

Children with handicaps teach valuable pro-life lessons

Suppose you were pregnant, and told by your doctor that you should have an abortion? You were told that to have the child would not only put an enormous burden on you, coping with multiple handicaps, but it would also be unfair to the child, having to undergo multiple surgeries and live with these handicaps.

About seven years ago, I told the story of a couple faced with that challenge. They chose to have the baby. Today, I thought I would tell you the rest of the story.

Yes, Jesse was born with Spina bifida, and all the predictions about the handicaps and medical interventions came true – all except one. Jesse has turned out to be a blessing, not a burden.

Although he does have many physical limitations and is confined to a wheelchair, there is nothing limited about his thinking or his personality. Now in the first grade, he functions at a “gifted” level in math and reading. While physically limited, he is a typical 7-year-old in every other way.

Allow me to quote his parents: “The principal of the school recently referred to Jesse as the mayor of the school, referencing the fact that he knows everybody and everybody knows him. Jesse has a personality larger than life. He is friendly, funny, kind and determined. Jesse does not just come into a room. He makes a grand entrance with high fives and introductions to anyone around. He is full of questions and even questions the answers. If everyone was as engaging as Jesse what a world we would have.”

Isn't that last sentence especially poignant? There are those who thought that Jesse should never enter this world. Now we marvel at how wonderful a world it would be if there were only Jesses!

All of us want the perfect child. The only problem is that there are none. We are all limited in some way – physically, emotionally or mentally. Perhaps our greatest limitation is that we have never learned to accept our own limits – to really love

ourselves as we are, and to really love others as they are. Jesse teaches us to do both.

And yes, there is play in Jesse's life. He belongs to a baseball league called "The Challengers." Every child on the team has physical or cognitive challenges, and they arrive with wheelchairs, walkers, carriers and lots of caring adults. If it takes them 10 swings to hit the ball, that's fine. They "run" just to first and back to home plate, and call it a home run.

Jesse's grandmother commented: "Having the privilege of attending these games on Saturday morning was a gift of watching tolerance and acceptance in action."

Notice again, the word acceptance. Most of what passes for love in our society is approval. We approve of people if they meet our expectations. Approval is not love. Love is accepting people just the way they are - physically, emotionally and mentally.

Yes, various angels have shown up in Jesse's life. A little boy he met in preschool has been a steadfast friend ever since. He looks in on Jesse between classes in school. At home, Jesse's little 3-year-old brother looks after his "big" brother.

Jesse is at the heart of so much life, love and laughter in his family. Are there challenges? Yes, obviously. What generous and loving parents he has, to accept the challenges.

Yet, a sentence used above to describe Jesse also describes his parents. "He is full of questions and even questions the answers." Before Jesse was born, his parents were full of questions. Fortunately, they questioned the answers they received.

There are many heroes in the pro-life movement. There are those involved in politics and in legislation, those who march and those who pray. But surely the silent saints of the pro-life movement are the parents of children with handicaps. They teach us again what love is all about and what life is all about.

To give his grandmother the last word: "There is no list from our perspective of what Jesse cannot do, only a list of what he can do. Spina bifida does not define Jesse. Jesse defines Spina bifida!"