

Getting Close to the God Who Is Close to You

(Notes from the "Intimacy with God" Women's Retreat, June 2017)

Please take time to study out the scriptures thoroughly and pray about them. There's no substitute for God's insight given directly to your heart.

Note: Dialogue in italics are excerpts from my time with God in prayer. Italics in the scriptures indicate words that I have changed or added to give social context or express the connotations of the original Greek text.

I. I will love you completely, perfectly, always and forever

When I need you

I just close my eyes and I'm with you

And all that I so want to give you

It's only a heartbeat away ("When I Need You", Leo Sayer, 1976)

Listen! My beloved! Look! Here he comes, leaping across the mountains, bounding over the hills.

My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag.

Look! There he stands behind our wall, peering through the windows, shining through the lattice.

My beloved spoke and said to me, "Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, come with me.

See! The winter is past; the rains are over and gone.

Flowers appear on the earth; the season of singing has come, the cooing of doves is heard in our land.

The fig tree forms its early fruit; the blossoming vines spread their fragrance.

Arise, come, my darling; my beautiful one, come with me." (Song of Songs 2:8-13)

God: "My strong desire is to comfort and love you."

Me: Is that your strongest desire?

God: "My strongest is to protect your spiritual life."

Believe that God desperately, desperately wants to be close to you. He has overcome every obstacle, crossed every mountain, surmounted every barrier to come to you, inspired by all the energy of his eagerness to be with you. But then he stops outside a wall. Whose wall? Yours. It's a poignant image. He's outside, peeking at you through the windows; you're inside, seeing his glory shine through the lattice. But he doesn't come in to get you. He doesn't force you. Instead, he begs you to come to him.

He coaxes you. The winter is over, that dreary, rainy season when there are no leaves on the trees and nothing bears fruit, when the world looks lifeless. Now it's spring, and he wants to give you a world of delights, filled with beautiful flowers and fruit and birdsong. It even smells good! Jesus said, "**Yes, I am the gate. Those who come in through me will be saved. They will come and go freely and will find good pastures.**" (John 10:9) God has provided the opening. But he won't compel you; you have choose. In Jesus, it is completely safe to leave the protections of your own wall to come into glory of a relationship with God.

God: "Do not be afraid to feel powerful. Do not be afraid to feel safe."

II. A relationship is based on honesty and trust

Me: I feel like I hate you!

God: "Oh, really. Tell me more." (He leans forward A bag of popcorn materializes in his hand. He starts munching.) "This is getting good!"

Me: I am afraid I will hurt you.

God: "You have only ever hurt me the tiniest pinprick compared to all of the love you have given me."

Even though the world with God is wonderful, we hesitate to trust. It's been cold and rainy for a long time, and although our walls may be not very nice, they make us feel safe. It's hard to step outside and give ourselves to something new. After 22 1/2 years of baby steps, I realized I hadn't made it very far. I felt guilty and afraid. I knew I was angry with God. Would he be angry with me? With prayer, I realized that when people expressed emotions honestly to Jesus, he responded with compassion, mercy, love, and salvation.

- Thomas got proof when he doubted. **Put your finger here; see my hands.** (John 20:24-29)
- Martha's faith grew when she blamed Jesus. **Your brother will rise again.** (John 11:17-27)
- Nicodemus was given truth when he questioned. **For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.** (John 3:1-20)
- The Prodigal Son's older brother was reassured when he expressed bitterness. **My son, you are with me at all times, and everything I have is yours.** (Luke 15:11-31)
- Peter received a new purpose when he tried push Jesus away. **Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch people for eternal life.** (Luke 5:1-11)

Me: I am sorry I was so awful.

God: "Not awful, understandably angry. "

Me: I blame you for this!

God: "I hope you do. It's better than blaming yourself for something that wasn't your fault."

God: "Don't feel bad. You're working through hard issues. Step forth with me again. Let me heal you."

III. Sharing your emotions is beautiful even if they do not feel beautiful to you

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and having entered the house of the Pharisee, Jesus reclined at the table. A woman who was sinful in the city, having learned that he reclined at the table in the house of the Pharisee, having brought an alabaster flask of perfumed oil, and having stood behind him at his feet weeping out loud with grief, began to rain tears down on his feet. She was wiping them with her hair and kissing them over and over and anointing them with the perfumed oil. Having seen this, the Pharisee who had invited Jesus said to himself "If he were a prophet, he would have known who and what the woman is who touches him, for she is a sinner." (Luke 7:36-39)

The Greek grammar emphasizes that she had planned it all out. She had learned where Jesus would be, brought oil, positioned herself behind him, and started to cry. The Greek word *klaio* means "to wail in mourning." It's what people did at funerals. It's what Peter did after he denied Jesus. It is an intense display of overwhelming emotion. I probably would have stopped there, hoping that Jesus might notice me in the background but not wanting to interrupt him or do anything that might make him uncomfortable, not presuming to be too close. But the sinful woman moved wasn't content to just show her emotions; she wanted to touch Jesus with them.

What kind of faith does it take to believe that an itinerant preacher whom you barely know wants literally to feel what you are feeling - you, a notorious sinner? Somehow, this woman understood Jesus' desire to be emotionally close to us, his brothers and sisters. His warmth, kindness, and compassion - maybe something as simple as his beautiful smile - filled her with certainty that he would welcome her expression. I think that she was expressing grief over what she had done, offering up her pain and apologizing to this wonderful man. She might have been trying to say "I'm sorry."

What Jesus heard was "I love you."

Having turned to the woman, Jesus said to (the Pharisee), "Do you see this woman? I entered your house. You did not give me water so I could wash my own feet. However, this woman has been raining tears down on my feet and wiping them with her hair. A single welcoming kiss you did not give me. However she has not stopped passionately kissing my feet over and over from the time I entered. You didn't anoint my head with olive oil. But she has has been anointing my feet with perfumed oil. I say to you that because of this grace, her many sins have been sent away because she loved much. However, he who is forgiven little, loves little. Those others reclining at the table began to say to themselves, "Who is this who sends away sins?" On top of this, Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." (Luke 7:44-50)

Water for washing off the dust of the road, oil to refresh the face from the hot Judean climate, and a welcoming kiss were traditionally offered to honored guests upon entering a home. Jesus' Pharisee host has given Jesus none of these. He hasn't met even the basic requirements of hospitality. The woman has gone beyond in every area: not well water but her own tears, not regular olive oil but oil perfumed with expensive spices, not asking the guest to wash his own feet but doing it herself, a job normally reserved for a slave. She has welcomed Jesus at great personal cost, both monetarily and emotionally. She has risked damaging her reputation even further with her public display. She has given to him out of her own body and her own passions. It is an invitation into the deepest and tenderest part of her heart - in front of everyone.

We see a red-faced, puffy-eyed, overly emotional woman covering a man's feet with tears and mucus. Jesus sees a welcoming committee rolling out the red carpet. To us, it's a mess; to God, it's love.

Jesus is so moved that he forgives her sins on the spot. In front of everyone.

It doesn't say that she was forgiven because she had started to live a righteous life, that she had stopped sinning or sacrificed the right things or fulfilled the law or said what she was supposed to say or become a good person or succeeded in not blowing up at her co-worker even though she was really tempted or any of the things that we think we need to do to be close to God. In fact, her life would make you think that God wouldn't want to be close - it never occurred to the Pharisee that Jesus might know who the woman was and still want to be touched. To express her love to Jesus, she overcame many obstacles: a terrible reputation, fear of ridicule, public embarrassment, social taboos. To me, the most amazing thing is her belief that Jesus wanted her at all.

Even if you're angry or you've been crying so hard that your face is covered with snot or you've been bitter for years or you want to scream because you're so disappointed, God is honored that you trust him enough to share what is deep inside. He feels so loved because you've welcomed him in. There's no mess so ugly that he isn't longing to help you clean it up. The sinful woman knew that Jesus wanted to be emotionally close to her, no matter who she was. You need to know this for yourself and for everyone, forever.

Me: I feel ashamed to tell you this.

God: "Robin, people have been angry with me for thousands of years. It's unlikely that whatever you're going to say is the worst thing I've ever heard. You can't make me feel bad about myself. I have indestructible self-esteem. Please tell me what is on your heart."

IV. I am a hundred percent, no a thousand percent on your side

You were my strength when I was weak
You were my voice when I couldn't speak
You were my eyes when I couldn't see
You saw the best there was in me
Lifted me up when I couldn't reach
You gave me faith 'cause you believed
I'm everything I am
Because you loved me ("Because You Loved Me", Celine Dion, 1996)

Thomas, Martha, Peter, Nicodemus, the sinful woman, and many others took the difficult step of exposing their truest selves to Jesus. This can seem like an obstacle too great to overcome. Believe that God will leap into action when you cry for help. (Note: depending on how he wants you to grow, you may have to put in more energy than just a polite request.)

In my *dire straights*, I called to the Lord; I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before him, into his ears. The earth trembled and quaked, and the foundations of the mountains shook. (Psalm 18:6-19)

For this reason, I kneel before the father, from whom all family in heaven and on Earth is named, so that, out of the riches of his glory, he may give you power to be strengthened through his Spirit in your inner being, to *settle Christ at home* in your hearts through faith, rooted and established in love, so that you have full strength together with all the saints to take hold of the width, length, height, and depth and to know the knowledge-surpassing love of Christ so that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. (Ephesian 3:14-19)

He has given us a series of steps that will always work to fill us with him. But you can't skip steps. My life changed when I decided to start praying to hear the Holy Spirit and follow his direction without second-guessing. Before that, I had tried to understand Jesus's love and be filled with God, but for years I hadn't consistently listened to the Holy Spirit because I had been scared. I had totally missed making Jesus at home in my heart because I had been intimidated by him. So I had struggled to be rooted in love and hadn't had the strength to take hold of anything, saints or no. It was like building a house without a strong foundation. Even a good roof didn't hold when the earthquake came.

Being filled with the fullness of God is not something that we just wait for. In Greek, the verbs are all active not passive voice. Several start with the prefix "kata-" an intensifier that indicates effort and attention to detail. You don't just set up the throne room in your heart and hope that someday Jesus will move in. The Greek word is "katoikeo" which means "to settle someone as a permanent resident." Jesus will come if you open the door, but you may have to strap him down with the seatbelt of faith, depending on what kind of a day you're having. Do whatever it takes to make the Son of God a permanent resident!

V. Stop thinking that your love for me is second-class compared to my love for you

Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth. This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we persuade our hearts to be faithful: if our hearts *look down on us*, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he *looks at everything*. (1 John 3:16-22)

God: "What you give to others is often flawed and incomplete, but it is also beautiful, wonderful, and helpful."

I struggle with feeling bad because I fall short of God's wonderfulness. Even though God showers me with love every day, I don't feel good about receiving it because I am so (fill in the blank): faithless, worldly, fearful, inadequate, generally a failure. But the Bible says that we look down on ourselves because we only see what is right in front of us. God sees the bigger picture. He turns our efforts into good in ways that we can't fathom. If we are trying to love God and other people, we can set our hearts at rest no matter how we feel. Be at peace in him even if you are full of doubt about yourself.

God: "Surely you don't think it's a coincidence that you're going through all of this drama just when you're starting to minister to others..."

God: "There's no point in trying so hard to do the right thing that it makes you not want to do anything at all. Lighten up!"

VI. I am the soul of love, and I have come here just to be with you

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. (John 15:9)

Write down a list of all the things that you think God feels about Jesus. Then close your eyes and imagine the same smile on Jesus's face every time he thinks about you. Which is all the time. It can be hard to believe that this is the way Jesus and God feel about you. But it's true, not just when you had a good day and did all the things you think you were supposed to do. Every single day. Both of them feel this way about you always, every minute, for eternity. Trust them. Trust this.

Me: It's so tempting to try to be wonderful for you all the time.

God: "You don't have to try. You just are."

God: "Do you want to hear more about how wonderful you are and how much I love you?"

Me: (nodding) Yes.

God: "Done!" (then starts a long list)

"My Little Flower" (A poem God read to me)

I send my sun on you so you can bloom and grow.

I send my rain on you so your roots can go deep and strong.

I send my bees so you can bear seeds.

I send my brush to paint you with beautiful colors.

I send my breeze to caress your cheek and fill your heart with joy.