

Season 3 | Episode 8

When Your Child with Autism Becomes an Adult

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 the resources mentioned at joniandfriends.org/podcast. Emily Colson is joining us on the podcast today to talk about helping her son with autism through life's transitions. It's a pleasure to speak with you again, Emily. Thanks for being on the podcast today.

Emily Colson:

Thank you, Crystal. It's really an honor to be with you. I love Joni and Friends and the impact it's making all over the world in families living with disability.

Crystal Keating:

Certainly, and certainly in your own family. I want to start this conversation talking about Max's transition from boyhood to adulthood as a person living with autism, especially in a couple of the most important areas of our lives, and that would be church and employment. So maybe if you could start out by describing how your relationship with the church has changed through the years. I mean Max, he got involved as a young child or a teen, and he's now a young man of 30 years old. So, what's it been like for you in the church these years?

Emily Colson:

It is. It's so wonderful to look back to watch Max turn 30. It kind of really primes your thoughts to look back when you have these big birthdays, especially for your child. And to look back at what God's done. It's such an encouragement to me going forward to look back at those past victories in His hand on our lives. We went to church when Max was very young, and I could bounce him on my lap and he could run around the church and he'd run around with all the other young kids. But then we hit some really tough years where I couldn't understand how in the world we were going to get into the church. I knew we belonged, but I couldn't figure out how to physically do it. And so we spent five years at home from church. It wasn't until Max was baptized as a believer at age 13 that I thought, "We can't do this anymore."

And God opened the most creative door for Max to come through. And I'm so thankful that God opening that door, it opened the door for others with autism and others with significant disabilities to come through the doors of our church. And I just think about how God has changed the culture of our church through these beautiful individuals who have come through

the doors. How he's brought life to our church. Max comes not to be taken care of, but he comes to serve. That's how we started coming. We came to serve. It started with a cleanup crew for many years. We came to what we called backwards church. And we came at the end of church. As you may know, Crystal, we just came when it was over.

Crystal Keating:

I love that.

Emily Colson:

Yeah, because we couldn't really handle any other parts. So we went to the part I knew would work and it would work when it was over. So Max started on the cleanup crew for many years and then he started coming to serve as a greeter and a chair stacker and serving at the welcome center and serving in the kids' church and using his spiritual gifting of vacuuming. He uses that to clean up the church, which is just glorious.

I watch how Max's joy in the church. His joy of worship has impacted others within the church. It's impacted their joy. Max leaps through. It could just bring me to tears right now, but he runs into the middle of the church and he just leaps and dances and shakes hands with people, greets them all through the church. When a singer comes off the stage and comes to sit back down, Max will jump up and go shake their hands and thank them. And, oh, this is what we're supposed to do.

Crystal Keating:

He has the gift of encouragement.

Emily Colson:

It's the gift of encouragement. Thank you for that. That's true. God's given him the gift of encouragement. He has such joy in worship. He loves to climb up on the back step where the sound booth is, and our pastor calls him the back of the church worship leader. And he's up there leaping and dancing. And he's a big guy and he's singing at the top of his lungs. Not always the same song as everybody else, but he is singing at the top of his lungs. And he was up there one morning, and I looked at a friend standing beside me and I said, "Oh boy, he's going to right through that floor one day, just dunk tank at a carnival style." And my friend said, "No, he won't." And I was, "What do you mean he won't?" It was just a joke.

And he said, "He won't because some of the men months ago noticed the same thing." And he said, "Those men got together and they reinforced the floor where Max dances." Nobody told me. They saw a way to hold up Max. To say, "You belong. You belong here and we will do whatever we need wherever you are to hold you up in this church." What an affirmation of life. What an extraordinary act of love. Love for Max and love for me. Our pastor said something about having Max and others with disabilities in our church and he's said, "We gave up perfect and we got something better."

Crystal Keating:

Amen, that's right. It's that powerful verse that we quote often in Corinthians where it talks about the whole body and everybody participating and the hand and the eye and the leg and the internal parts and all parts working to the glory of God to display Christ. I know COVID has made church so different for all of us, but if you could rewind to before the shutdown, what's

church been like for Max, I guess it was, he'd be 29 or 28. How is he involved? Is it different now than it was five, 10 years ago?

Emily Colson:

I think the difference I've seen is in the heart of the church. I think the difference I've seen is in the reception he receives, and the reception others receive. When someone new with autism comes into our church, if I haven't met them yet or even if I have, others in the church are running up to me and saying with excitement, "Emily did you know this young man with autism is in our church? Have you met him? Have you seen him?" They're so excited and that's what we want. We want that excitement when anyone new is coming into the church.

Crystal Keating:

Yes.

Emily Colson:

Right? But we want that excitement rather than fear, rather than, "Oh no, I don't know what's going to happen. I don't like this. This makes me uncomfortable and untidy," but because they've seen such beauty shine through Max's life within the church, they can't wait to see what God is going to do with the next individual he sends into our church.

I think of one young man, a little younger than Max, who has been in our church would come with his mother and one day he was having a really hard time in the church. Max was taken care of on that particular Sunday, and I heard this loud cry from the back of the church. It was unmistakable and the mom got her son out into the lobby, but unfortunately the acoustics in the lobby were so much louder and we all, inside the church, heard this painful sound coming from the lobby.

The pastor kept speaking just a little bit longer and then he said, "I'm sorry guys, but I've got to stop. Would it be all right with you if we stop and pray for this young man?" Well, at that point, I'd walked out and I was standing with that mom because I didn't want her to be alone and I wanted to say, "You come back. This is not a deal breaker. You come back." And while I was out with that mom, the whole church was in prayer. The whole church was praying. People were praying aloud in their seats, which is not really normally the culture of our church, but everyone was in solidarity. Everyone was in prayer.

And the pastor said in that prayer that this young man belongs to us. He's ours. When that prayer was done and people walked out, they were hugging me, they were hugging each other. There was such a profound sense of unity, of belonging to one another and belonging to Christ. And that happened because of the messiness of that moment, because of the reality of the messiness of life.

I had one woman come up to me years ago and she said, "Emily, I want you to know why I came to this church." She said, "I came to this church because I heard how much this church loves Max." And she said, "I thought to myself, 'I think if that church can love Max, then I think that church can love me.'" It's a powerful pro-life, pro-all of life message when we are including all of life in our churches.

Crystal Keating:

Well and we talk about this often, how the invisible love of God becomes visible through people and it goes beyond attending church. It's being the church.

Emily Colson:

Yes, it does. Being the church.

Crystal Keating:

It's being a family. It's being interconnected. I love that word. If we think, "Okay, if they're accepted, then I will be too and if they're accepted by God, I will be too." And we know the scriptures, but it's something else to witness it.

Emily Colson:

To live it.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah.

Emily Colson:

Yes, it is.

Crystal Keating:

How beautiful. Well, what would you want the church to know about Max and other friends who are adults on the autism spectrum?

Emily Colson:

Oh, don't miss it. I want churches to know don't miss it. The beauty is extraordinary. You're not going to know it until you take the step and actually welcome people in. It's going to feel terrifying, and I completely understand that, but don't miss the beauty of what can happen. I want to speak to this season of COVID because it's taught me some... what I think are important lessons in thinking about our families and the church. I never dreamed there would be a season when everything would shut. I'm sure all of us feel the same way. I never dreamed there would be a time when the church would close down and no one would go to church and programs would shut down and schools would shut down and day programs and all kinds of supports would shut down. I think, as I've spoken so many years about welcoming in our families, what it's reminded me is that all of those things are vulnerable.

Our church programs, the best supports we can put in place, are vulnerable. What we need to teach and share and instill above anything else is the love of Christ, is how much God loves us, that He is the one who will never leave us or forsake us when everything else closes down and is gone. When all our support people are gone, He's the one who strengthens us in our weakness. He's the one who's for us when it feels like everyone's against us. He is our ever-present help in times of trouble. He's the one who will bring us comfort in the darkest valley.

And so as we come back as the church and we begin to put our programs back in place, and they're all important, I don't mean to diminish what we're doing and how we're doing it because

we need physical help. We absolutely need physical help, but at the same time, we have to share the love of Christ. We have to share who Jesus is and how we are loved by our Heavenly Father, even when everything else is stripped away, because that will be the hope. That's the hope our families need when we're living in isolation. That's the hope we need whatever our circumstances bring.

Crystal Keating:

That is so true. What an amazing realization. We may know it, but until it's taken away and we have to set our foot on something secure, then we can go, "Okay God, perhaps you're shaking and stripping things down so that we really go back to the most important and long-lasting thing, which is you first and the church body, not the building, but the people and how we're connected by the Spirit of God." That is so powerful.

Well, Emily, I want to talk a little bit about Max and the support that he's needed through the years. Maybe you can talk a little bit about if the support has changed as a child with autism and now as an adult with autism. I'm sure it has.

Emily Colson:

When you lose the school system, which you're entitled to that education and you kind of come out into the adult world, that's a pretty terrifying thing for our families. I'm just going to say that I think I was afraid of graduation from the time Max turned about 12 years old. I thought, "Oh no, what are we going to do? Oh no." Because everything you're doing in his education in school is aiming toward adulthood. It's all aiming towards; well he's going to need this skill when he gets older and he'll need that skill. And so it unfortunately built in a lot of fear for me of, what's going to happen? Interestingly enough, despite my fear of it happening, Max still turned 22 and graduated.

And I remember that day of his graduation and going into it just with such fear. And then that moment it started, I thought, "Oh no. Oh no, I am going to celebrate every moment of this and celebrate every victory and celebrate every victory to come, even when I don't know what it's going to look like down the road. I don't want to miss out on the good that's actually happening." It's very different. I think almost more is required of families to help navigate some of these issues in the adult world and finding meaningful things for our kids to do, our adult kids to do, finding connections for jobs. It's a joy too. I don't want to sound like it's a burden. It's really a joy to see some of those doors open up, even though we have a lot of closed doors. Max pre-COVID had a really robust day.

So he's had very many part-time jobs, paying jobs, that he's loved. He has two locations where he volunteers in our church and he volunteers at our YMCA. He had a day program that he really loves that he's been able to attend because he has a one-to-one with him to be able to navigate that program and a home teaching program. So he's had a very, very full day. His jobs, I will tell you, I remember the first time he was given a job. He was 14 and he was in his school program and he was going to work in a nursing home for two hours a week and help out setting up the dining room tables. And they gave him a t-shirt and that t-shirt had an emblem on it of the nursing home. I wasn't sure how this was going to go, if he was going to be really anxious getting up that morning.

This was new and new doesn't go all that well for Max, but he got up that morning. He went into the bathroom. I watched him put that shirt on and then I watched him pat the logo with pride. I looked and I thought... Now I didn't tell him. I didn't build this up too much because I didn't

want it to create more anxiety, but he automatically instinctively knew, "I'm needed. I've got somewhere I belong. I'm wearing their logo." It was just so glorious to see. And he's loved working. He knows it's important. He knows he's needed. He has purpose. He has had a job in a carwash. He's been in charge of all things vacuum. So for Max, that's really a great fit. He's had a job working in a juice station, cutting up the bananas and he just really, really loves bananas. I know he's needed there because they would call sometimes and ask if Max could do an extra day.

Crystal Keating:

That's awesome.

Emily Colson:

I thought, "Oh my goodness. Isn't that wonderful?" He's had a job in a grocery store.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah. Let's talk about his grocery store experience because I think that wasn't always a place where you were able to go with him and... Right?

Emily Colson:

Right. Oh no, a grocery store was really trouble. We really, for many, many years just couldn't go into a grocery store without some kind of major disaster, and we don't even have to go into that. I have a feeling most of our families can use their imagination, but we just couldn't. We couldn't navigate it. And to see Max now work in a grocery store, beyond what I could have imagined he would be doing. And I remember one day he was working in this little grocery store and a customer walked up to the clerk at the counter and he handed him a \$10 bill and he pointed over to Max and he said, "This is to buy that young man lunch because he is working so hard." How glorious. He was noticed. He was seen. He was valued. He was loved.

Max had a job in a seafood restaurant on Cape Cod. We live in Massachusetts. It was a wonderful, wonderful job. They had him doing everything in that restaurant. They had him working so hard and he loved it. Well, it was 4th of July and he was scheduled to work on 4th of July. And about two days before I began to realize, the traffic, if anyone has ever been to Cape Cod on 4th of July, you can't move-

Crystal Keating:

Is it crazy?

Emily Colson:

Oh, you can't move an inch because it's so crowded. And so the protective mom in me sent an email to the boss, to the owner. And I said, "Max won't be able to come in to his shift because it's going to take us two hours to get there and two hours to get home. And so I think Max just won't come in on that day."

I almost immediately got back what was the worst and the best email I've ever received in my life. And he said, "I certainly understand about the traffic, but we count on Max. And in the future, I need two weeks' notice if Max is going to be missing from his shift because I need someone else to cover his work. So I need Max on the 4th of July and in the future, please understand that we look at Max just as we look at any other employee."

Crystal Keating:
I love that.

Emily Colson:
Isn't it wonderful?

Crystal Keating:
Yes.

Emily Colson:

For the first moment I felt so embarrassed and then I realized, "Oh my goodness, they need him." And it totally changed my perspective on Max's jobs. It wasn't something they were just allowing him to do and isn't that nicey-nice. And it's sort of like a school program. It's a snow day, we can't get there. But they saw Max as a valued employee just as they saw anybody else working there. It just couldn't have been better. I'm just going to tell you, we drove that two hours and we got to that two hour shift and we drove the two hours back in traffic.

Crystal Keating:

That's right. Oh, that's so good. Wow. Well Emily, as we close our time together, maybe you can share a little bit about you as a mother and maybe how the family dynamics have changed as Max has become older. How have these changes impacted you as his mom?

Emily Colson:

As I share this after a year of isolation, I will tell you I'm a little tired as a mom. I'm sure others can relate to that right now. It's such an interesting question because it really causes me to think very deeply about this experience that God's blessed me with. And when I say that, that includes those moments where I am so totally broken and not sure if I'm going to survive another moment. And in that I have felt God's presence and goodness holding me and sustaining me. I've watched God hold and sustain Max. I had a goal I expressed on one of his education plans years ago. I remember it was 2005 and when they asked parents, it was our turn to say, "What do you have as goals for your child?" And I was very bold in that and I said, "I want him to become a mighty man of God."

I remember the room just went silent and nobody moved. I'm in New England. This is not what you say in Massachusetts. It's not what you say in a school education plan meeting. The room went silent, and I held my ground and I didn't add another word. And all of a sudden, I heard the teacher start to type and I saw the words go up on a screen for everyone in the room to see. And everybody all of a sudden cheered. They all started shaking hands with each other saying, "I have never seen that in my entire life. In all my years, I have never seen those words added into an education plan." And to watch those words go up on that overhead screen for everyone to see, it's been my hope and my desire for Max to be a mighty man of God. And that's exactly what God's done. He's made him into a mighty man of God.

Crystal Keating:

Amen. Through all the seasons of life, God has been with you, Emily and I know it's been challenging. And so I so appreciate you coming on to share your heart and share about the

church. And so much of what you're saying reminds me of a little booklet that we have in our [church training resources](#). All of our resources are free. It's called [Helping with Life Transitions: Engaging Young Adults with Disabilities Into the Life of Your Church](#). And Emily, your church is living it and I just pray that you're able to reengage very soon. And I pray that you continue to see God's hand on your family and that Max continues to be a mighty man of God. Thank you so much for joining me on the podcast again today.

Emily Colson:

Thank you, Crystal and my deepest thanks to all of you at Joni and Friends for the most important work that you're doing for our families. Thank you.

Crystal Keating:

God bless you.

Emily Colson:

God bless you, Crystal.

Crystal Keating:

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