

FEATURE

Child's disability teaches mother about priorities



Parenting MONTHLY FEATURE

My close friend and neighbor Fran is part of Community Bible Study (CBS), a non-denominational 30-week Bible study course. Last year, a woman in the program, Diane, spoke to the CBS group about what God had taught her since the birth of her daughter, Erynne, who has a neurological disability that affects her muscle tone, mobility, vision, speech and hearing.

Fran was so moved by Diane's story that she asked if I could watch her children one morning a week so she could help out with Erynne's therapy, a vigorous program that takes place in Diane's home five days a week for four-six hours each day. Every week more than two dozen volunteers are needed to walk Erynne and to stimulate her speech, vision and sense of touch. It's a demanding schedule for the family, especially considering that Erynne has two older sisters, Elly, 9, and Heidi, 7.

A few weeks ago Diane spoke to the CBS group again and reflected on what God has taught her through Erynne during the past year.

"I used to look at Erynne and what she couldn't do," Diane said. "I viewed her as a burden. But now I don't look at her disability. When I see Erynne I see a very precious child and I feel like she's a trea-

sure. "I remember in my heart four years ago I said, 'Lord, if you don't heal Erynne, I want you to take her.' I wasn't willing to face the painful road that was looming in front of me. The easy way out of my pain was to tell God to take her if he wasn't going to heal her. What God did instead was to change me. I love her as she is, and I'm thrilled with the progress she's made and what she can do now. But I'm not content to leave her there.

"And as I've thought about that, I realize that's how God views you and me. He loves us as we are. And he's delighted in our progress with him. But he is not content to leave us there. He is always at work in us and around us, stimulating our growth because it is for our good."

Diane spoke honestly and beautifully about the easy and comfortable life she always expected she would have, a life that didn't allow room for pain, suffering or disappointment. It's a world that most of us believe we're entitled to. Understandably, we want to keep pain and suffering at a distance in our lives. We live in a society that is uncomfortable with pain, suffering, crises and illness. We find ourselves looking for ways around the pain — anything to avoid going through it.

And yet it is often in these most painful moments — a diagnosis of cancer, the sudden death of a loved one, a car accident, an addiction, a parent's illness, or a child's disability — that we have the opportunity to meet Jesus, heart to heart.

It doesn't happen immediately, but



BY EILEEN MARX

family matters

when we look back at our life's darkest moments, we understand that those are the times that we've grown in the most profound ways. During these times when God has our undivided attention, we're given opportunities to redefine our priorities and allow God to change us.

As Diane said, "My circumstances were telling me that God had given me a raw deal. But what God has taught me is to look past my circumstances to his heart and to see Erynne as his gift to me and to know that all his gifts are for our provision whether we recognize them as good at first or not."

While Diane spoke, I thought of the responsibility we have as parents for teaching our children how to respond to the pain and suffering that come into our lives. This isn't easy to do because a parent's natural instinct is to shield a child from pain and hurt. It can be difficult to teach our kids that pain and heartbreak are just as much a part of life as happiness and joy. Certainly children don't need to believe that pain is something pleasant. But perhaps our job is to show children that there are times when we can turn tears into joy and burdens

into gifts. By reaching out to someone in pain, we're letting that person know that because we are there to help, God has not forgotten them.

"Another thing that God is doing in my life," Diane said, "is he's changing me from being a Martha to a Mary. He's changing me from being a doer to one who delights in sitting at Jesus' feet. The perspective I've always had is that a day wasn't worth much unless I could get a lot done. If I couldn't look at my 'To Do' list and see my checks beside it, I felt frustrated. Well, because of Erynne's needs and because of all my family's needs, at the end of the day I think, well, I've had a shower, I've gotten dressed, I've gotten three meals on the table and usually the dishes are washed — not always. And we've accomplished Erynne's therapy. And that's it. But I don't mind putting off my 'To Do' list anymore because it will get done when it needs to get done.

"Erynne's therapist has told us that the most critical part of her therapy is her walking because more than any other activity it stimulates her vision, speech and sensitivity (to touch). Likewise, God opened my eyes to see that he wants to improve my vision, speech and sensitivity through my daily walking with him. I'm seeing that tough circumstances are opportunities for personal growth; I have a message to encourage and speak to others in pain, and I have a keener sensitivity and awareness that my own weaknesses don't have to impede my spiritual maturity."

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Marx lives in Lawrenceville, N.J., with her husband and two children.



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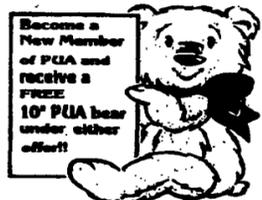
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