

A True Friend Identifies

By Joni Eareckson Tada

Have you ever watched a football game and seen those crazy fans in the stands wearing face paint and funny hats, braving temperatures well below zero? They scream at the top of their lungs to cheer for their team, as if the players will actually listen to their instructions. And put them in front of a TV camera and you would think they had just won the lottery! If you are watching the game at home, you say to yourself, “Why do they do that?”

The answer isn’t found in the win-loss record of the team. In baseball, for example, some of the most avid fans are Cub fans—and the Cubs haven’t won the pennant in eighty years! The answer lies not in the team itself but in the heart of the true fan.

What the crazy fans in the stadium, as well as the more subdued fans in the living room (like my husband, Ken, and me!), experience in our heart is called *identification*. We identify with the team. Our identity as individuals is tied, even in a small way, to the team. As a resident of the Los Angeles area, the Lakers are a part of me and I feel like a part of them. If they win, we’re happy. If they lose, we’re sad. (Ken more than I!) And we will defend the honor of the team to any who would disparage it.

A true fan will recount stories of past triumphs. Or quote statistics on the players. Or wear jackets, hats, pins, and shirts with the team’s logo—even during the off-season. A true fan will do this because he or she identifies with the team. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we identified with one another as people in the same way? Someone’s hurt becomes my hurt? Someone’s hope becomes my hope?

Nowhere is a sense of identification more needed than in relationships between nondisabled people and disabled people. Whether you simply cross each other’s paths briefly or become intimate friends, developing a sense of identification with a disabled person is the most important and rewarding step you can take. To identify with a person with a disability will mean that you have taken yet another step in conforming to the image of Christ.

If identification is that important, let’s define it and then describe it in further detail. Webster’s dictionary says it is a “process by which a person ascribes to himself the qualities or characteristics of another person.” It is also described as “the perception of another person as an extension of oneself” (that is, your pain is my pain; your joy, my joy).

Nobel Prize winner Herbert Simon describes identification this way: “We will say that a person identifies himself with a group when, in making a decision, he evaluates the several alternatives of choice in terms of their consequences for the specified group (or person).” The essence of a friendship with a person with a disability is that we think about choices (how we will act, what we will say) based upon their impact on that person and consider that person to be an extension of ourselves. It means that we will look at the world from their perspective and act accordingly.

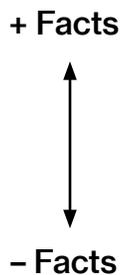
Whether or not we identify with someone with a disability will depend upon these two factors: what we know about a person and how well we value that person. Borrowing again from Herbert Simon, these factors are called “premises.” We make decisions about things and about people based on premises of what we believe to be true (facts) as well as the things that are important to us or that we care about (values).

To illustrate how we make decisions, imagine for a moment that you’re in the market for a car. Your pragmatic nature determines that safety and economy might be important values to you. As you shop for cars, you will base your decision on information related to those values. Miles per gallon, air bags and antilock brakes will all be key factors in helping you determine which car you buy. (If you choose a convertible sports car, you weren’t being honest about what you valued. Looks and speed were probably more important to you!)

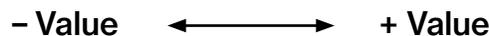
When it comes to our attitudes toward other people, we go through a similar process. Because an attitude is simply a decision we make with regard to a person, idea, or thing, our values and the information available to us will be of central interest.

Let us take this line of thinking and illustrate how you can not only describe your attitude toward a person with a disability, but also how you can grow in your relationship with that person or group of people. At the same time, we will see other attitudes that are prevalent in our society today regarding people with disabilities.

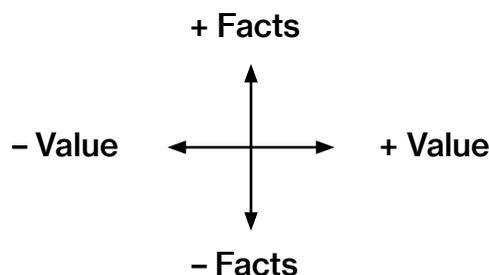
First, think about information regarding people with disabilities. You can have varying amounts of accurate or inaccurate information (facts) about someone. Represented in graphic form, it looks like this:



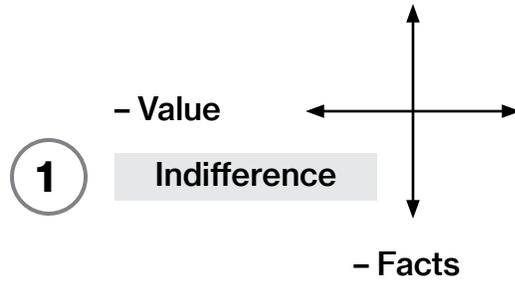
Second, think about your value regarding people with disabilities. Your value can move in a positive or negative direction and can be represented this way.



Those of you who remember (enjoyed or dreaded!) algebra class can see where I’m going with this. Put the two lines together to form a graph of Facts and Value:

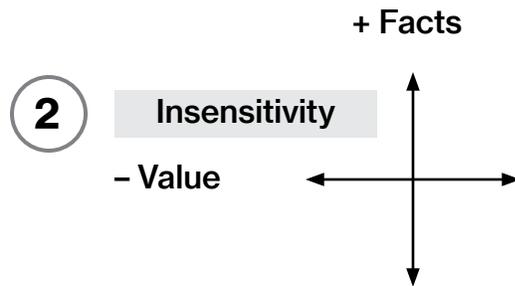


You will notice that when we formed this graph, we created four areas or quadrants. Look at each quadrant to see what’s there.



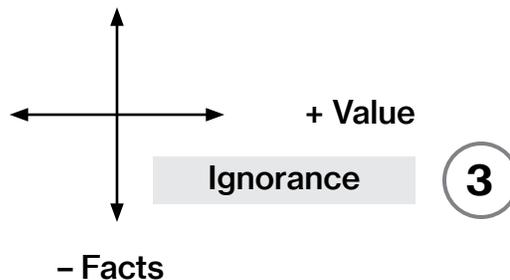
Quadrant 1: Lesser value with little or inaccurate information.

This is the quadrant of *Indifference*. “I don’t know and I don’t care” is how someone with little value and little or inaccurate information would express it. Very few would actually say it that way, but it is prevalent in our society when it comes to working with disabled people. As a group, disabled people have experienced discrimination and have had to work hard to get the most essential laws passed to protect them from indifference.



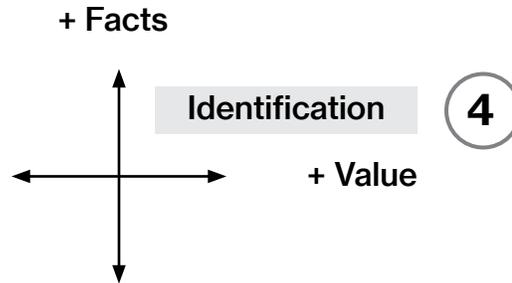
Quadrant 2: Lesser value but with accurate and increasing amount of information.

This is the quadrant of *Insensitivity*. A person may know what is happening with people with disabilities but may not respond positively because he or she doesn’t care or has become burned out from caring. This often happens with those working professionally in the field of disability. The disabled person may become just another “problem,” “case” or “file.”



Quadrant 3: Positive value but with inaccurate or inadequate information.

This is the quadrant of *Ignorance*. A lot of people in churches fall into this category. They care a lot—Christ’s example and command prompt this—but they simply don’t know much about people with disabilities. They are unaware. That is why much of disability ministry is geared toward building awareness. Ignorance can be expressed in things such as assuming a person who is mentally disabled is also deaf. Or a person in a wheelchair might be assumed to be mentally disabled. You can imagine how people would interact in such cases and why friendships or acquaintances would be so hard to get started.



Quadrant 4: Positive value with more, accurate information.

This is the quadrant of *Identification*. The more we value a person with a disability and the more we know, the more we will identify with them. Notice that with even a little bit of information and a little bit of value, you have moved away from where many people are in society.

As we move further into the quadrant of Identification, we learn more about a person. And at the same time we grow in our appreciation and love for them. We begin to learn secrets of what is important to them—simple things like their tastes in music and deeper things like their motivations in life. All the while we esteem them more highly and view them more and more as someone created in God’s image. We will find creative ways of loving the person and valuing the person the way God values him or her.

We have come full circle in this chapter now. We said at the outset that our goal in friendship is identification. Exciting for each Christian is that if we decide to value and learn as much as we can about a person with a disability, we will have expressed the mind of Christ by identifying with that person. Christ *identified* with us in the flesh. He became one of us and knows our frame. He valued us enough to die for us.

Imitating Christ in Friendship

That is what this is about, isn’t it? Imitating Christ who was the ultimate Friend.

Jesus was the Friend of sinners. And his friendship was so strong that he identified with us in his death when he took on our sins and endured the wrath of God. Oh, what an expression of loving friendship to identify so closely with us!

Just as Jesus identified with people in his death, he also identified with us in his life. And in the thirty-three years that Jesus spent on earth, he paid particular attention to what was considered to be a rather unlovely group of people—people with disabilities! Did you know that twenty-five out of the thirty-four miracles recorded in the Gospels involve people with disabilities? On every page you see Jesus interacting with disabled people, befriending them and meeting them at their point of need!

Jesus’ friendship with people with disabilities serves as a model for us. We can’t go wrong if we imitate the way in which he identified with people with disabilities. He valued each disabled person as a person. The story of the paralytic who was let down through the roof in Luke 5 highlights Jesus’ belief that a disabled person was indeed a *person*. In verse 20, he addresses the man as “friend,” or literally “man.” That one word cut right through the prevailing notion that disabled people were less than full participants in society.

While elevating the status of each disabled person to that of a true human, at the same time Jesus saw that each disabled person was also a *sinner*. We have a tendency to idealize people with disabilities as somehow incapable of sinning. But Jesus didn’t sugarcoat human nature—even when it came to those who might elicit sympathy or pity in our society. In some cases, Jesus pointed out the disabled person’s need for forgiveness. The disability may not have been caused by the sin, as in the story of the blind man in John 9, but that did not exclude the person with a disability from the community of sinners. Several times Jesus told disabled people that their sins were forgiven or that they should sin no more.

Jesus not only knew the true nature of a disabled person, he also felt *compassion* for them. Whether

he was dealing with an individual or masses of people with disabilities, the Gospels often say that “he had compassion” on them. He did not ignore the need of the day and trivialize it in light of more important matters like the kingdom. He took each person at their point of need and expressed tender mercy. I like that synonym for compassion: “tender mercy.” When we identify with a person with a disability like Christ did, we will be tender in doing so. Whatever harshness or difficulty our disabled friend might throw at us, we can be tender in our response.

Jesus included people with disabilities as a part of his *mission* on earth. When asked in Luke 7 whether or not he was the Messiah, look at how he answered: “Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor” (v. 22 NIV). In our “mission” for Jesus, we might have easily skipped over this group. But Jesus didn’t forget. And neither should we.

Jesus *stopped to listen* to people with disabilities. The story of Bartimaeus illustrates this characteristic of Jesus. Bartimaeus, while sitting beside the road to Jericho, called out to Jesus. The disciples tried to rebuke him. They were, after all, on their way to Jerusalem where Christ would be welcomed as King. But as this large procession of people moved toward Jerusalem, it says that Jesus “stopped.” He engaged Bartimaeus in conversation, learned his need, and then ministered to him. Stopping, slowing down, turning off the road—all are acts that reflect the strength of Jesus’ identification with disabled people.

If Jesus...

If Jesus identified so deeply with us, and if he identified so deeply with people with disabilities, it can be our privilege to enter into a wonderful imitation of our Savior. We need not be intimate friends to identify. We need not be professional healthcare workers to meet needs. We need not be theologians to value the essential worth of a disabled person. Submission to and imitation of Christ’s way is all we need.

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About the Author

Joni Eareckson Tada is a global Christian stateswoman and an internationally renowned advocate for people with disabilities. She is the Founder and CEO of Joni and Friends International Disability Center, a nonprofit organization with a worldwide outreach to people with disabilities and their families. A diving accident in 1967 left Joni, then 17, a quadriplegic in a wheelchair. Since then, Joni’s wisdom and influence have been shared with the world through Christian books, the media, speaking, and her service in disability advocacy. She served on the National Council on Disability under two U.S. Presidents; during her tenure, the Americans with Disabilities Act was drafted and passed into law. Joni has also served on the Disability Advisory Committee to the U.S. State Department. Her driving desire is to see every person with a disability find hope, dignity, and their place in the body of Christ. Joni and Ken Tada have been married since 1982.