

April 2, 2020.

Hello Again, Apostles Friends.

Today is World Autism Awareness Day. It's also National Peanut Butter and Jelly Sandwich Day and National Burrito Day. Although I admit that a well-timed PBJ or burrito can provide happiness and encouragement, I think the autism community has more to teach us that is relevant to where we are in the world today.

If we think social distancing leading to social isolation is difficult for us as we battle the COVID-19 pandemic, consider for a moment the social isolation felt by people on the autism spectrum. Autism inhibits an individual's ability to perceive social cues and communicate effectively. Autistic individuals may stand much too close and speak much too loud. They sometimes exhibit limited and repetitive patterns of behavior. People with autism may be very sensitive to sensory stimulations, even to the point that certain lights or sounds may cause seizures. They often have anxiety and attention disorders. In short, social interaction with a person on the autism spectrum is going to be somewhere between awkward and impossible, depending on the severity of their symptoms. For these folks, social isolation is neurologically based and essentially permanent, although medication can help with some symptoms (seizures, for example).

The United Nations General Assembly designated April 2nd as World Autism Awareness Day in November, 2007, and the day was first celebrated in 2008. The autism community hopes the event promotes greater understanding of the challenges faced by individuals with autism and, as a result of that increased understanding, that autistic people are treated with greater tolerance and kindness.

The theme for this year's event is "Assistive Technologies, Active Participation." Researchers are working on technology that will help people with autism process sensory information differently. They are trying to "make visual information more accessible" to individuals with autism.

Autism Awareness is a subject that is near to my heart because my nephew, Christopher, has Autism Spectrum Disorder, a condition that used to be called Asperger's Syndrome. Christopher's elementary school principal told my brother, Philip, that Chris would never attain the elementary school competencies required to get into middle school. She recommended he be placed in the special education curriculum. That was her way of saying that there was nothing she could do to prevent the bullying Chris received in her school every day. My brother, a man of unshakeable faith and one of my true heroes, refused. Phil understood better than anyone (better than me and certainly better than Chris' elementary school principal) that, like many people with autism, Chris had real gifts. Phil knew that his son was extremely intelligent if you could just work around his behavior that made social interaction so awkward.

Despite being bullied every school day of his life Christopher graduated from high school. He earned a bachelor's degree in computer programming, has a full-time job in the field, and has already been promoted. Twice.

I said at the beginning that World Autism Awareness Day had something to teach us that is relevant to where we are in the world today. Have you been keeping track? Let's see how you did.

1. Terms like social distancing and social isolation are relative. We can envision an end to our isolation, but for some people, like those with autism, social isolation may last long after the pandemic ends.
2. We're called to devote greater effort to understanding those who make us feel awkward and respond to them with tolerance and kindness.
3. Technology can break down barriers and decrease isolation by helping us visualize our world in different ways.
4. God gave us all gifts, and special people have special, sometimes amazing gifts.
5. Don't pay attention to the naysayers. Faith (and a lot of hard work) will help you succeed.

How many of these did you get? Are there any lessons I missed? If you got at least three, make yourself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. If you got all five, you are a Grande Burrito!

Dear Lord, we lift up those with autism on World Autism Awareness Day. May their objectives of understanding, tolerance, and kindness be made real in all of us. Help us all to find our special gifts and to recognize the gifts in others. Amen.