



Season 3 | Episode 11

Chronic Pain and Healing

Tera Bradham DeNeui

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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 or find us at joniandfriends.org/podcast. In our last conversation with Tera, we talked about God's purposes through suffering and pain, God's plan to work through life's hardships, and the ways he brings people together to find hope and healing through faith in Jesus. And I believe that's what's happened in your life Tera, as you understand what it's like to live with chronic pain, it's given you such a passion to minister to others. So let's begin this conversation by focusing on the birth of your ministry, to those who also live with chronic conditions. Tera, how did your ministry begin?

Tera Bradham DeNeui:

It started off piece by piece and that's how God takes us. He only reveals enough for us to take that next step through the fog. And so he had told me to write a book. And so I wrote my memoir, which is so funny looking at it now. But you fill out that sheet with your target audience and everything for your publisher. We really thought it was for athletes. And it's just so laughable because it totally is, but it's so much more than that. And the real audience and most of the people I heard from reading this book were people dealing with some kind of chronic pain. And so that was the first nugget.

And then I was just having coffee with someone and we were talking about... I don't even remember, like conferences. And I felt like God dropped this vision into my heart, where it was just a national conference or a global conference for people who live in pain and not just to come and meet and gather, but to have their tangible needs met whether that's something where we can get volunteer masseuses and training to do that, or a free essential oils treatment or dogs you can adopt because dogs are so good for you psychologically and everything else, just all of these things.

And so that was the vision. And then my word for the year of 2020, when I let God give me a word each year, he's so good to warn us if we listen, my word for the year was small, which is so funny. So I had this huge vision that 2019 fall, and then 2020, we didn't know what was coming. And he said small, you're not going to make a conference. Let's make a little retreat. Let's just start there. And so I had this really cute blue barn rented out and we were going to have a local event just for people dealing with chronic pain, physical limitation, and chronic illness, and was so excited. And then the pandemic happens. And so clearly everything went online, but it was beautiful because we never would have, and in two weeks, we flipped that retreat and we had it online.



And we had all these people come, who could have never come. I have a friend who lost her hands and her leg in a climbing accident. And she was like, "This was amazing because I didn't have to worry about how uncomfortable the chairs were. I didn't have to worry about how long I was going to be there because I was at home and I could take my prosthetics off and do all of that." And so we're like, "Wait, maybe this is a format we should stick with." Then we had some more. And at the same time, I felt like God had told me to start a podcast which released right in March when things were blowing up, which was great because it was a virtual resource. And so, that's how it came to be and had the huge vision and smaller. And then COVID, and God's doing what he wants.

Crystal Keating:

That is such a testimony for so many people, I think who have looked at 2020 and thought this was the worst year of our lives. And then there were others where we heard from families and other people that said, "God did a work. He showed us things that we would have never discovered otherwise, would we have been able to meet in person." And I think the online platform is especially important for people in chronic pain and chronic illness who can't necessarily walk into a church like they would like to, or they can't show up consistently as we know that they would like to. And I just love how you focus on encouraging people through whatever dark time they're facing. I know you help them by guiding them through feelings of inadequacy, to feelings of hope when all seems dark. So tell us more about some of the intricacies of your ministry. What are some of the themes that you're sharing? What are some of the commonly asked questions? Even the commonly expressed hardships that people with chronic pain face?

Tera Bradham DeNeui:

One of the first ones that comes to mind is our identity. And so much of our identity is tied up in what we do, I think, especially in the U.S. And so a lot of what we get from people is, "Well, who am I when I can't do what I could do before?" And not just as a person, but within the body of Christ. And so we have created a kingdom warrior quiz that people can take where it gives them results. It's where do you still fit into the kingdom? Because you're still a part of the kingdom. And the body of Christ is limping because we are missing all the prayer warriors who can't get out of bed. We're missing all of the mentors who could be discipling people remotely. We're missing the people who could be knitting hats for babies or whatever it is because they are in their houses, like you said.

And so our goal is like, how can we get people back plugged into the body so we can stop limping so that we can build church from the right side up Jesus called it the lame and the blind and the sick. Those were the first people he called. And we don't do that. And so that's our goal is not only how can we get churches aware of it? I know you guys do so much, but also how can we get people connected to each other where they have that community, but then also back to the church, what is your kingdom purpose? Just because you have five minutes of good energy a day does not mean you are useless. God is still using you. He still has a plan. It just might not look like what you think it looks like.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah. And even that idea of speaking life into people who feel that there is no life and even removing that idea of comparison. I mean, we do that all day long when you have a disability or not. I can't do as much as they can, or I can't be involved like they can, instead of saying, what



has God called me to? What has he equipped me to do? What can I do? Where am I useful? How am I helpful? And even in the spiritual realm, how can we shake? As Joni always says, shake the heavenlies with our prayers, things that we can't necessarily see in the moment, but we trust God to be moving and working through our prayers. And so I love that you're working with connecting people back to the big church, the universal church, the body of Christ.

But I also know that you're working alongside local churches to help support people in pain because the importance of the church to help us refocus our hearts on God's character and remember his faithfulness and love, instead of always thinking about our circumstances is so important. It's important to Joni and Friends, and it's important to your ministry, Heal. So why don't you talk a little bit more about your desire to come alongside the local church, help them to have those conversations like you talked about in our last episode where you were saying, when you were going through chronic pain, people even though well-meaning, didn't always know what to say. They weren't sure how to support you when it becomes weeks and months and even years after pain. How are you guys doing that with the church and leadership?

Tera Bradham DeNeui:

First off, we are a baby ministry. So I have lots of ideas and then have to pare it down to what is realistic and take the baby steps.

Crystal Keating:

It's good. Your word is small. So God's going to honor that mustard seed.

Tera Bradham DeNeui:

So we consider ourselves a parachurch ministry. So we're not the church. And I think it's really important for people to come to the retreats and see someone else who knows exactly what it feels like to not be able to do the things they want and still be a Christian and still have value in what do I do with that? But at the same time, it is so important for us to be surrounding ourselves with diversity. And I know that's a hot topic, but even with everything going on with race in our country, I think it has highlighted even more how unacknowledged diversity as far as inclusion with different abled people, how that is not being addressed. And so I have an idea, like I want to make a worksheet people can take where on our side, if you're struggling with pain, you can say, these are the people who are going to hold me accountable to trying a new church.

They're the ones who are going to call me. And if I struggle, someone's made a mean comment and I hate to think that happens, but it does. And we know it does. And they're going to encourage me to take that step. Like these are the churches I'm going to visit virtually because guess what? Yay God for the whole disability community, look what he did with COVID. Almost every church is accessible now. And so doing that on our side, there is a level of responsibility we can take to saying, I'm going to forgive and I'm going to try again. But on the other side, like how can we advocate with churches in such simple things? And so we actually have a friend who did a Joni and Friends internship back in the day and he works with a disability ministry.

So we're looking to partner with other ministries to come in and do a training. And that is, don't take someone's wheelchair away, right? Sometimes people will take them to their seat and then wheel their wheelchair away. And that's taking away their freedom. And I think, yes, starting with those, but also this is just a one-on-one thing. This is being an advocate for those who sometimes don't speak up or aren't in our circles. Not saying, why aren't they healed, but saying,



why aren't they here and going to your pastor and saying, "Hey, what can we do to welcome them? Why are families of kids with special needs the most unreached people group in the U.S.? What are we doing when someone walks in, who has a screaming child with a different need to welcome them into the church and make them feel like they can come back?"

And honestly, just start having those conversations start bringing what we have in this community, to the local church. But guess what, if we're not going, no one is going to hear that. And it's just perpetuating the cycle. So I think we need brave people on both sides who are going to look and say, "Hey, this is a problem." I'm not going to be so cognitively lazy that I don't have another paradigm shattered. And I'm not saying that judging, I'm saying that I have been in this place where I'm like 2020, so many things are shattered. I can't take another one, but it's true. It's just the fact that our world is so broken and it's just revealing that. It's all been here. So having brave people on both sides. And then our goal is just to be able to equip you to take that step, whichever side you're on to let's make one body. Let's learn from each other. Let's be the church that God made us to be.

Crystal Keating:

Yes. Amen. That's so true. And when you talk about people in pain, I often think of the exhaustion that sets in and how the exhaustion can often, from what I've heard, limit someone from having the wherewithal to want to go into a church, to talk to the leadership, to be their own advocate. I feel like you need an advocate on their behalf. I mean, that's the nature of an advocate because pain can bring so many feelings of hopelessness and isolation and you get that. I think your ministry offers Heal Advocates.

Tera Bradham DeNeui:

Yes.

Crystal Keating:

Who are men and women with a desire to disciple. Yay.

Tera Bradham DeNeui:

Yes.

Crystal Keating:

Wow, live out the calling to disciple those struggling with physical pain and limitations, because the connections with other believers must be so comforting. It must be a reminder of God's love. So talk more about your advocate program.

Tera Bradham DeNeui:

So just like you said, Heal Advocates are exactly what they sound like. They are an advocate for people who have been marginalized in the church with pain and limitation. And so that can be someone listening who is in pain, maybe that is you. And you want to be an advocate for this group. Or like you said, it can be someone who maybe does not have physical pain or limitation, but they're like, "You know what? I see this as a need in the church. And I'm going to advocate on behalf of this group." And so either one, literally that would be, everyone is welcome. It's just that you want to advocate for this group of people. There are people who are passionate about connecting others to this ministry and the resources that we have at Heal.



Maybe the resources we have at Joni and Friends, but the Heal Advocate, just connecting to the retreats we have. Connecting them to their local church, providing resources to say, "Hey, how can you take this person to their doctor appointments? Or how can you talk to your pastor?" What can you do? Because you can reach out to a bunch of pastors most of them, if they don't know you, you don't pull a lot of weight there. But if someone from their congregation goes up to them and says, "Hey, this is a need I'm passionate about, let's see how we can do this." Most of the time they'll listen. And so our advocates, we separate into four categories of ways that you can get involved. So we're all about practicality and what are the tangible things we can do?

One of those is a content creator. If you want to advocate, maybe you're really good at writing. Maybe you're good at making video devotionals. Maybe you're good at recording things, whatever that is, those creative people, you can create content that we can get out and encourage this group. Maybe you want to promote the ministry like, we should do this retreat. I'm going to host a small group that views the online retreat together. And then I'm going to lead that group and the questions and the breakouts. And I'm going to create my local community just by using this retreat. Pray warriors. Maybe you're like, "I'm stuck in my bed all day, but I'm going to pray a hedge around everyone in this ministry." So we absolutely need prayer warriors. I think that's actually where it starts. And then kingdom investors who maybe you have resources that you would like to help with. Maybe that's a place, whatever it is. So those are the four tangibles.

Crystal Keating:

Those are great. And I'm sure some of our listeners hear those things and think, I want to be involved in this. Tera, where do they go to learn more about your ministry?

Tera Bradham DeNeui:

They can go to thehealministry.com. So that's where we have the podcast. We have a devotional. You can sign up for the retreats or to be an advocate. We have a newsletter. All of that ways to stay connected is on thehealministry.com.

Crystal Keating:

Thehealministry.com. That's good. And we'll put those in the show notes as well. So often people with physical pain and limitations, we're just so prone to put our eyes on to our suffering and off of Christ, which I know we don't want to do. It's just so natural. And so while challenging pain and limitations have the ability also to remind us of our need for God and actually draw us closer to him and Tera, I love what your ministry is doing. And you guys have a five-day program called From Chronic Pain to Constant Praise. So as we close our time together, how would you help someone move to a place of worship in the midst of unwanted circumstances and the physical distractions of pain?

Tera Bradham DeNeui:

First off, I would just say, I'm sorry. And I don't know if anyone has ever heard that just from someone in the church. If you have been hurt, I just want to say, I am sorry. And I repent on behalf of the people who have hurt you. And God's going to redeem, he's going to use this. He's not finished with you. So first off, I'm sorry. And there's a good chance that this is not your fault, the pain you're in. And even if it is maybe you got hurt in a car accident when you were drunk, whatever it is, you're not beyond redemption. It doesn't matter whether you caused it or not, God's going to use it. He works all things together for our good. He doesn't say it happens for



our good. So acknowledging that. And then just also saying like his word says those who look to him are radiant.

Their faces are never covered with shame. Someone needs to hear that, that you are pure and bought by the blood of Christ. Your sins are washed away. I mean, goodness gracious. This is who God is. Impossible is where God starts. And this is the God we have. And so as we go from pain to praise. Practical steps: one, just take a good look at your circumstances. You can't move forward and let God redeem it if you've never acknowledged it. I mean, there were points where I chucked my Bible across the room and I'm not promoting that. I'm just saying he created emotions and he can handle it. And if you don't grieve it, he can't come in and hold your heart when you not even acknowledged that it's breaking. So grieve the losses, you know, read Lamentations, read Jeremiah, read the songs, grieve what you've lost, because it's real. It is so real.

Continue to ask for healing. We believe that God heals people in the way that brings him the most glory and brings us closest to him. So maybe that is a miracle. Maybe that's medicinal. Maybe it's sufficient grace, maybe it's ultimate healing and heaven, but our God is a healer 100%. So I know that you want to give up and say, "I'm not going to ask for healing anymore." It might not be physical, but God has healing for you. That's who he is. And so press into that healing journey, see what that looks like for you. See what a healer God he is for you, and then surrender the results to God. So once you ask, let him show you, what is that praise that he wants you to have?

Sometimes I think, we think... It's kind of like forgiveness. We think we're going to wake up and we've forgiven someone and that's not how it works. You have to choose to forgive. And maybe one day you're going to have the emotion that comes with that. And so after you've done that, choose to worship, choose to worship him for who he is and what he's done. And maybe you can't think of anything he's done that's good. Maybe you've been in that place. I've been in that place before. But if you can't think of anything. Start at the cross, goodness gracious what Jesus has done. Can we not get over that miracle?

Crystal Keating:

Start with the gospel. Start with the greatest display of love.

Tera Bradham DeNeui:

Yes. And so if you start there understand that the wages of sin is death, but the gift of the father is a eternal life through his son. Praise God for that. Don't praise God, he says to his disciples, that you're driving out demons, praise him, that your name is written in the book of life. Praise him for that. And then you're going to start seeing all of these little things you can be grateful for. God, I'm grateful that I got up this morning. God, I'm grateful that I got to just use my fingers to send that encouraging text to someone. God, I am grateful that if I'm still breathing, you're not finished with me yet.

And choosing that attitude of praise. I know that sounds too simple, but it's true. It changes our mind and science backs up the Bible. It always does of saying, this is how we can transform and renew our minds day by day. He does it. That's what the spirit does. He lives in us and he's just renewing and transforming. So it's okay if you fall back and make a mistake in that process, just grab his hand. Let him pull you up again. Choose to praise him in one moment and just keep putting one foot in front of the other.



Crystal Keating:

Amen. What a great word, Tera. Thank you so much for joining us on the podcast today. We really appreciate your encouragement. Thank you for listening today. If you've been inspired, please send me a message or leave a five-star review on your favorite app. That's a great way to help other people find encouragement from these conversations. And to get our next episode automatically subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts. I'm Crystal Keating and thank you for listening to the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast.

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