

SHARING *Hope* THROUGH HARDSHIP



Love like Jesus!

from the heart

“My command is this:
Love each other as I have loved you.”

JOHN 15:12

Recently, a wonderful friend came to care for me when my husband, Ken, went on a fishing trip. Like anyone who has taken Ken's place as my caregiver, she got a crash course on the demands of helping someone with a disability. I mean, right away, whoever's helping me gets immersed in countless routines. They have to learn catheters, leg bags, and disinfecting urological equipment. They've got to pick up meds from the pharmacy, help me with chest percussion therapy, study spirometer readings, and hold up a tissue to blow my nose at least ten times a day. Then there are the bed baths, nebulizers, and mealtimes when I need to be fed—oh, and sips of water all throughout the day. And friend, this only scratches the surface.

By the time Ken returned from his fishing trip, my friend caring for me looked at us and said, “People have no idea what you go through, do they?” And she was right. Oftentimes, people assume I just wake up and... here I am, all dressed, with makeup on! People imagine that our life is somehow manageable, doable, and

reasonable. Perhaps some assume that people with disabilities get used to their circumstances and have all their needs covered.

March is Disability Awareness Month, so it seems a fitting time to tell you, from the lady who has lived with quadriplegia for decades... sometimes I wish people knew how hard life with disability can be. And of the 1.3 billion people in the world with disabilities, many live with poverty and discrimination, which exponentially multiplies the kinds of difficulty I face in my daily routines. So friend, as I see it, awareness alone is not enough... not for followers of Jesus Christ.

What do I mean? Well, look at our Lord and Savior, Jesus. In response to our broken, sin-ridden world, did He look down from heaven, simply “aware” of our hopeless plight? Did He just take note of our hopeless condition and leave us to suffer? No! He came down and took on a mortal frame, susceptible to pain. And on the cross, He not only entered into your plight and mine... He conquered sin, death, and hell, which would have otherwise crushed us for all eternity!



I thank God for all the ways Ken and our friends help me navigate life with disability. And I am thankful for you and your faithful care for disabled people worldwide. *God bless you for loving others as Jesus loves you!*

So, what does it mean to live out the command of Jesus in John 15:12, to “Love each other as I have loved you”? This verse makes me think of my dedicated caregiving friends who are not just “aware” of my needs but pour out their time and energy to feed, bathe, and clothe me. I think of my husband who is not just “aware” that I can't lay in one position all night, but gets up at 3:30 in the morning, takes out my pillows, turns me on my other side, re-tucks the pillows, pulls up my blanket, and gives me a kiss on the forehead.

And friend, I think of you, who make it possible for struggling families to experience refreshment at our *Retreats & Getaways*. Many parents who come to our Joni and Friends *Family Retreats*... they are raising children who have significant developmental delays; some of these boys and girls must be tube fed and toileted. Other families have grown children with autism, epilepsy, and sleep disorders, needing 'round-the-clock care.

Oh, how grateful I am that our Joni and Friends community, including you, can offer so much more than “awareness” to disabled people in need. And we do it all in the name of Jesus, loving like Him. As John 13:35 says, by this everyone will know that we are His disciples, bringing glory to the Father.

Joni Eareckson Tada
Founder

Love One Another

When Raelene and Dan talk about life with Simon, “Our gentle giant,” love flows through their words—a harmony unifying the complexity of their life. At 21 years old, Simon, who has a rare chromosome duplication known as Dup15q, is the eldest of Raelene and Dan’s three children. And for Sydney (19) and McKenzie (16), Simon has always been there, their beloved big brother who needs full-time care.

“Life with Simon has never been easy. It’s been a blessing and it’s been amazing, but it’s never been easy,” says Raelene.

Simon’s condition causes significant developmental delays, autism, intellectual disability, limited communication capacity, sensory processing challenges, pica (which means he eats non-food items), epilepsy, digestive difficulties, and mobility challenges. Dan describes his family’s wholehearted approach to caring for his son: “Simon requires 24/7 care. He needs to be within eye distance at all times. It is very much a team effort.”

Growing up as part of a family caregiving team, Sydney and McKenzie have been formed by Simon’s needs. Caring for Simon is not just a role for each of his family members, but a calling. Every moment of the day requires selflessness and intentionality: managing medications, navigating hospital stays, interpreting Simon’s unique ways of

communicating, and making sure he feels safe and loved.

“As a family, we’ve all felt the weight of Simon’s needs—emotionally, financially, and spiritually,” says Raelene. “It affects our time, our choices, our energy, and sometimes our ability to simply be present for one another... There are days when it feels like we are barely holding things together, and others when Simon’s joy, his laughter, or a quiet shared moment reminds us just how much beauty exists even in the hardest circumstances.”

With routines and experiences drastically different from those of most peers, Simon’s sisters sometimes feel marginalized. “A lot of our life revolves around Simon’s care,” says McKenzie. “There have been so many times we’ve had to leave events early because he was overstimulated or had a meltdown.

Having friends over has always been tricky too. Some get uncomfortable, others don’t know what to say, and it just... makes things complicated. So, we learned to keep certain parts of our life private.”

And even though Raelene worked for decades in children’s ministry, after years of investment in their church community, the pastor indicated that there was no longer a place for Simon in the congregation—or others with disabilities.

As Raelene recalls, “The pastor began asking me to ask individuals with special needs to no longer come to our church because it was distracting and people were feeling uncomfortable. When we left the church, I really struggled to find where my faith was and who I was in Christ. It took us about two years to be open to joining a community again...”





“Family Retreat is a place where we can just be ourselves. We can let Simon be who he is, we can be who we are; we don’t have to explain, we don’t have to justify. We just get to be a family.” –Raelene

Friend, because of your generosity, Simon’s family found healing, belonging, and joy in the body of Christ! God is using you to welcome struggling families into His house, now and for eternity!

“Family Retreat was the very first experience we had back with a body of believers,” says Raelene. From the moment they arrived at their first *Family Retreat*, the whole family felt something shift... they felt seen, understood, and unconditionally embraced.

At *Family Retreat*, Raelene and Dan had

their first experience letting someone they hadn’t previously known care for Simon. And as they saw Simon smile and laugh, ride the zip line, giggle through a dance party, and light up during worship, Raelene and Dan discovered refreshment and peace like never before.

“Family Retreat is very special to us,” says Dan. “It gives Simon a time to feel celebrated. He got to do the all-terrain chairs on the beach. He loves the horses. If he wants to shake sticks, if he just wants to lay down on the grass, no one looks at him like, ‘Why’s he doing that?’ It’s been a great time of rest and rejuvenation here for us.”

“My entire family benefits from *Family Retreat*,” Sydney says. “They all get to do what they enjoy. My brother really enjoys the dance party. He was giggling so hard.” Both Sydney and McKenzie found that *Family Retreat* opened the door to a world where they didn’t have to explain their family.



“Everyone just... got it,” says McKenzie. “We were normal. We were welcomed—not as broken people to be fixed, but as image-bearers of God, uniquely created, fully seen, and deeply loved.”

Within the Joni and Friends community, Sydney and McKenzie didn’t have to worry about what people thought of Simon or hide parts of their story. Both sisters also loved volunteering at *Family Retreat*, serving as one-on-one buddies for participants in other families.

Best of all, McKenzie shared, “Joni and Friends reminded us that the body of Christ, when functioning with love and humility, is beautiful and healing. The people at *Family Retreat* live out the Gospel—not with words alone, but through service, compassion, and joy. It’s truly an extension of the heart of Jesus.”

Today, Raelene has a message of gratitude for you, who make Family Retreat and all our Christ-centered outreaches possible:

“We want to thank you. This was our connection back to a faith community. It truly does make a difference in the lives of families that experience disability.”

Friend, thank you for surrounding struggling families with the love of Jesus!

“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples...”

Special needs parents Oksana and Sergey know what it means to find their strength in Christ. Sophia, their third daughter, is twenty-one years old and lives with cerebral palsy, severe scoliosis, and quadriplegia. Since age seventeen, she has received most of her nutrition through a feeding tube.

Despite having undergone multiple surgeries, including a spinal fusion, “Sophia is a very joyful girl,” says Oksana. “And she loves her family.” While Sophia can’t speak aloud, she understands and can communicate in three languages—English, Ukrainian, and Russian—using a communication device. She can also use her expressive eyes to answer “yes” or “no” to questions.

For Sophia’s family, daily life requires ongoing complex routines: feeding, changing, bathing, and therapy. And each routine comes with equipment: a power wheelchair, a bath chair for toileting and bathing, a device for lifting and transferring, g-tube bags and syringes for feeding and administering medication... no wonder when the family travels, they have to bring an RV!

Oksana and Sergey have sometimes felt isolated from community. “Because of Sophia’s special needs, we have lost a lot of friends,” says Sergey. And for Oksana, sharing about life with disability often leads to blank looks and a feeling of disconnection.

But when they discovered Joni and Friends *Family Retreat*, God provided the infusion of community, respite, and joy that Sophia’s family needed so desperately. For Oksana and Sergey, watching Sophia smile and thrive lightens their



hearts. Oksana also discovered a fresh sense of belonging with other moms who navigate disability every day.

Best of all, as Oksana put it, “Jesus is the center of attention at *Family Retreat*... for me this is very dear.” And among fellow believers, Sophia’s whole family got a Holy Spirit breath of fresh air, filling them with strength for the days to come.

“Blessed are those whose strength is in you...”

PSALM 84:5

“...if you love one another.”

JOHN 13:35

When Emily arrived *Family Retreat*, she brought her signature sparkle to get the party started. In her sequined vest that mirrors her bright personality, Emily, who lives with Down syndrome, came with her electric guitar case on her back and big plans to perform at the talent show. As a *Family Retreat* veteran, Emily brought contagious joy and enthusiasm to everyone she met throughout the week—and wore her eye-catching vest everywhere!

“Emily wanted to do everything at *Family Retreat*,” says her volunteer buddy, Katie. “She loved the arts and crafts, carnival games, basketball, painting, and horseback riding. And on the zip line, in her sparkles, she looked like a bright disco ball flying through the air!”

During the year, Emily, who is 35 years old, lives in a group home and works at a grocery store. She also practices martial arts and recently received her black belt! While she enjoys her usual routine, Emily doesn’t get to see her family every day. It’s just one reason why *Family Retreat* is the highlight of the year for Emily—and for her mom, Barb.

Within our loving Joni and Friends community, Emily and Barb spend quality time together, reconnect with old friends navigating similar life circumstances, and experience joy and refreshment in Christ.

By the end of the week, Emily’s hope to celebrate God on the talent show stage became a reality as she captivated the audience with a rendition of Lauren Daigle’s song, “You Say.” Emily encouraged everyone as she sang, “When I don’t belong, You say I am Yours.” *Thank you for giving people with disabilities like Emily a place of belonging in Jesus Christ!*



Emily (left) had a blast with her volunteer buddy, Katie (right)!

Bless your loved ones & share the love of Jesus!

Your gift given **in honor** or **in memory** of a loved one brings the hope of the Gospel to people living with disabilities worldwide! View your loved one's name on our online Tribute Wall at joniandfriends.org/tribute or by using this QR code!



God is at work through *Family Retreat*... *and through you!*

From Pennsylvania ▼

Matthew's voice rang through the house, a sing-song reminder that he couldn't wait for *Family Retreat*. But his parents, Ron and Joan, weren't sure they could make the trip a reality...

Now thirteen years old, Matthew was adopted out of foster care by Ron and Joan ten years ago. When they welcomed Matthew into their family, they knew he was medically fragile and lived with a traumatic brain injury that almost took his life in infancy. As Ron and Joan nurtured Matthew through continual obstacles, they also lovingly cared for their oldest child, Kari, who was born with a rare genetic disease called RARS2.

When Kari's health declined last year, Ron and Joan didn't know if they could manage both of their children's needs away from home at *Family Retreat*. What would they do at 5:00 a.m. during quiet hours when Matthew's energy kicked in? But God met this family's specific needs by providing a volunteer buddy who offered to

play sports with Matthew in the early mornings.

With Matthew having fun, Ron and Joan enjoyed quiet moments with Kari. And throughout *Family Retreat*, Kari got to do crafts, enjoy worship, and feel loved and celebrated. "It was an amazing week of God's provision," says Ron. Joan agrees, adding, "Our children were honored and loved, and we received a much-needed boost as we saw and felt God's grace to us."

Only later would Ron and Joan know how precious the retreat week would be to their family... "Kari died a few months later," says Joan. "We are so glad we were able to do *Family Retreat* this year."

Because of you, Kari's family has precious memories from her last *Family Retreat*. Jesus uses those memories and your prayers to minister to Ron and Joan in their season of grief. Thank you for keeping their family in your prayers.



"The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."

PSALM 34:18

From Knoxville ▼

Throughout the Bible, God provides His people with safe places to rest. How fitting that Carrie, a mom to three children, including eleven-year-old Collier who lives with autism, uses "refuge" to describe her family's experience at *Family Retreat*! "*Family Retreat* became a refuge for us," Carrie says, "a place where Collier was celebrated for exactly who he is, where our family felt surrounded by people who 'got it,' and where we experienced joy, rest, and community in ways we had never known before."

The first time Carrie and her husband, Jayson, brought their children to *Family Retreat*, they felt anxious about entrusting Collier's care to others. But when they experienced the love of Jesus in action through our Joni and Friends staff and volunteers, Carrie says, "Every one of our needs and expectations was met and surpassed."

"We now look forward to *Family Retreat* each year," says Carrie, "not only because of the break and encouragement it provides, but also because of the relationships that have grown and the healing and bonding that come from worshiping God alongside families just like ours."

For Carrie, Jayson, and their children, *Family Retreat* provides a reminder that God offers refuge not only through His presence but through the lovingkindness of His people. Today, the refuge Collier's family first found at *Family Retreat* continues throughout the year at their church, which has developed a disability ministry with the help of Joni and Friends! "Now at our church," Carrie says, "families like ours are fully known, fully included, and fully embraced."

Friend, thank you for leading families struggling with disability to God, our "refuge and strength" (Psalm 46:1). Your generosity is changing lives!



"The Lord is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble."

PSALM 9:9

Easter Gifts to Grow Gospel Joy...

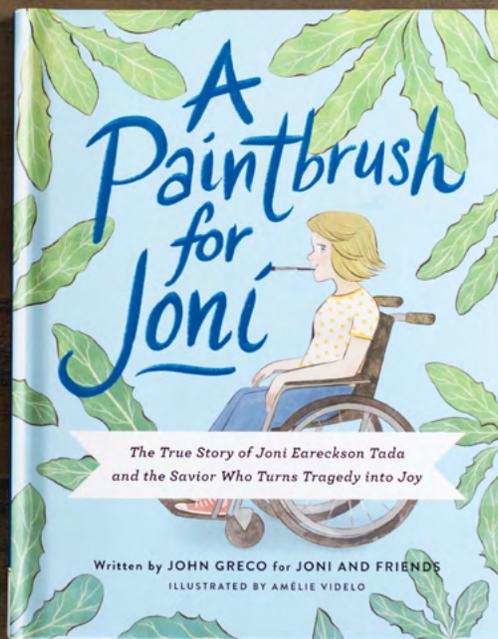
A Paintbrush for Joni

This uplifting story explores how the Lord used Joni's disability to help others and spread the Good News of the Gospel through her paintings, books, and ministry. Now Joni wants to pass her legacy on to the next generation, empowering all children with the hopeful message that God can use them to do incredible things too!

Product Details:

- Hardcover
- 48 pages

\$18.99



Scripture Cards

Keep your favorite Bible verses close at hand, and share one with a friend! These elegant cards feature artwork by Joni Eareckson Tada on one side and Scripture on the other. Printed on high-quality heavy stock, these 3" by 3.5" cards are perfect to display in your home, tuck into a card, or hand to a friend or loved one in need of encouragement.

Product Details:

- 31 Cards: Scripture on one side, artwork on the other
- 16 New Testament Scriptures, 15 Old Testament Scriptures
- Artwork originally by Joni Eareckson Tada
- Cloth gift bag imprinted with Joni's art included to hold cards

\$14.99



100% of proceeds directly advances ministry to children and families living with disability.

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