

The Road Less Traveled – June 21, 2019

Two things recently caught my attention online regarding special-needs children. The first was an article I read on Tuesday about a father in Batavia, NY who accompanied his 17-year-old daughter to her senior prom. His daughter, Tori, was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder in the seventh grade and has struggled to make and maintain friends. After two of her male classmates declined to escort her to the prom, her father, Thomas Perl, stepped in. He wanted Tori to experience the prom to its fullest, and the two spent a night making memories.

The other thing I saw was an article that a colleague of mine shared on Facebook about how the church welcomes special needs children. The article was provocatively titled, ["Why You Should Not Welcome My Special-Needs Child To Your Church"](#) was both insightful and challenging.

What really caught my eye, however, was a comment left on the post by my older son, Andrew. Andrew has been a very occasional visitor to our church over the years. He was in college when we moved here, has worked in other churches and is now married to a pastor who shepherds her own church. But what he has seen here during his occasional visits prompted him to respond to my colleague's post and talk about how this church ministers to those with special needs. He ended his post commenting, "I'm incredibly grateful that Aledo has worked to make that part of their identity!"

And I don't think I've ever been more proud. Not of my son, though I appreciated his comments deeply. But of our church. Because it is something I have taken for granted.

I have taken for granted that one of the most Spirit-filled kids I know has day-to-day struggles that I can't even imagine. And yet when he yields to that Spirit and dances at the front of the Sanctuary during worship, he is celebrated. Not tolerated. Not accepted. But he is celebrated as an example of what real surrender to Jesus looks like. And part of all of us wishes we could be like him.

I have taken for granted that I am part of a church where an adult Sunday school class agrees to change rooms so that a little boy in a wheelchair can stay with his own Sunday school class, which otherwise would have been moving upstairs in the Education Building with the new school year.

I have taken for granted that I am part of a church where a little boy with Down's Syndrome – whose family sadly has moved out of state – sat in a different pew with a different family every week, believing that the entire Sanctuary was his family. And never once did one of those families do anything but reinforce that belief.

I have taken for granted that I am part of a church that celebrated a young man, also with Down's Syndrome – as he stood two years ago with his classmates to be confirmed in the faith. And I've watched those same classmates and other students minister to him with

kindness and Christian love in a way that leaves no doubt in that young man's mind that this is his home, this is family, and it is here that he is loved. And he is right.

There are other examples, but I will leave it at that. Suffice to say as I look around our church family, I could not be prouder to serve alongside you. And our decision to be a place that celebrates the gifts and graces of *everyone* did not start with me. It is part of the history of this church. But I would challenge us as a family of faith to not leave it to chance. Many of you know families with special-needs children, and you know the challenges they face. The article that my friend shared suggested that some 90 percent of families with special needs children do not go to church. Not because they aren't interested in faith, but because they don't want to risk either rejection or pity.

My challenge to you – to all of us – is to share the message with everyone you know that at Aledo UMC they will find neither rejection nor pity. Instead they will find a flawed, messy family of faith that stands ready to celebrate the unique gifts and ministry of their children – *all* of their children.

If you've been here any time at all, then you know the children I mentioned above. And you haven't just welcome them. You haven't just accepted them. You have been blessed by them in a real and unique way that only they can facilitate. You have looked upon their gifts and faith and said, just as I have, "Thanks be to God."

See you Sunday.