

Season 2 | Episode 32

How To Be More Inclusive

Joshua Fast

SEPTEMBER 17, 2020

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 welcome and include people living with disability in your community. Be sure to subscribe wherever you listen to [podcasts](#) so you don't miss any of our encouraging conversations. You can also find all of the helpful resources that we've talked about at joniandfriends.org/podcast.

Last week, we talked with Josh Fast, father to six-year-old Malakai, who has a rare genetic disorder called myotonic dystrophy. He's back this week to talk about the ways God is using him in his own community to start the conversation about accessibility, changing perspectives, and ultimately, changing hearts so that people of all ability are considered.

Welcome back to the podcast, Josh. It's great to have you on the show again today. And for those who may have missed our first episode, can you briefly share your story as a father to a son with special needs and how his life led you to begin Priceless Youth Ministry?

Joshua Fast:

It's great to be back on the podcast again. Yeah, I can totally share a little bit about my story. My son, Malakai, was born a little over six years ago now as a preemie with myotonic dystrophy, which caused cerebral palsy as well because he wasn't breathing for half an hour after he was born. So, living through that and spending four and a half months in the hospital, and then [inaudible 00:01:42] we spent another two and a half, about a year ago now, with him in the hospital for another surgery, and some of the complications that came out of that.

But there's definitely a lot of day-to-day challenges for us, as I'm sure there are for many people who have children with disability. One of the chief things that we have to worry about with Malakai is him being able to breathe despite having a lot of secretions in his mouth that he can't quite manage without an extra helping hand. So, we have a suction unit that helps with that. We have oxygen on standby, which unfortunately has to get used now and then. So, we have these kind of tools and things like that to help him on daily basis, but we don't have to worry about him running around and getting into whatever mischief, but definitely have to worry about him breathing and that kind of thing. So, it's a definitely different parenting experience.



Crystal Keating:

Yeah. I think that kind of hit me with a lot of gravity when you shared that last week, just about the concerns that you have as a special needs parent often seem so different from maybe other parents who are raising children that aren't medically fragile. And so, the things that you're watching and thinking about feel sometimes like life and death matters. And that definitely can change your perspective as a parent, and yet, the joys that you experienced with Malakai are certainly really high. And I just loved hearing about the way that he communicates with his smile and his laughter.

And I know that you're in a community of other Christians who also have children with disabilities, so I'm wondering, in what ways has your experience raising a son with myotonic dystrophy inspired you to help other families? I'm sure you have some great stuff.

Joshua Fast:

It's definitely changed my perspective when it comes to disability and my perspective in looking at the world in general. Oftentimes I see in a situation in a church or out in public in general, where little things like a curb, how a curb is designed, why it does not have a slope down, or you look at a church and oftentimes the ramp is way at the back of the building instead of in the front. So, people just really have to go all the way around the church to get in, or even the little buttons you have to hit. And just in a social aspect too.

I see how people are treated. I see how people treat my son as well. Oftentimes, we're out and about with my son in a wheelchair. Kids don't have a filter as you know, so they'll ask their parents all sorts of things like, "Hey mommy, what's wrong with that little boy?" And of course, the parents are kind of embarrassed that their kid just asked this really embarrassing question. And they say, "Oh, it's okay, Johnny or Susie. He's just tired and he's sleepy. That's why he's not moving a bunch." And it's like, no, he's fully awake and doing his normal thing, it's just he has myotonic dystrophy which causes low muscle tone and is weaker in his muscles. He can't move around.

So instead of saying, "Well, why don't we ask? Why don't we talk to this little boy? He's a human being, he's a person. Let's not talk about him behind his back. Let's come up and say, 'Hey, how are you doing? What's going on with you?'" Right? Introduce themselves would be a much better way to approach, or even some people don't even approach or ask at all. They just avoid eye contact, which feels amazing. I'm obviously being sarcastic here. It feels horrible.

Crystal Keating:

Amazingly horrible.

Joshua Fast:

Exactly. My brother works with street people a lot and they often tell him how depressing and how soul crushing it is to have every person walk past you and avoid eye contact. And obviously people with disability face this all the time.

My perspective and my view has definitely changed a lot just with having a child with disabilities and understanding and seeing things from a totally different perspective, the world, churches, everything, and a lot of other families have shared similar experiences of what it's like.



Crystal Keating:

Yeah. I think even just the basic idea of looking someone in the eye is so honoring and it brings dignity back to the conversation. Because dismissiveness is almost saying like, "Oh, you're not really there," or "You don't really matter," and that's certainly how it feels on a whole other level. Has there been a situation where a family has actually come up to you and said, "My children would like to meet your son and what's his name?" Have they interacted with you in a positive way that kind of really blew you away?

Joshua Fast:

It doesn't happen very often. It has happened once or twice within daycare. When he was at a daycare program within the church that we were going to at the time, the associate pastor's children were in the daycare and the kids were really great about coming up and talking to Malakai and interacting with Malakai.

But yeah, it doesn't happen very often. And I think it really speaks to how we raise our kids. Because kids don't have filters. They don't have prejudice or anything against, they're just very curious. It's something that is often taught or brought down. So, I often encourage people when I talk to them, I say when you encounter someone with disabilities, you may not know what to say, you may not understand or know what their situation is, but at the very least, please just give them eye contact and smile. That will make a huge difference. If that's the least you can do, that's way better than doing nothing.

And obviously teaching and having your kids exposed to people and kids with disability is really great. I shared last time about how the teacher set up games so that my son could be part of it, which really changed that physical connection with the kids and with my son. It changed how they saw him. Obviously, this is such a challenge in our current times to have physical connections with people, but that physical touch I think really humanizes people and really humanizes them. It's just, "Hey, wait a minute. They're the same as me, they're just going through different struggles."

Crystal Keating:

Right. Instead of shutting down the conversation, you want to engage it and actually move forward, and even just ask the question, "What's your son's name?" or "Can you tell us more about him?" I think parents who have children with disabilities welcome that. It can bring about a relationship rather than shutting it down.

And I know that as the founder of Priceless Youth Ministries, you've really tried to learn as much as you can about helping families impacted by disability. I know you've been a part of some of our great training curriculum. We have the Beyond Suffering courses that you've been a part of. I think you've also taken some other courses, like a Practical Guide to Special Needs Children's Ministry and Welcoming People with Disabilities in the Church. What have been some of the biggest changes in your worldview and understanding of scripture after taking these courses?



Joshua Fast:

It's just how disability is everywhere and God's view and God's perspective on disability, especially shown through the actions of Jesus, how he hung out and purposely worked with and talked with and was active in people's lives who had disability or were considered disabled by the community. If you think about it, Jesus became disabled in coming and setting aside his divinity and setting aside who he was as God to come down and be part of us and be part of humanity. He became disabled for a time being to reach us.

And I think that's a really good example that can be shown in the church. I think communities and church bodies are not complete without people with disability. There's an aspect and a part of humanity that is shown through people with disability that you can't get unless you are interacting and being part of that community.

The other thing that was really, in the Beyond Suffering that I did recently, really interesting is the history of people with disability. There's actually a really awesome video on Netflix right now called Crip Camp.

Crystal Keating:

Oh yeah. I've heard about that.

Joshua Fast:

It is phenomenal. And it's really interesting because I was going through the course and they're talking about how there was this sit-in protests and things like that in the past that people with disability did, which, I mean, it's hard to do a sit-in protest when your body is fully functioning, let alone when you're a quadriplegic or something like that. Like it was super challenging and hard for these people. And I read about it and heard about it, and they talked about it in Beyond Suffering course. And then I went and watched Crip Camp and it literally showed it.

So, they basically said, "Listen, you guys passed the law. You need to get on it." And this is right around the time before the Disability Act was put in place, which is something you guys have in the States which we don't have in Canada. There are rules and laws coming down slowly. Actually, one came in just last year that all federal buildings have to be accessible. The funny thing is that they still aren't. Like we have a parliament building here because Victoria is the capital of B.C. where I live, so we have parliament buildings. And I've talked with other families and people who have disabilities and they're not accessible.

So, representation in parliament and in government is next to impossible because the buildings aren't even accessible. And even voting centers. There was a voting center here in the town where I live where it was on the second floor and there was no ramps or accessibility to get there. Like how are people even supposed to vote who have a disability when they can't even get there?



Crystal Keating:

No, and that's like the most basic barrier is the physical barrier. The United States just celebrated the 30th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act, the ADA. And Joni has said that even in the beginning when the laws were in place, it took a long time for the enactment of them. And even then, the most important thing is the accessible heart, the changing of the mindset, thinking about others. So, I'm curious, can you talk a little bit more about the culture in Western Canada? What do they say about disability? They're certainly saying something about maybe an oversight, if we could believe the best, that they're having voting on the second floor and there's no accessibility. Can you talk more about culture there?

Joshua Fast:

From what I've seen and experienced and heard from other families and people with disability is often, they're forgotten about. And even like within the course learning about all this history, all of that history is not taught. It's often when we talk about hardships or we are talking about suffering, we talk about all of these things, disability is completely forgotten about. It's not even part of the conversation.

There's a kind of a universal we don't want to talk about it or a universal sense that people in general just don't think about disability on a regular basis. They don't take it into consideration because their mindset isn't even there. So, a lot of times, there's was kind of this, well, we'll just step back. And if we do nothing, then we won't do any harm either, right?

So, we're overly polite, as I'm sure everyone knows. Canada has a history. That only goes so far. We don't want to step out of our comfort zones and understand or see the other side, because if we're just happy and calm and peaceful where we are at, we don't want to cause any issues or any rifts with someone else by interacting with them. That's what I see and what I hear here. But what most people don't understand is by not doing anything, they're actually causing pain and suffering. They're actually causing problems because they haven't thought about or considered people with disability.

One major example of this is changing tables. So almost every place that you'll go, public restrooms and stuff that have the little baby, it goes up to maybe 30 pounds, a little change table that folds out from the wall, a little plastic thing. You probably see them in most washrooms. Usually in women's washrooms, sometimes in men's washrooms. That's a whole different issue.

For someone like my son who can't sit up or hold up his head, what do we do when we're out in public when my son's diaper needs to be changed, right? He's more than 30 pounds. He's approaching 50 pounds. What do we do? Well, unfortunately, what most parents have to do is lay their child on the floor of a public washroom. Would you like to lay on the floor of a public washroom?

Crystal Keating:

I would not.



Joshua Fast:

I don't know anybody who would want to lay on the floor of a public washroom. So unfortunately, they are dehumanized and treated as a lower-class citizen just because we haven't thought about it.

So, this is something that actually a friend of mine is working on with an organization called Changing Places. And the airport here in Victoria just recently, through work that he's done, has put in an accessible washroom. So, these are super common in Europe. They're not common here. So, what it is is it's actually like a large, full size changing table that you can put an adult on if you need to. It can raise and lower in height. There's a lift system in the ceiling. There's a washroom toilet with a little curtain around it. A commode that's also available. A sink that's at a level with nothing underneath it so you can get a wheelchair under it.

Crystal Keating:

Right.

Joshua Fast:

So, someone with disabilities, if they have a helper, can go in there and use this washroom. They could do it on their own. If they need a helper or they need a diaper change or something like that, then they have everything they need in a public space, which is huge. And this is just one example of many. I've actually been working with some churches who are doing renovations or putting in a new church and hopefully including these in their spaces.

A great suggestion is if you do not have this kind of space or don't have the money or the budget or the time to do a big renovation, buy a massage table. [inaudible 00:16:17] massage tables run a 100, maybe 200 bucks. They can fold up, be put in the corner, but you can fold them out. They'll hold up to 600 pounds. We actually keep one of these in the back of my son's wheelchair accessible van for when we're out and about. But the thing is, it weighs like 40 pounds. So, it's not super ideal for us. Obviously, having a changing place would be better, but this is something that churches could put in and have ready to go. It's like, "Oh, you've got a kid who has disabilities? No problem. We have a changing place for you." And it's easy and cheap and easy to do. That's like a bare minimum that would be a great addition. So, one of the things that we can kind of suggest-

Crystal Keating:

I love that idea.



Joshua Fast:

Yeah, it's just one of the little things that thinking about and having that mentality of, "Wait a minute, if I was someone with disabilities in this situation, what would I face? What challenges would I face?" Another one that's very common is where's your towel dispenser and your hand soap and things like that? Are they mounted way high up on the wall in your washroom? Or are they down low where someone who's in a wheelchair can reach them? Or what are your signs like, your signage in your church? Does it have raised letters that someone who is blind could easily put their hand over and go, Oh, that's the washroom for men," or "That's the washroom for women," or "This is the way to Sunday School," or this is the way to whatever in the church, just little things like this.

I went into one church that had great, big, huge, wonderful double doors, all flat, on the level. Obviously, it was very wheelchair accessible, but the door that had the wheelchair button had a stack of magazines on the table behind it. So clearly, there was no thought put into, "Hey, wait a minute. Someone with disabilities might come to our church and we need to have that accessible for them."

Crystal Keating:

Yeah.

Joshua Fast:

Or obviously a big thing that was mentioned in the courses as well is your stages. How many church stages have steps? Just about all of them. But if they had a ramp that wasn't packed full of equipment, because I've seen churches that have a nice ramp and then they pack all the extra equipment onto the ramp, which totally defeats the purpose of having a ramp.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah. I think it's so helpful for families like yours to be able to speak into the conversations that pastors and church leaders may or may not be having, maybe because they just have never thought about it. What we often say to church leaders who say, "I really want my church to be accessible. What do we do?" and we have a lot of resources for them, but we also talk about asking the families themselves. Go to the families that are already in your church and ask them, "What are your needs? What are you seeing around our church that maybe isn't accessible or isn't easy to navigate within?"

I think you're such a great resource for your community because you're thinking about those things. When you connect with the new church for like accessibility consultations, are they asking you questions? And if they are, what are you asking them to do or what are you asking them to consider?



Joshua Fast:

A big thing is helping pastors to understand the need. Either they don't see the need in their community, or they say, "Oh, we don't have anyone in our church that has disabilities. Why would we bother putting this stuff in?" But if you look at scripture, we're called to go out and compel them to come in. It's not about if they're there already, well we'll serve them, I guess. It's about going out and finding them and compelling them to come in. And you can get over any physical barrier if you have changed hearts.

So, if the church doesn't have a ramp and has three or four steps up to the front or to the stage, no problem. Get a couple of strong guys in the church together and let's lift them up there. It's a temporary solution. Ultimately, we'd love to see something a little better than that and actually be cognitively thinking about what disabilities may come in, especially doing research in your area. "Okay, we have a lot of people in our community with blindness, let's make signs more accessible around our church for people with blindness," and then get them to come in.

But as a temporary, what a cool bonding moment to have a couple of strong guys from the church lift them up there, just like in Jesus' time, the friends that brought the gentleman who was on a mat through the roof. They had to cut a hole in the roof and bring him down to see Jesus. If the heart is there and understanding for disability and watching for it, you can overcome any obstacle.

Crystal Keating:

Right. That is [inaudible 00:20:56].

Joshua Fast:

Right? You can get over any of these barriers. So, a big part of it is helping them to understand. I actually have a power wheelchair, an extra one that's too big for Malakai yet. And something that I would do is bring that wheelchair in and say, "All right, jump in this wheelchair and go to the washroom," in your church.

Crystal Keating:

You make the church leaders do that? That is so fabulous.



Joshua Fast:

I've heard stories of other organizations doing this. And the pastor got on the chair and went to the washroom and came back in tears because he realized the hand dispenser isn't accessible. I can't get the wheelchair under it. I can't even wash my hands, let alone go to the washroom in the washroom that's supposedly wheelchair accessible, right? They haven't even thought about disability ahead of time. And what does that communicate to people with disability? What does that say when you walk into a church or enter a church that is not accessible? It says, to them, "We haven't thought about you. We don't care about you."

So, the attitude that we see of, "Well, if I do nothing, I'm not hurting anything," is not acceptable. Because if we haven't thought about it, we are doing harm. They are not even considered. So, we really need to change that heart and that attitude. And once you can change that heart, another thing that I really liked to do with church leaders is have them come volunteer and have that one-on-one experience with people with disability. Because I think once you understand and work with people with disability and see how amazing they are and how beautiful they are, you can start to understand and see things from their perspective, right? So, then you're starting to look around your church, around your community, around the people you're with and say, "Hey, what can I do to make this space more inclusive for people with disability?"

Crystal Keating:

That's so good.

Joshua Fast:

So that's some of the things that we do.

Crystal Keating:

That's great. And when you change the culture, it has ripple effects all throughout your community, and it's just starting with you and your family. I just think that's so great. Well, Josh, as we close our time together, there's two things. One, how can we be praying for your ministry? And can you share some words of encouragement for pastors and other church leaders who are considering how they can help cultivate a heart of inclusion as they share the love and truth of Jesus Christ with all?



Joshua Fast:

We're a relatively new ministry. We've been going for about a year now and we're severely underfunded unfortunately. I mean, it's obviously a challenge. Everyone's in a financial struggle right now, but we definitely could really use some prayer when it comes to finances and to people to partner alongside us, especially in our community and say, "Hey, I've got a kid with disabilities. I'd love to share my story and my experiences." That would be something that we would love to have. Because if we can get those stories and the experiences, we can better understand how to help people in the community that we're in.

I have a young man who is actually writing out his story and he's grown up in the church his whole life. And he's a quadriplegic with cerebral palsy, and really excited to hear his stories of his interactions and see what what can we do better? And look through his eyes at what the church has done and meant to him, or those missteps that have happened and how can we learn from those mistakes and make them better, right?

So those are just some of the ways it'd be great to help. If you know a church or someone in the Western Canada that's really struggling with this and wants to have a consultation or just wants advice, like give me a call, check out PricelessYouthMinistry.ca. We have resources on there. We have contact information, reach out. I'd love to help in any way I can. If you're a family who is struggling. You've been to church, but you don't feel like you're included. Your kid isn't part of the children's ministry and you're not sure why they aren't supported, give me a shout and approach your pastor and say, "Hey, you know what? We'd love to be more included. What can we do? And here's someone I know who can help." I would love, love, love to help in any way I can with those struggles and those obstacles and tear down those barriers so more people with disability can get to know Jesus.

Crystal Keating:

Can you share some parting words of encouragement for pastors and other church leaders who are considering how they can help to cultivate a heart of inclusion as they share the love and truth of Jesus Christ with all?

Joshua Fast:

Yeah. I think the old adage, walking a mile in another shoes, the biggest thing is if you want to be and understand how to be more inclusive, get to know someone with disabilities. If you don't currently have someone in your circle or in your life that has disabilities step out of your comfort zone and get to know someone with disabilities. I guarantee it'll change your life for the positive. And you'll be able to understand and start to see from their point of view what the world is like and how inclusive are not your church is.

So, I think the one thing I could say is definitely look into that. Look into what scripture says about disability, because throughout the entire Bible, it lays out how we're supposed to treat and work with people with disability and how God honors and went out of his way to reach people with disability.

Crystal Keating:

Good words. Well, Josh, thanks again for your time on the podcast today. We pray for God's abundant provision for your ministry and for the churches in Western Canada to really experience the blessing that comes when all are included in the body of Christ.

Thank you for listening today. To get our next conversation automatically, please subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts. And if you enjoy today's episode, leave us a five-star review. I'm Crystal Keating and thank you for listening to the Joni and Friends Ministry podcast.

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