on there, and we would be thrilled for you to join Max's mission and send out messages of hope and love because it's so very, very needed in this season of COVID where everyone has been isolated and everything has been shut down. I know there is one perspective that other people will now understand what our families living with disabilities so often experience in isolation. And that's true, but I want to encourage listeners to flip that around for a moment because our families are now actually the experts. We are the experts in isolation. We're the experts in going through struggles, so we now have the opportunity to share those lessons, to share hope, to share encouragement to those who are now experiencing what we've experienced. So this actually, in the midst of the struggle, in the midst of what's very hard, this actually is our moment to shine the light of Christ that we can. As we read in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, that we can comfort others with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. This, this is our moment to shine.

# **Crystal Keating:**

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Oh, that is so beautiful. What a way to take something that's been hard and challenging for so many years and now be the vessels in which God is using to encourage so many. Emily, thank you so much for joining me on the podcast today. We're going to put emilycolson.com in our show notes. If you want to look at those, or you can simply go to



emilycolson.com. All proceeds will be donated to charity, including Joni and Friends. Emily, may God bless you, and thank you so much for being on the podcast today.

Emily Colson:

Thank you so much, Crystal. It's a joy.

**Crystal Keating:** 

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