BEACON LIGHTS

Special needs

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BEACON LIGHTS

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THE ISSUE AT HAND Brendan Looyenga

Special needs

The world in which special needs children live today is much different than it was only a generation ago. I can vividly remember stories from my cousin about having a special needs child integrated into his classroom at Heritage Christian School back in the late 1980s. This was a first for Protestant Reformed Special Education and something that profoundly impacted all the students from my cousin's class. What was a novel idea then—that children with special needs should receive their education in a Christian schoolroom—is now an everyday occurrence at Heritage Christian and other schools in the PRCS federation.

So often we talk about the importance of diversity in the body of Christ without realizing how far the analogy from 1 Corinthians 12 really extends. Verses 22–23 explain that "those members of the body, *which seem to be more feeble*, are necessary: and those members of the body, *which we think to be less honourable*, upon these we bestow more abundant honour" (emphasis added). The little word "seem" and the short phrase "which we think" are critical reminders that our perception of significance is not what God counts most important. No matter how gifted a person might be and how useful they might seem to the church, the truth is that God doesn't need these gifts, or any one person, for his purposes to succeed. Instead, he uses "the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty" (1 Cor. 1:27).

The place that special needs members have in our community is a good example of God using what *appears* weak to the human eye as a source of actual strength. I am reminded of this time and again when I witness the simple, yet rock-solid faith displayed by individuals with special needs. Theirs is not a faith that requires deep theological explanations or mountains of evidence to be sure. Rather, it is a faith that believes in Jesus Christ as savior and the love of God for them personally. Faith that is simple, profound, and strong. That is the gift by which God confounds the things which are mighty in this world.

As we celebrate and thank God for our special needs brothers and sisters through this issue of *Beacon Lights*, let us grow in appreciation for the unique place they have in the church of Jesus Christ. That place is, among other things, to remind all of us what it means to be "stedfast, unmoveable" in our faith (1 Cor. 15:58). Be encouraged by the examples spoken of in these pages and use them as motivation as you seek to abound in the work of the Lord.

A caregiver's perspective

Tom Cammenga

My wife Cherie and I have been married for almost 34 years and God has blessed us with five sons, two daughters-in-law, and three grandchildren. In a certain sense you could say that we are living what has been our dream ever since our dating days, although how we got here—and I am sure what lies ahead as well—was far from what we had planned. "No plan survives first contact," is a military phrase that I think aptly applies to the plans that we so carefully construct for our lives. Very rarely does anything go as we have laid it out in our minds. Thankfully, God's ways are so much higher than our ways, and his plan, much unlike our own, is perfect.

In his good providence, the Lord gave to us a special needs child for our first son. It was at Travis's one-year doctor's appointment that we first had any indication that everything was not as we perceived. The result of that appointment was a referral to a pediatric neurologist to further determine what, if any, delays there were and to address and diagnose them. About a year and a half later, the neurologist gave a final diagnosis of Angelman Syndrome, which is a genetic disorder having to do with a deletion in the fifteenth chromosome. There began a journey that has taken Travis and our family over mountaintops and into some of the deepest valleys we

Tom works as a supervisor at Royal Technologies. He and his wife Cherie attend Faith Protestant Reformed Church

could imagine. And yet, strange as it may seem to others, this is also our normal. We do not know life as a family any other way than to have a special needs child and sibling.

Certainly all of God's people have trials, burdens, and hardships in their lives. The word of God is quite clear that the way of the righteous is difficult. All of these, we believe by faith, are meant to direct us to God and to form and fashion us for our place in heaven. Trials come in various forms and in various ways in each of our lives, and for our family it is our privilege that the care of a special needs child and sibling is one of those burdens. To call this a burden may seem a bit harsh, and certainly there are a great many joys too, but the reality is that the care of a special needs child can be a very heavy load at times. It must be understood, though—and often this is a lesson we must learn over and over again—that in every burden or trial the Lord lays upon his people, there is also blessing. For the child of God, the two are completely intertwined, though we are often not able to see it at the time. You see, there must be blessings because the burdens and trials come to us, not by chance, but from our loving Father for our good and for his glory.

Always.

This we have humbly learned and experienced in the many challenges we have faced in caring for Travis and walking the road that God has laid out for us.

The primary task we face as caregivers is the attention to our son's needs that is necessary from day to day. Travis is dependent on us to bathe him, dress him, prepare food for him, take care of all his toiletry needs, and many other things. In addition, Travis has no understanding of what danger is, and if he were not always supervised, could easily injure himself. Although he is able to walk on his own, as he ages this becomes more and more difficult and unsteady, and so he depends on us to assist him with that as well. Imagine a thirty-three-year-old man with the mind and physical ability of a two-and-a-half-year-old, and that is Travis.

Then there is the often-frustrating fact that Travis is not able to speak and therefore not always able to communicate to us what his needs are or what he is thinking. It is true that through the sign language we have developed, he can communicate on a very basic level. But, for example, although he can tell us he feels sick by tapping on his head, he is not able to tell us how he is feeling or what hurts. We must always look at the big picture and what is going on in a broad sense to determine more clearly what the specific need may be. In all our care for him, this probably requires the most patience.

As is the case with most special needs children and adults,

consistency of routine is very important. For Travis, if even only one thing in the daily routine changes, it appears to put his mind into somewhat of a tailspin. This can result in his repeatedly signing to ask what time it is or what is happening, or even lead to a veritable panic attack. This can present many challenges as life is full of changes, but as much as possible, we strive to maintain a fairly normal routine for his sake and for ours.

Probably the greatest burden that we face with respect to Travis—and this is likely the case with all who care for those with special needs—is what his care will look like in the future. The reality is that based on what we have witnessed in the lives of others with special needs children there must eventually be a transfer of care and that transfer must occur sooner rather than later. Our deep, heartfelt desire is to be able to care for Travis for as long as the Lord gives us the physical strength to do so. In fact, in a way as his parents, we see that as our responsibility. However, given the drastic effects that even small changes can have on those with special needs, we are convinced that the best thing for him is to begin this process of transitioning while we are still yet capable of caring for him ourselves. I can tell you, the very thought of that is heartrending to us. In a certain sense, it would be easier for us if the Lord were to take him home than to transition his care out of our home to someone else. Early on along this journey, soon after Travis had been diagnosed with Angelman Syndrome, the questions of the future came one after the other, and we would often comment that these were bridges that we would cross later. And so it is with this. Oh, that God gives us the grace we need when we come upon it!

In all of this, though difficult and trying at times, we see and experience blessing, even great blessing. Blessing that far outweighs the burden or trial of it. Certainly God blesses us in what we perceive to be the positive aspects of our care of Travis, such as his ever-ready smile, his constantly happy demeanor, his relative health and strength, and the contentment that he shows that is beyond our comprehension. But God also greatly blesses us in and through the hardships, some of which I have pointed out. We would not be who we are today without Travis, and we are convinced that our faith would not be as strong, though weak it can be at times. God has used him in so many amazing ways to shape and form us that I could fill many pages were I to attempt to illustrate them all.

In Travis' dependence upon us, we see very clearly our total dependence upon God. Just as Travis cannot care for himself, neither can we. God not only supplies us with all that we have and need, but he also cares for

us in love. So easily we take this for granted and so thankful we are for the constant reminder that God has graciously given us.

In Travis, with his childlike trust and faith in us and his contentment no matter his circumstances, we have a beautiful example of what our relationship should be with our heavenly Father. Looking to him for the supply of our needs and for our care, we may and must do so confidently, knowing that he is faithful, and being content, even joyfully content, in whatever way he leads us. And in that leading, we understand that God is, by his grace, giving us to see that in the end all that matters is him. All that we need is him. He is the God that never changes, amid our ever-changing lives. He is our constant and abiding help and hope. He has been our faithful God in the past, he remains faithful now, and we are confident that he will continue to be faithful, even unto the end. To him will be all the glory when, someday in heaven, Travis will run and leap and talk and sing perfectly with all the saints. Oh, what a day that will be!

Daniel: A personal perspective

Teresa and Daniel Kuiper

All of God's children are unique in some way. Some are unique enough to qualify for a special needs diagnosis, such as autism spectrum disorder. Our son Daniel was diagnosed with autism at age four, and I was asked to write about his life.

When Daniel was young, we knew he was unique but didn't think much of it until some friends

Daniel works as a dishwasher at Rainbow Grill in Grandville. Teresa, his mother, is a homemaker. The Kuiper family attends Trinity Protestant Reformed Church in Hudsonville, MI

 Photo courtesy of the Kuiper family

and family members suggested testing. His testing showed a very uneven development, with significant strengths and significant weaknesses. It was noted that he interacted well with adults but not with children. There were also atypical speech and play patterns, as well as a sensory integration disorder, that pointed to autism.

There was a time of grief for me as a mother when Daniel was first diagnosed, wondering what his life would be like. I felt guilty for a time because we didn't see the need for autism testing sooner, as early intervention is said to be so important. It helped me to remember God's sovereignty over the timing of his diagnosis. Though Daniel had lots of exercises and therapies and special vitamins, we weren't going to change the fact that Daniel had autism.

Shortly after Daniel's diagnosis, he started attending an early childhood program which provided occupational and speech therapy. He had to work hard to learn things that come naturally to most people, such as pressing hard enough with a pencil or crayon to make marks on a page. In speech therapy, he received social skills training, learning how to interact with his peers.

Thankfully, Daniel was able to attend regular school classes throughout his school years. He needed a full-time teacher's aide the first few years to help him stay on task and keep him calm. It discouraged him that he received more reprimands than his classmates, though we repeatedly assured him that he was doing the best he could with his autism. He was put on a gluten- and dairy-free diet to help him concentrate better.

During his junior high years, Daniel developed obsessive compulsive disorder and perfectionism, which made life difficult in a variety of ways. For example, he had a hard time completing his schoolwork because he felt the need to keep rewriting his answers to achieve perfect penmanship. It was at that point that we needed to start using medication, which we received not as a sinful crutch, but as a gift from God to help his brain function better.

Daniel's high school years went fairly well. The speech therapy, consisting of social skills training, lasted throughout high school. Daniel had volunteer positions around town shelving books in the library, helping the school janitor, and helping in the nursing home dining room. After high school he attended a one-year program at a community college, which taught life skills to special needs adults. He learned to use community transportation, shop, and arrange outings, and especially how to find and keep a job. The program included two job internships, and Daniel's were at a grocery store and a nursing home.

Today, Daniel works as a part-time dishwasher at a local restaurant. His community college taught him a good work ethic, and this training, combined with his autism, makes him an extremely conscientious employee. It can be hard to convince him to take a day off, and he is careful to explain to his managers the reason why he needs vacation time.

One of the reasons Daniel would take off work would be to participate in a special needs awareness day at the Protestant Reformed grade schools in west Michigan. After the teacher's presentation of the subject of autism, the school kids love to ask Daniel questions and are amazed at his knowledge. Daniel has spent a lot of time reading encyclopedias, and he has loved road atlases from early childhood. In addition, he has the Psalter pretty much memorized.

When Daniel has free time, he usually heads for his computer. There are roads to travel with Google Street View and sports to watch. Daniel is a fan of college football and high school basketball, attending as many Covenant Christian High School basketball games as he can. His other activities include Bible studies, special needs outings, and a special needs bowling league. Daniel also enjoys listening to sacred and classical music. Routines are very important to him, so he doesn't forget to exercise or do his devotions.

Autistic people often have black-and-white thinking patterns, and Daniel has a hard time deciding what to think about certain gray-area subjects such as COVID-19 immunizations, for example. Communication is sometimes difficult because he is so concerned about using the perfect words that he keeps restarting sentences. He makes strict rules about what temperature requires the wearing of a hat and gloves, and he has a very complicated system by which he makes other unimportant decisions such as what drink to order at a restaurant.

We are thankful that although Daniel had some rough times earlier in life, his limitations aren't causing significant distress in the present. I asked Daniel as I was writing this article whether he ever wishes he didn't have autism, to which he responded, "No."

Social skills are usually difficult for a person with autism. Daniel needed actual training to help him learn things that come naturally to most people, such as reading facial expressions and body language, making inferences, and taking turns during a conversation. An autistic adult once described her life as being similar to living in a foreign culture, not understanding what would be offensive to others and always having to be learning how to act in different social situations. Thankfully, most people are very understanding when there is a

special needs diagnosis. I believe we do well to keep in mind that social skills, like all other skills, vary from person to person, even when someone isn't impaired enough to qualify for an actual diagnosis. Understanding this can help us be more patient with people who seem to have little common sense regarding social interactions.

Considering the lives of special needs people can remind us just how much we often take for granted. Many things that young people look forward to and find enjoyable, such as driving and marriage, aren't options for special needs people. Even finding a suitable job can be difficult for them. I think that the borderline special needs people grieve their disabilities and losses the most. Let us not forget to pray for them, as well as all special needs people and their caregivers.

It's the heart that counts

Kierra Houck

You've probably heard the saying, "don't judge a book by its cover." Due to our human nature, we tend to look at outward appearance instead of focusing on what is on the inside, which is what really matters. Just like a book's cover, people may look different and have things that they deal with that are outside of what we consider "normal." Even when people are different, we must look at them as being part of the body of Christ. We must not stare at or avoid them because they are different from us. We should include them because they, too,

Kierra is a senior at Covenant Christian High School in Walker, MI. She attends Byron Center Protestant Reformed Church with her family

Photo of the Special Needs Bible Study courtesy of Amy Kaptein

have feelings. A disability is not what defines a person; rather, it is their heart that really counts.

The body of Christ is made up of many different members: big and small, sick and healthy, weak and strong. They are all necessary, no matter how different they may be. God uses all our differences to benefit the body of Christ. The diversity of the body is so important that without one person, the body would not be complete. This truth is found in Romans 12:4–5, "For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another."

We can learn things from special needs members in the church. These members of our community have a particular place in my heart. This is especially because of my experiences with my sister, Annie. Annie was born three months early and suffered a severe brain bleed, leading to her many health struggles. She helped me to realize the importance of what is in the heart, not outward appearances. Growing up with Annie shaped me to be who I am today.

Annie had such a love for Jesus Christ, which was evident in the way that she went through her life on this earth. Situations like hers would normally weigh a person down, but it didn't for Annie. This is because of the hope that she had for heaven, as we read in Revelation 21:4, "And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away." Her faith was strong in every trial. Each time she went into surgery, she would always say that she knew that Jesus was with her and would protect her. She knew that whatever happened was God's will (Rom. 8:28). She let her light shine even though she had many disabilities. Annie did everything for the glory of God. Just because she *seemed* different outwardly, I would say that her love for Jesus in her heart was stronger than mine could ever be.

Annie's limitations in understanding Scripture did not make her less of a Christian. The Bible speaks of needing childlike faith (Mark 9:36–37). Annie had this! She may not have understood the ins and outs of every doctrine and Scriptural truth, but she knew and believed with all her heart that she loved Jesus, that Jesus loved her, and that she would go to see Jesus and live with him forever. This confidence helped her push through the difficulties that others would crumble under. People with disabilities can most certainly know Jesus Christ is their savior, and we must not doubt the work of the Spirit in their hearts.

Because of her faith, Annie was ready to go home to heaven to live

with Jesus and the saints of all ages. In November of 2014 her wish was finally granted. Her body was too weak and couldn't go on. Her organs began to fail one by one, and it was time to say goodbye to the one I couldn't imagine my life without. It's hard going on without her, but the time I spent with Annie, and what God taught me through her, is very important to me.

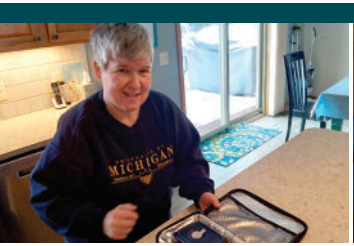
God had all of this planned out in his eternal counsel. He determined that Annie would be born prematurely and have the struggles that she experienced. She was fearfully and wonderfully made, one of God's masterpieces (Ps. 139:14). God created special needs members for the good of the church. In John 1:3 we read, "All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made." He providentially decided that he would take Annie home to heaven at the age of 21, on November 18, 2014.

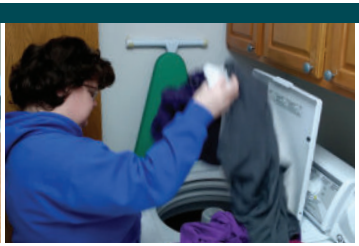
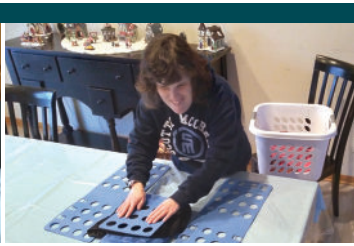
God knew that the family to whom he gave Annie would be the perfect fit for her, and that she would be the perfect fit for us! In 2 Samuel 9, there is a story that shows the importance of special needs members in the body of Christ. The story's background is David's asking whether any members of Saul's family remained, and then finding that Jonathan had a son named Mephibosheth who was still alive. After the battle in which Saul and Jonathan were killed, the boy's nurse fled with him. She ended up dropping and ultimately crippling him. David, despite this boy's disabilities, brought Mephibosheth to his table. Verse 13 reads, "So Mephibosheth dwelt in Jerusalem: for he did eat continually at the king's table; and was lame on both his feet." David went out of his way to show a man with disabilities his importance in the kingdom. No matter our troubles, Christ makes us to dwell with him in his house.

Being Annie's sister was such a blessing. People often look at special needs children as a burden. They would stare at us in stores and question how we were able to get through the challenge of her special needs. But the difficulties a special needs family member brings don't take away from the blessing they are to caregivers (Ps. 127:3). Annie taught me the importance of going day by day and finding the good in every situation. She taught me the importance of not being bitter in my own struggles and to find joy in every moment.

This is my sister Annie's legacy: she reminds people that there are so many things that we can learn from every member of the body of Christ. I encourage you to take the opportunity to spend time with special needs members of your community. They may teach you a lesson that will change your life for the better, just like Annie did for me.

Remember, all of God's children are special. Being different isn't a bad thing. Don't stare at or avoid special needs children because they are different from you. Include them because they, too, have feelings. A disability is not what defines a person, rather it is their heart that really counts. Remember, "Never judge a book by its cover." Take the time to read those *books*. You will be glad you did!



Life inside the home

Cara Kuiper

It's 5:15 in the morning and the wake-up alarms are going off in the bedrooms. Some residents may hit snooze a time or two. Others may get right up and start the day. You may be aware of the routine your family has in the morning, but what about adult foster care homes or other care facilities where there are a variety of residents with differing abilities? What, you may ask, happens inside places like Georgetown Harmony Homes on a given day or week?

The alarm has gone off. Whether the residents get up right away is a different story. It depends on how late they stayed up the night before. Once they are awake, they will get dressed, have breakfast, ask the staff for their morning meds, grab their lunches and gear, and be in a flurry of activities before their rides come to get them. The home manager will be getting up as well. In the apartment they will get themselves ready for the day. They will go to the home side and open the office or other closets that have been locked the night before for the residents' protection. They will check out notes from the night

Cara works as a resident living assistant with Georgetown Harmony Homes. She attends Hope Protestant Reformed Church in Walker, MI

 Photos courtesy of Cara Kuiper

before or get breakfast together so that the morning can be a productive one for all the residents.

The residents' rides will be coming to take them to work or day programs, so getting up on time is the better choice. Residents enjoy going out and about in the community. They may be seen delivering a meal to your vehicle at Culver's, wiping the tables for you at McDonald's, bagging groceries, or bringing the shopping carts into the store. You may not always see them; sometimes they are behind the scenes cleaning dishes at Panera or detailing vehicles at Action Water Sports.

If not at work, what sort of programs do residents attend? Some of the local programs in west Michigan include Indian Trails Camp (IKUS), MOKA, Preferred Employment and Living Supports (PELS), or Bethesda Farm. These programs have vehicles that come to pick up the residents on any given day and bring them to the program's campus. Whether they do things on campus or go out and about volunteering, residents have a purpose for getting up and going someplace for the day. The programs help them in various ways by discussing things like time management, paying for purchases, making healthy food choices, proper hygiene, or home living skills, among other things. This means that residents will be with other clients and service providers for most of the day, which is a big deal. Oh, how my ladies do *not* like snow days!

The day will go by quickly and in the afternoon, residents return to our group home. They are usually excited to come back home and unwind, but before then there is a flurry of activities that need to happen. Part of this is putting things away in the bedrooms and doing chores. Some of the residents will make lunches for the next day. There will be others who exercise or do laundry. And all the residents are expected to clean their rooms and bathrooms.

During this time the home manager is replaced by an afternoon/evening resident living assistant. This staff member helps monitor the residents through the evening routine. The resident living assistant may have some last minute food preparations for the dinner meal and will also help to make appropriate snack decisions later at night. Evening activities that the group does together may include bowling, Bible study, or a visit to the library after supper. The resident living assistant helps the residents get to these places with the home van and ensures that they are making appropriate choices and behaving well while out and about in the community.

You may also wonder about the layout of our home. Georgetown Harmony Homes are built into the

community like all the other homes in the area. Our organization currently has two women's homes and two men's homes. The homes are built to be handicap accessible so as to offer the best opportunities to those who live there. All residents have their own bedrooms with an attached half bath. There is a shower area, washer, and dryer in the main living area along with a kitchen and living room. The homes also have an office where you will find the many books that pertain to licensing, residents' files, and a locked medicine chest. (Staff members are responsible for following specific protocols and administering meds correctly to the residents.) The basement has another tub/shower combo, a second living room area, and a set of closets for all the residents. Some of the homes have craft rooms or exercise areas in the basement as well as storage areas. There is an emergency exit door off the basement, which gets used during fire drills so that if there is an emergency the residents know how to exit the home through that door.

Each of the Georgetown Harmony Homes has an attached apartment where the home manager lives. The homes also have a room and bathroom for the resident living assistant, which allows them to be comfortable during their regular shift or if they work an overnight shift. Home managers coordinate all the various services that residents need to access. This means working with state licensing agencies, community mental health services, the Commission for the Blind, pharmacies, various transportation services, and, most importantly, the residents' families.

It's good for all of us to be aware of the special needs adults in our community. Younger readers may have recently seen some of the Georgetown Harmony Homes residents attending Fearfully and Wonderfully Made Day in our Grand Rapids area schools. Your church may have various collections throughout the year for Georgetown Harmony Homes or other care facilities. The residents of homes like this are put here on the earth to serve God and to work out his purpose in their lives. Whether we only bump into them occasionally in the community, go to visit them regularly, or work with them on a weekly basis, we need to pray for those that are living and caring for those in an adult foster care homes or other care facilities.

I have found it to be a blessing to be involved in this ministry! We are always looking for more resident life assistants or volunteers, and I'm sure that you have seen the ads. They have been posted online as well as sent out to school secretaries for the weekly announcements. We encourage those of you who are eighteen years of age or older to prayerfully

consider working for Harmony Homes. You could be on schedule one night a week or one weekend a month. These residents have taught me so much in my eleven years of working here. They bring great joy to those around them. We can learn so much from them!

The joys of special education

Carli Engelsma

"You look like an alpaca," the boy said to me.

I had no idea what I was getting into, and I'm glad I didn't. My first day I introduced myself to a student and he said, "I'm gonna kick this ball in your face." To which I responded, while unsuccessfully stifling laughter, "No you're not." We stared at each other for a moment, and then continued on with the worksheet. That was the exact moment I knew I was going to love this job.

I had always wanted to go to school to be a teacher, but when the time came to make that decision at the end of high school, God led me down a different path. Four or five more years of school seemed like an eternity at that time. Only five years later, I wish I had realized that length of time is more of a flash than an eternity. But I digress. My dad is a teacher and I always attribute my desire to be a teacher to that fact.

Special education had never crossed my mind, but in the spring of 2018, I noticed in my church bulletin that there was an opening for a special education teacher at Heritage Christian School in Hudsonville, Michigan. After applying and being interviewed, I started working as a paraprofessional

Carli leads the Special Education program at Heritage Christian School in Hudsonville, MI. She and her husband are members at Trinity Protestant Reformed Church

Photos courtesy of Carli Engelsma

(*parapro*) for Protestant Reformed Special Education (PRSE) at Heritage in September 2018. This past year there were no applicants for our teacher position, so with the help of many amazing parapros, a dedicated PRSE Board, the support of our local public school, and the guidance of a former PRSE teacher, I've been able to tackle the many responsibilities that come with this position.

When I was asked to write an article about the joys of being a special education teacher, my mind immediately went to the thought, "I didn't go to college. I shouldn't be writing articles about special education and why it's such a great career within teaching." But, as I sat down and started going through the reasons why I love doing what I do, I immediately realized that degree or not, I can most definitely share the joys of working in this position. But enough about me. Let me tell you why I love this job so much!

Working as a part of the special education program has brought me joy in many ways. To put it simply, there is joy in the differences I see and experience.

One of the sources of joy from working in special education is the variety of Christian adults I get to work with. Unlike a regular classroom with one adult and twenty students, our classroom has eleven adults and fourteen students that are in and out each day. That's quite a different ratio because of the wide range of abilities our students possess. Each parapro in our classroom demonstrates their unique ability to work with our students. I learn from them daily how to be patient, how to stay calm, how to make the best out of a difficult situation, and how to see the bright side of a tough situation. I reap joy from the moments when I realize someone is handling a situation differently than I would—and from seeing it work!

At first, the difference in how special education instructors teach may seem frustrating. It's tempting to say, "I would never do it that way!" But there are so many ways to accomplish our goals. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 12:4–6 always come to mind when working alongside brothers and sisters in Christ: "Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all." Experience with special education has taught me that it's good that we all have different strengths and weaknesses. There is joy in our differences!

Another great joy that comes from working in special education is the students I get to serve. It's hard to explain the joy they bring! I've written and rewritten this part several times because no words can truly capture the experience of working with the students in our program. Their smiles. Their

jokes. Their unique viewpoint on life. Their childlike faith. All these things bring me true joy every day.

Recently, I was reminded that we all have strengths and weaknesses. This may seem like something obvious, which I shouldn't forget as a teacher, but this past summer I attended a parapro training conference where inclusion was explained in a way I hadn't thought about before. Imagine a puzzle. The pieces only fit together *because* they are all *different*. Each student in the classroom is like a different puzzle piece. Where weaknesses present themselves, they give opportunities for others to show their strengths. We all fit together beautifully, but we wouldn't if we were all strengths or all weaknesses! In 1 Corinthians 12:18 Paul says, "But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him." A puzzle that's all squares? A puzzle that's all triangles? Or all circles? It wouldn't work! A body that is all eyes, ears, or hands? We know that wouldn't work. The same goes for churches, schools, and classrooms. Every student is unique. We need to recognize this, appreciate it, and put into practice our beliefs by showing love to those who are different from us. There is joy to be found in our differences.

Finally, the biggest joy that comes from working in special education is seeing how each and every student is fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of God. Psalm 139:14 says, "I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvellous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well." There are days when this job is hard. The last bell rings and I feel as though I've done everything, and yet somehow nothing. Writing this article has been a wonderful reminder to see the joy in the work God has given me. There is joy in loving our brothers and sisters in Christ just the way God made them to be. There is joy in seeing students and teachers treating each other in a way that shows they truly believe God made everyone fearfully and wonderfully. There is joy in our differences!

Honoring the Lord's name

I have a hard time speaking up when I hear people taking the Lord's name in vain, especially when it's my friends and family using slang phrases like "Oh my goodness" or "Oh my word." Do you have any simple responses to help me stand up for God's name, while doing this in love and trying not to be offensive?

Onderwijzer sympathizes with you and feels the same struggle. The second commandment warns, "The LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain" (Ex. 20:7). If God will not hold him guiltless, he will surely punish the blasphemer. Perhaps your friends and family do not realize that slang phrases are really substitutes for God's name. They might use phrases such as "My goodness" out of ignorance. You should politely explain it to them.

The Pharisees misused God's name, although not out of ignorance. They avoided using God's name altogether. They swore by the temple or the altar. They swore by heaven or by earth. Yet Jesus condemned them (see Matt. 5:33–37; 23:16–22). When we swear by "our mother's eyes" or "our mother's grave," as some do, we dishonor God. Our mother is not God. The Catechism instructs us here: "His wrath is kindled against those who do not endeavor, as much as in them lies, to prevent and forbid such cursing and swearing."[1] And also: "May we also swear by…any other creatures? No.…[Such] honor is due to no creature."[2]

Remember also your position as a young person. You have little to no authority over others. It is the responsibility of authority figures to see to it that God's name is not dishonored. How difficult it is when your boss at work and even the president himself routinely take God's name in vain! If your family does it or your friends do it, you have every right to say, "What you said is offensive to God and to me." You do it meekly, respectfully, and submissively. One very effective way when the name of God or of Jesus is used wrongly is simply to exclaim, "His name be praised!" That might open up an opportunity to speak of our glorious God and Savior simply because this approach would be received more favorably than a rebuke.

1 Heidelberg Catechism Q 100, in *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 127.

2 Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 102, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 128.

The appearance of evil

Scott VanUffelen

Prove all things; hold fast that which is good. Abstain from all appearance of evil. And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.
1 Thessalonians 5:21–23

Live in a manner worthy of God and of God's name! What a high and lofty calling this is. As fellow believers we are to continually remind ourselves of our calling to be lights in this world, for by our fruits we are known (as witnesses) to those around us. In one of my classes at Covenant Christian High School, we had a discussion centered around this concept as part of our news article of the day conversation. This month I want to highlight a few of the key ideas and points that were brought up by students for your own contemplation.

Epoch Times reported that General Motors (parent company of Buick, Cadillac, GMC, and Chevrolet) provided a grant to the Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network's (GLSEN) Rainbow Program.[1] This program lobbies school districts to allow boys who have undergone sex changes to play on girls' teams and to use female-specific bathrooms. More broadly, the program provides support and guidance for educators "to create inclusive, supportive, and identity-safe environments" for all classrooms.

Corporations are in the business of making money on behalf of their owners or shareholders. We are all aware that companies like General

1 Bryan Jung, "General Motors Funds Transgenderism Efforts in Children's Classrooms," *Epoch Times*, January 1, 2023, https://www.theepochtimes.com/mkt_app/general-motors-funds-transgenderism-efforts-in-childrens-classrooms_4953407.html

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Motors (GM) donate money to charities and organizations as part of their broader fiscal plan to avoid paying some federal income taxes. But the report from the *Epoch Times* indicates that $86 million was awarded by GM in 2021 specifically to nonprofits working to provide gender-inclusive solutions around the world. How much of this amount went to GLSEN we do not know; however, we do know that Chevrolet, a daughter company, donated an additional $25,000 to GLSEN. Whatever amount General Motors gave, Chevrolet felt they needed to give them more. "With this latest LGBTQ+ focused partnership, we are building on that history and reinforcing Chevy's commitment to driving substantive cultural progress."[2]

Those of you who love the bow tie brand probably dismiss this news with the argument, "I am sure that other companies do the same thing!" Those who bleed Mopar (a Chrysler brand) or speak Super Duty (Ford trucks) simply mutter, "It figures." I suppose both are correct. But how does that relate to our discussion?

Here are a few ideas and concepts to consider. Some real thought needs to go into which companies we actively support with the money God has given us when other choices are available. This might not always apply when we simply don't know what companies are up to, but we are required to be *active* discerners. "It doesn't matter!" is not a biblically grounded approach. If we know that there are specific policies that are morally questionable and yet remain defensive of a company and its brands, we will be asked to give an account of our support. If our reasons do not line up with Scripture, we must be willing to change our allegiance and our actions.

The text that opens this article is helpful for our walk with the Lord. We are called to prove (or test) all things to avoid not only the *form* or *actions* of evil, but the *appearance* of evil as well. Practically speaking this means we should be careful to avoid investing in or working with a company that makes money from practices that are expressly against God's word. But it also means that we should not invest in or financially support a company that uses legitimately earned resources, given by God, in ways that are not God-glorifying. Examples given for both included not going to the casinos to gamble, but also not working for the casinos or providing services that legitimize them as proper institutions within our communities. Other examples provided by students were not giving money to institutions that fund abortion clinics or supporting the corner gas station that is known for providing alcohol to minors.

2 Jung, "General Motors Funds Transgenderism"

This discussion may lead us to ask, "Is there any good or trustworthy company out there?" We know that there is no company that is perfect in every way and in all situations. But at the same time there are companies with well-known policies and deeds that even the world recognizes as being corrupt. Thus, as Christians, our witness is clouded when we are associated with such companies. The truth of God's word, which is represented by our lives and actions, is muted when we justify our financial association with such companies under the guise of Christian liberty. Confusion and ridicule will be the result when we try to argue that Christ died on the cross so that we can pursue whatever means of income or use any product that we want. This is what is meant by "living after the flesh" (Rom. 8:1–14).

Let's put this in perspective another way. Imagine if a young person claimed that he or she can drink alcohol at 16 years old based on Christian liberty. What if I claimed the right to subscribe to cable channels filled with pornographic and incestuous shows or to work for the local casino because I am free in Christ? Can a young man take a job as a bodyguard for a known drug lord simply because he is using his talents, abilities, and opportunities given him by God? If these statements sound ridiculous to you, imagine how they would sound to someone who does not know Christ in their lives. Would you want their introduction to Jesus to be through these actions? When you then open your mouth to witness, would they even listen? Would they even believe you?

For the cause of Christ and for the glory of his name, let us live in a manner worthy of our calling! Abstain from evil, flee from the appearance of evil, and God will sanctify you wholly. May we continue to walk with the Lord in the light of his word as proper witnesses of that light.

Set apart at Sinai

Abby Van Solkema

Last month we saw God's sovereignty at work as he formed Israel into a great nation in Egypt and sent Moses to deliver them from their bondage. He redeemed them by the blood of the passover lamb and brought them through the Red Sea safely. Now, after three months of journeying through the wilderness, the people arrive at Mount Sinai, where the events of the rest of Exodus will take place. In chapters 19 through 40 we will read about the Lord establishing his covenant with the nation of Israel and taking them to be his people. During this time at Sinai, he set Israel apart from the other nations, gave them specific laws to obey, and guided them to build the tabernacle so that he could dwell with them and they could worship him. By studying the events found in these chapters of Exodus, we will gain a better understanding of who God is and who we are to be as his people.

God's people are special to him. In Exodus 19:5 he refers to the children of Israel as his "peculiar treasure," indicating that they are cherished and beloved. In 1 Peter 2:9 the apostle uses similar language when he refers to Christians as "a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people." God's love for his chosen people is evident in the way that he saved Israel out of slavery in Egypt and took care of them on their journey to Sinai. The Lord uses the image of carrying his children "on eagles' wings" (Ex. 19:4) to show how he lovingly and powerfully protects them from harm.

In his treatment of Israel, we see a beautiful picture of the infinite compassion that the Lord has for each one of his dear children. In his love he has sent his Son to save you from slavery to sin and to bring you into relationship with him. In his love he continues to dwell with

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you by his Spirit and tenderly care for you as his own child. Yet none of us have done anything to deserve even the very least of this special treatment. It is all because of God's mercy and grace.

Our heavenly Father is not only merciful and gracious, he is also holy. This holiness sets him apart from us and all creation. "To whom then will ye liken me, or shall I be equal? saith the Holy One" (Isa. 40:25). This separation was visibly evident at Sinai in the way that God dwelled at the top of the mountain. None of the Israelites could even touch the mountain without fearing death (Ex. 19:12). God's holiness also means that he is perfect in all that he is and everything that he does. Not only is God incapable of sin, but he is the standard of what is righteous.

When God set his people apart at Sinai, he gave them laws to teach them how to live a holy life. God's people are called to be holy because our God is holy (Lev. 20:7; 1 Pet. 1:15–16). The ten commandments were meant to distinguish the chosen nation of God from the nations around them. They also show us how to live today as citizens of heaven in a wicked world. We have been freed from slavery to sin in order to live a new, holy life in Christ. Is your life visibly different from the world around you? Can others tell that you are God's precious treasure?

To fully experience the blessings of being God's precious treasure, Israel needed to obey God's commands (Ex. 19:5). The right response of the nation of Israel to these words was, "All that the LORD hath spoken we will do" (Ex. 19:8). Yet we will see in our reading of Exodus this month that they could not keep their word and obey God's commands. Israel quickly turned back to idol worship and broke God's covenant before they had even left Sinai. If not for the intercession of Moses, God would have destroyed them in his wrath. We are no better than the children of Israel. All of God's people are unable to keep his commandments on our own because of our weak, sinful nature. But in his goodness, he has given us an even better mediator than Moses—Jesus Christ.

Christ is the perfect fulfillment of all the typology that we see in Exodus, including the animal sacrifices, the high priest, and the tabernacle with all its components. In Christ's blood we are cleansed from all our sins. Because of his continual intercession, we can approach God in prayer and worship at any time. In the New Testament the Spirit of God no longer dwells in the tabernacle or temple, but in the hearts of each one of his children. "What? Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are

bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's" (1 Cor. 6:19–20). Someday God's chosen people will be set apart forever in heaven, where we will no longer be burdened by our sin and this wicked world, but free to perfectly serve our heavenly Father and live in his glorious presence (Rev. 21:3).

Date	Read	Meditate	Psalter
Mar 8	Ex. 19:1–25	How did the Lord use the physical landscape of Sinai and elements of nature to display his majesty and holiness to the people?	20
Mar 9	Ex. 20:1–17	How do the rules that God gives here enable not only the nation of Israel, but also believers today to live in relationship with the Lord and each other?	78
Mar 10	Ex. 20:18–26	How was Moses a picture of Christ in the way that he served as a mediator between the people of Israel and God?	10
Mar 11	Ex. 21:1–36	Where do you see the ten commandments of Exodus 20 at the heart of the more specific laws given to Israel here?	250
Mar 12	Ex. 22:1–23:19	What aspects of God's character are displayed by these judicial laws that he gives to the nation of Israel?	260
Mar 13	Exod. 23:20–33	How will the covenant promise that God gives Israel in these verses be fulfilled even more fully in heaven?	211
Mar 14	Ex. 24:1–18	Why was it necessary for sacrifices to be made before the priests and elders could fellowship in God's presence? What spiritual reality does this picture?	9
Mar 15	Ex. 25:1–9	What is the meaning of the word sanctuary (v. 8)? Why did the children of Israel need to make one?	251
Mar 16	Ex. 25:10–22	What characteristics of the design and location of the ark picture the holiness and mercy of God?	265
Mar 17	Ex. 25:23–30, Lev. 24:5–9	What did the shewbread or bread of the presence represent?	408

Mar 18	Ex. 25:31–40, Lev. 24:1–4, Num. 6:24–26	How is the Lord a continual light to his people as signified by the golden candlestick in the holy place?	94
Mar 19	Ex. 26:1–37	What do the colors and precious metals used in the design of the tabernacle represent about the Lord?	208
Mar 20	Ex. 27:1–21	How did the separations within the tabernacle and position of the altar serve as a reminder of what is necessary for sinners to be in God's presence?	266
Mar 21	Ex. 28:1–43, Heb. 7:23–28	How is Christ, our High Priest, a better fulfillment of the Old Testament priesthood?	303
Mar 22	Ex. 29:1–37, 1 Pet. 2:4–6	Since there is no longer a designated priesthood in the New Testament, how do all believers today offer spiritual sacrifices to God?	339
Mar 23	Ex. 29:38–46	Although the priests had an important role in the Old Testament, how do the closing verses of this chapter make clear that their work was merely symbolic of God's?	397
Mar 24	Ex. 30:1–10, Ps. 141:1–10	What did the incense burned on the altar represent?	386
Mar 25	Ex. 30:11–16	What is the significance of the fact that there was one ransom price for all men, whether they were rich or poor?	301
Mar 26	Ex. 30:17–21, 1 Cor. 6:9–11	Why is cleansing from sin, as pictured by the brass laver, necessary for fellowship with God? How are we cleansed?	143
Mar 27	Ex. 30:22–38	What can you learn about the service of the Lord from the repetition of the word holy in this section of verses?	432
Mar 28	Ex. 31:1–11	Do you remember that all your knowledge and abilities have been given to you by God? How can you use these skills to serve him?	288
Mar 29	Ex. 31:12–17	What does it mean to keep the Sabbath day holy? How can you do this?	318
Mar 30	Ex. 31:18–32:35	Were you shocked at how quickly Israel turned to idolatry while still at Sinai? How is your own sin just as shocking?	373

Mar 31	Ex. 33:1–23	What does this chapter teach you about the preciousness of God's presence? Is God's presence precious to you?	81
Apr 1	Ex. 34:1–35	How had Moses personally experienced the character of God that is proclaimed in vv. 6–7? How have you?	85
Apr 2	Ex. 35:1–36:7	Although he could have miraculously given Moses all the materials for the tabernacle, why do you think God commanded that they be collected as an offering from the people instead?	166
Apr 3	Ex. 36:8–37:29	What does the material that the tabernacle was made of symbolize about the church of God as it exists on this earth?	170
Apr 4	Ex. 38:1–31	What can you learn from the fact the women of Israel gave up their looking glasses (mirrors) to be used in making the brass laver (v. 8)?	201
Apr 5	Ex. 39:1–43	What did the words engraved on the gold plate of the high priest's turban emphasize about the responsibility of the priesthood?	268
Apr 6	Ex. 40:1–33	Why do you think such detail is given on how Moses assembled the tabernacle exactly as God had instructed him?	368
Apr 7	Ex. 40:34–38, Rev. 21:1–27	How was the glory of the Lord that filled the tabernacle only a dim picture of a greater glory that awaits in heaven?	396

Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp of Smyrna

Prof. Doug Kuiper

From Clement of Rome, we learned to promote church unity by honoring God-appointed officebearers. Ignatius and Polycarp were also prominent church leaders after the apostles died. Both were martyred, and through this they teach us to be ready to die for Christ's sake.

The men

Ignatius was born around the year 30 AD, and his death is often dated 107 AD. He was bishop of Antioch for many years, and probably had known the apostle John.

At that time Christianity was illegal, and Ignatius was a prominent Christian leader. The Roman emperor Trajan required him to come to Rome and threw him to wild beasts. On his way to Rome, he wrote letters to several churches including Ephesus, Smyrna, and Philadelphia—churches to whom John also wrote letters (Rev. 2–3). One can still read these letters today.[1]

Polycarp was born in 69 AD and burned at the stake in 155 AD. He knew Ignatius as well as the apostle John. John had labored in Asia Minor where Polycarp was later bishop. While bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp wrote an epistle to the Philippians.

Their martyrdom

The word *martyr* suggests several things. First, while many suffered persecution for Christ's sake in a variety of forms, martyrs *died* for that cause. Second, these individuals were willing to die; they counted death a privilege.

The deaths of both Ignatius and Polycarp illustrate these points. Both

1 Interested readers can access these letters from online resources including the website *Early Christian Writings* (https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/ignatius.html)

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were killed because they refused to worship Roman gods. They knew that death would be the consequence, and they were willing to die.

After 312 AD martyrdom was no longer possible. The emperor Constantine made Christianity a favored religion, and official government persecution therefore ended. With no new martyrs, the church began to honor the old martyrs, calling them *saints*. By this was meant that these martyrs had extra righteousness and earned a higher reward by their martyrdom.

While the deaths of Ignatius and Polycarp were truly noble, the later stories of their deaths illustrate a wrong view of martyrdom. Later Christians said that Ignatius desired martyrdom so that he "might be brought into a yet more intimate relation to the Lord." They also said that all desired to imitate Polycarp's martyrdom. In one sense these statements are true: by bringing us into Christ's bodily presence and perfecting us, death does bring us into a more intimate relation to the Lord. But the Roman Catholic Church interpreted these statements to mean that Christ bestowed greater blessing on the martyrs, and many Christians thought that the martyrs had contributed to their salvation by dying for their Lord. This erroneous view was representative of the unbiblical theology that infected Rome during the post-apostolic era.

The lessons

Young people, take to heart two lessons from these stories.

First, while it is wrong to *deny* Christ, it is not wrong to *flee* one's persecutors. Knowing that his life was in danger, Polycarp fled and disguised himself. When a servant betrayed him and he was captured, he was then given an opportunity to escape death: "Swear by the fortune of Caesar," said the proconsul, "and I will set thee at liberty; reproach Christ." Polycarp had fled, but he would not deny Christ. "Eighty and six years have I served him, and he never did me any injury," said Polycarp; "how then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?"

Second, if God wills that we be captured and killed, let us die confessing the name of our Lord Jesus, as did Ignatius and Polycarp. He never did us any injury! The Christian's death is always the defeat of our last enemy and our entryway into heaven. Christ had said to the church in Smyrna, "Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer…ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life" (Rev. 2:10). Polycarp of Smyrna and Ignatius of Antioch received that crown.

Church news

Ruth Baas

Baptisms

Miles, son of Andrew & Emma DeBoer Calvary, IA

Sophie, daughter of Randy & Katelyn Kooiman Calvary, IA

Tate, son of Jordan & Lydia VanMaanen Calvary, IA

Tristan, son of Nathan & Amber VanMaanen Calvary, IA

Henry Steven, son of Luke & Courtney Huizenga Crete, IL

Rebecca Lynn, daughter of Nick & Kelly Lubbers Crete, IL

Edmund Thomas, son of Daniel & Bridgette Huizing Edmonton, CAN

Beckett Lee, son of Cody & Erin Cammenga Grace, MI

Shiloh Jay, daughter of Scott & Carly Brands Loveland, CO

Noah Steven, son of Drew & Breanna Buiter Randolph, WI

Hudson Brooks, son of Joe & Heather Regnerus Randolph, WI

Clara Kay, daughter of Dan & Becca Regnerus Randolph, WI

Nova Rae, daughter of Chris & Breanna Sooter Sioux Falls, SD

Jeremy Lucas, son of Alex & Katrina Kaiser Southeast, MI

Oscar Lee, son of John & Madeline Feenstra Spokane, WA

Otto, son of Alex & Karrie Poortinga Spokane, WA

Laura Rose, daughter of Liam & Kari Kikkert Wingham, CAN

Confessions of faith

Alex Lubbers Georgetown, MI

Brandon Boverhof, Josh Butler Southwest, MI

Weddings

Seth DeJong & Renae Buiter Hull, IA

Matthew Koerner & Sharon Kleyn Grace, MI

Luke Potjer & Mikaia Looyenga Hope, Redlands, CA

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