



Martha Grace Reese

UNBINDING
your
SOUL

Your Experiment
in Prayer &
Community

***New & Improved
Facilitators' Guide!***

We've added major improvements to
Unbinding Your Soul's Introduction and
Facilitators' Guide (chapter 10),
based on users' feedback.

Small Group Studies
Personal Prayer Journal
Unbinding the Gospel Series

Unbinding Your Soul Sermons

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FAITH & COURAGE

Sermon #1: "There's More" (chapter 5)	1
Sermon #2: "Connect the Dots" (chapter 7)	5
Sermon #3: "Humble Heroes" (chapter 8)	9

THE EXPERIMENT

Sermon #4: "God Sightings" (chapter 2)	14
Sermon #5: "First Steps" (chapter 3)	18
Sermon #6: "Step Over the Line" (chapter 4)	22

Unbinding Your Soul Sermon #1

(Chapter 5)

"There's More?"

Ephesians 3:14-21

Set-up: Signs with the word "More" everywhere- over water fountains, in hallways, on the bulletin, shoe polished on cars . . .

Testimony: Ask someone who has been a long-time Christian to talk about an experience in the last 2 years that jump-started his/her relationship with God. Maybe someone has been on a mission trip that changed him, or had an illness that made her learn to depend on God, or participated in the Unbinding study. Ask them to talk about how much richer their spiritual connection has become. You can do this in the sermon at the point I suggest or somewhere else, or, you can do it before or after the sermon. See notes at the end on how you can work with your testifier to make this most effective.

Call to Worship:

Leader: We worship God who is more than all we can ask or imagine!

People: We yearn to be intimately connected to the One who made us.

Leader: We confess our fear of being disappointed with God or with ourselves.

People: We dare to investigate the promises of Scripture:

All: God's riches are unsearchable, and God's gifts are for us in Christ
Jesus! Amen!

Sermon:

New research is in. It turns out that those who expect their marriages to be fulfilling have a higher percentage of satisfaction with their marriages than those who did not have such high expectations for marriage. Marital science researchers say that unrealistic expectations still are not helpful. Marrying an alcoholic person and expecting her to stop drinking just because you put a ring on her finger doesn't work out so well usually. But if both husband and wife expect to *enjoy* being married, researchers say that makes it happen more often than not.¹ Expectations affect relationship.

Yet I know a married couple who simply have cohabitated for years. They know each other's stories backwards and forwards, but neither has asked the other lately about what happened in their day. It's comfortable, mostly, until somebody leaves the cap off the toothpaste one too many times, and the occasional argument breaks out. But not for long. They've learned how to live together well enough. They've cut their deal. Yet they can't tell you when their last date night was. Or when they kissed longer than just a sparse peck on the lips.

¹ From the internet article: "Marriage Expectations", yahoo.com, June 28, 2010

Neither husband nor wife really expects anything more.

What are you expecting out of your relationship with God these days? Are your expectations high? Maybe you've hoped for something from God before and been disappointed. Maybe you've tried to keep God at arm's length out of fear of what God might expect from *you*. Maybe you don't know what you *could* expect from God, so you don't even know where to start.

Ephesians is a letter written by the apostle Paul or one of his students. The letter is written to Christians in Ephesus, a city in what is now the country of Turkey. These Christians are brand-new to the gospel of Jesus Christ. And they were Gentiles, which means they weren't Jews before they became Christians. They don't know about the Hebrew Scriptures OR the gospel of Jesus. The letter starts out by giving these newbies some basic theology. Then Paul talks about Christian unity, and then, all of a sudden, the letter writer breaks out in a prayer.

A big, bodacious, passionate, prayer. It's a prayer for the people reading the letter. It's a prayer for all of us too.

And the prayer is this: ***I pray your expectations about God will be blown away.***
(Pause, count to 10 in your head if you have to)

I pray . . .your expectations . . .about God . . . will be blown away.

There's a commercial on TV of a man sitting at a desk. He throws up his hands and loudly declares, "That's it! I finished it!" Turns out he was searching the internet and got to the end of the information highway.²

Okay, we all know that's not even possible! Can you imagine getting to the end of the internet, having seen it all? Ephesians tells us that this is the way it is with God. There is no way we can reach the end of who God is. There is always more, always *more*, to be discovered. Madeline L'Engle said, "I do not believe I will ever reach a point in my life when I can say: 'This is what I believe about God. Finished. What I believe is alive and open to growth!'"³

The prayer in Ephesians asks that God will show us far more than we can ask or even *imagine* about who God is. The prayer asks that we be blown away by how much God loves us, and what God can do with us.

The research is in. Martha Grace Reese has worked with thousands of mainline Protestant congregations. She has discovered that God will blow away our expectations of who God is, and what God can do with us. She has found that we will discover more

² You can find this on YouTube. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HZ5vFvGII TI>

Go ahead, play it in worship!

³ Madeline L'Engle, source unknown.

of God if we will do two things: 1. Talk with each other for real about our faith, and 2. Pray for God to show us more.

[You could insert more about your church's Unbinding Your Soul study here]

This is *exactly* what Ephesians 3:18 directs us to do! Listen for the instruction to pray and talk with each other for real:

"I pray you may have the power to comprehend *with all the saints*, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with *all* the fullness of God."

The prayer is for us to know *more* of God's love through Christ. But notice the prayer acknowledges that we will not come to this experience alone. It is *together with all the saints* that we will discover *more*. The saints are, of course, not the New Orleans football team, nor the dearly departed who lived exemplary lives. When the New Testament says "saints," it simply means people trying to follow Jesus. That's you, Saint Jose. And you, Saint Sue! You, Saint Akesha!

Sometimes, just like in any relationship, we saints who have been at church for a while become reasonably comfortable in our relationship with God. We have a pattern of how we pray and when we pray, like at the table and before bed. That is, *if* we pray. We go to worship on Sundays and sit in the same spot. We show up to work the food pantry and do the same job. We feel reasonably satisfied in our spiritual lives. We ask our friends at church how they are and take "just fine" for an answer. That's the way we answer, too.

And we are, thank you, doing just fine, in essence. But we couldn't tell you the last time we deeply, passionately connected to God. That church camp campfire? When the baby was in the hospital? How long has it been since we last deeply connected with God?

Ephesians 3 is telling us there's something *more*. More *strength* for our inner beings, more *rooting and grounding* in love for our hearts, more *power* for our minds. More of *God* at work within us.

Dawn and Joe took their kids to see the Bridal Cave in central Missouri. When the family stepped into the cave, it was a cool 50 degree respite from the hot summer day. Soon, their eyes adjusted to the cool, musty darkness of the cave. They began to follow the lit paths behind the tour guide. They listened to the guide explain the stalactites and stalagmites. They saw the stunning formations of earth all around them.

Then, the guide shone her flashlight across the great expanse of the cave. "You see that back wall of the cave?" she asked. "We estimate there's a good mile and a half more of the cave just behind that wall." We all gasped. We imagined the untold wonders on just the other side. Then the tour guide said, "But no one has explored it yet."

Church, let's go exploring.

This week, let's ask God: Is there more? Is there more you want me to have of you? More of you for our church to have revealed to us? If we dare, let's pray with Ephesians. Let's pray to God: I want *more you*.

Testimony Tips:

As you prepare your testifiers, be sure to ask in plenty of time for them to prepare and for you to pray. Ask them to do these things:

- Speak for 3 minutes.
- Write out what they plan to say and give you a copy in advance.
- Practice with you at the microphone the week before the service.
- Invite someone to hear them.

Unbinding Your Soul Sermon #2

(Chapter 7)

“Connect the Dots”

Colossians 2:14-19

Set-Up: Dot-to-dots everywhere! Put one on the front of the bulletin, on the windshield wipers of cars, a great big one out in the narthex. You will also need a bulletin insert like this:

- . something you already do at least once a week
- \
- \
- \
- \
- . your faith

Testimony: You are looking for someone who has taken his or her faith to work, and it has made a difference in the work setting. This may be a teacher who silently prays over his students, or a cubicle dweller who holds an office Bible study on her lunch break. Ask the testifiers to describe the moment when they figured out they could take their faith to work in some small way.

Litany:

Leader: God of Sunday, and Monday, you hallow all the days of our living.

People: God of pulpits and parking lots, you make all places shimmer with your glory.

Leader: God of sanctuaries and stoplights, you are with us in solitude and in bustling crowds.

People: God of all times, let us be aware of your presence in every moment!

All: God of all places, let us be your people everywhere!

Sermon:

You’ve heard it said: “What happens in Las Vegas stays in Las Vegas.” Sounds racy, and exciting. I knew a minister of a small country church who noticed that about half of her small congregation was missing one Sunday morning. A little investigative work led her to discover three families had taken a trip to Vegas together. The Sunday they returned, the joke was on them.

She ribbed them all by beginning her sermon with a harsh tone. “Last week, you may recall,” she began, “We talked about the demonic dangers of gambling.” She took a deep breath and gazed intently at the congregation. Then she continued, “This week, we’ll talk about the powerful pitfalls of not giving your Vegas winnings to the church.”¹

¹ That minister was me.

The wayward parishioners squirmed uncontrollably for a few moments, until the preacher stopped starting them down and broke into a grin. "Nah, she said, the sermon's really about helping kids come to know Jesus." After church, one of the Vegas gang teased her, "Okay, so how'd find out where we were?"

Most of us have pretty clear compartments to our lives. Vegas doesn't usually come to church. And church doesn't come to other parts of our lives nearly often enough. We wear different hats — boy scout leader, businessman, deacon, wife, son, scuba diver. Have you had the experience of seeing someone in a grocery store in their casual clothes? Maybe you see your dentist training her dog at the park and don't recognize her without the white lab coat. Or you're in the check-out aisle with your kids' principal who doesn't usually wear gym shorts to his office. Our faith can pretty easily become another hat we wear.

Colossians is a letter, likely written by the apostle Paul, to the churches of Colossae and surrounding towns. The Colossian Christians had begun dabbling in some extracurricular faith practices. They were intrigued by different philosophies and curious about practicing astrology. Paul writes to persuade them that Christ deserves our full-hearted, whole-minded devotion. And he uses the analogy of clothing to get his point across.

"When you get dressed spiritually," Paul writes, "Don't just wear a little of this and a little of that, a little astrology on your Tee-shirt, a "Beyonce Rules!" jacket, and 1-900-PSYCHIC on your baseball cap. No! Paul says, we're God's chosen ones, we've got to be clothed completely in the love of Christ."

Paul insists that faith in Christ is not something that is put on here and taken off there; our faith is the hat we constantly wear. No matter where we are!

But how often are we wearing our faith?

Jill is a pastor friend of mine. She lives next door to a woman named Beth. Beth hasn't been to church more than about three times in her life. Jill has talked to Beth across the front yard many times. She's even kept Beth's daughter when Beth had to work late. They've gotten to know each other pretty well. Or so it seemed.

One spring weekend just before Easter, Beth and Jill were standing outside in the driveway chatting. Beth said, "You know, I have never been to church for Easter, and I think I'd like to go this year. Jill, do you go to church anywhere around here?"

Jill's jaw hit the sidewalk. Her face turned red as a beet, and she stammered for how to respond. Finally, she blurted out, "Oh my God, Beth. I am so embarrassed. How is it that I have never told you that I am the minister of the church down the street?"²

² God help me, I'm Jill.

Oh, my God! Indeed. Oh, my God, have mercy. Jill's Christian hat hadn't made it on her head to the neighbor's house.

"Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." Paul urges the Colossian Christians and us to speak and to act everywhere and every time in the name of Jesus Christ.

Remember dot to dots from kids' restaurant placemats, where you get the 4 crayons and activities until your pancakes come? You put your pencil to the paper and connect dot #1 to #2, and then dot #2 to dot #3, and so on, pretty soon, a new picture emerges. As a church, we are asking God for *more*:

more revelation of God in our personal lives,
more presence of God in our lives together as a church.
more strength,
more power,
more joy,
more love,
more **God!**

More happens when we connect the dots. In your bulletin today there is the most simple dot-to-dot you can get! By dot #1, write down something that you do at least once a week, if not every day. Maybe it's read the paper, or go to lunch at the same corner café, or get on Facebook, or ride the bus. Name your dot.

Now, draw a line between the dot you've named and dot #2. Dot #2 is your faith. Make drawing this line your prayer. Ask God, "Would you show me how to connect my faith to this regular activity in my life? Would you show me *more* of you while I'm doing *this*?"

Colossians says, "Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do *everything* in the name of the Lord Jesus." When Scripture says "in the name of", it means "in the presence of." It means: Whatever you do, do it in the presence of Jesus himself, as if he's really there. Because he is. He's right here, and he's out there in your house, and in your regular life.

Bill's church began a summer ministry to children. Lots of the kids in their neighborhood are on the school district's Free and Reduced Lunch Program during the school year. The church people realized that these kids were going without those subsidized meals in the summer time. So, they started passing out lunches to the neighbor kids.

Pretty soon, they were driving a little bus around, passing out lunches all over the community.

Bill was the bus driver for the program. He would pull the bus up to a low-income apartment complex or trailer park and honk the horn, letting the kids know they had arrived. As the kids came up to the bus, Bill would smile at them. He'd hand them their lunch, and say, "Have a nice day!"

One day Bill came home from his lunch delivery rounds to find his wife in tears. She had been teaching the third graders at Vacation Bible School at their church that morning. Now she was sitting in a heap on their living room floor.

Bill ran over to her, "What's wrong?"

"Today," she said, "I asked the kids in my class at Vacation Bible School to raise their hands if they know Jesus loves them. And two little boys did not raise their hands."

"Okay," Bill said, still unsure what the problem was.

"Bill," his wife wept, "No one has ever told those boys Jesus loves them!"

A light went on in Bill's head, and a dam burst forth in Bill's heart. "Oh, my God!" he thought. "The children on my lunch route may not know either!"

Bill connected the dots.

So the next day on his route, Bill drove up to the apartment, and the trailers, and he honked the bus horn. When the children came out to get their lunches, he smiled at them just the same. But when he handed them their lunches, he did *not* say "Have a nice day!"

Bill said, "Jesus loves you."³

[Pause here].

What if what happened in church didn't stay in church? What if we let God connect the dots?

³ "Bill" is an elder at my church. And if you want to know more about our summer lunch ministry, go to raytownncc.org.

Unbinding Your Soul Sermon #3

(Chapter 8)

"Humble Heroes"

I Kings 19:1-4, 11-13

Set-up: Let there be silence in this service! A rollicking prelude and then silence, or a jumpin' hymn and then silence. Prepare the congregation ahead of time to hear the silence and listen to God. You will also need quarters to pass out to every worshipper to keep at the end of the service. If you are blessing your Unbinding Your Soul books, you may want to have a stack of these on your altar as well.

Testimony: You are looking for a person who took a very small step that set up a domino-ing of results. Maybe it's a wife who prayed for her husband to know God's love, and when he finally did, the husband went wild with faithful living. Maybe a youth in your church would tell about how someone invited her to youth group and how her life is different. Maybe your nursing home ministry leader can tell the story of how that amazing ministry got started.

Litany:

Leader: As a deer pants for the waters of a bubbling brook, our lives are thirsty for more of you, O God!

People: We have looked for you in skywriting and in dramatic events.

Leader: We have hoped you would speak to us in loud crashing cymbals to get our attention.

People: Yet our sneaking suspicion is that you are guiding us in other, gentle ways.

Leader: We want to follow you, Jesus.

People: But we're not sure we are ready to follow you everywhere all at once.

All: Would you show us one step at a time?

Sermon:

Whenever I hear stories about heroes of the faith, I am inspired. Who isn't moved by thinking of Corrie ten Boom hiding people in her home to save them from the Holocaust? Or Harriet Tubman risking her life to bring others out of slavery into freedom. Or John Wesley preaching to the masses. Wow, it thrills me to think of these giants.

And, their being giants and all, it can make me feel pretty small.

Elijah was a prophet. He had done some pretty big and bold heroic things, like confront the Queen. He actually told the Queen she was living an immoral life and God was not pleased with her. That little bit of unsolicited advice went over about as well as you'd think it would - not very well. Elijah is running for his life at this point in the story. And Elijah is tired of sticking his neck out for God. He just wants to rest for a little while.

But God finds Elijah hiding in the wilderness. God wants Elijah to know that God isn't

quite finished with him yet. God needs Elijah to pass on his faith to a new person. God wants Elijah to teach a new prophet the ropes. So to encourage Elijah, God tells him that God will reveal the divine presence to Elijah.

“Go stand on that mountain,” God says. “I will show myself to you.”

So, Elijah goes to stand on the mountain. And he waits.

There’s a big, blustery wind. Trees are breaking and Elijah himself is shaking, but God doesn’t say anything.

Then, the earth starts to rumble, and a full-scale earthquake breaks out. But Elijah doesn’t hear anything from God in that, either.

Finally, there was a brushfire that swept the plains and licked the hem of Elijah’s cloak. But Elijah did not see anything of God in the fire.

Then, nearly nothing happened. All Elijah could hear was sheer silence.

Elijah covered his face. He could tell he was in the holy presence of God. And at last, God spoke.

What God said was, “What are you doing here?”

Sure, sometimes God does big and bold things, like parting the Red Sea for the Israelites to cross. But other times, God does small, nearly imperceptible things, like *speaking in silence*.

Or slip down from heaven into a manger in a remote village called Bethlehem.

God may reveal more of who God is to us in a big, brash way, but honestly, it’s not nearly as likely as God working through us in small, simple ways. And, God may use us in highly heroic ways, but it is much more likely God wants to use us in humble, quiet moments of faithfulness.

“Great occasions for following Jesus come seldom,” Mother Teresa has said, “but little ones surround us daily.” She would know.¹

Martha Grace Reese puts it this way: “None of us is particularly impressive, but God can do amazing things with us if we’ll ask what God wants us to do, and then ask God to give us courage to do it!”²

¹ Mother Teresa, source unknown.

² Martha Grace Reese, *Unbinding Your Soul*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2009, p. 46.

John was driving home from work one day. He was disgruntled with what was going on in the town where he lived. The population was changing economically and racially. More and more businesses were closing. As he drove by yet another empty storefront, John said, kind of as a prayer, just under his breath, "God, why don't you do something about all of this?"

And at that moment, John said, he noticed a school bus pull up to a pretty low-end motel. He thought it was unusual so he watched the bus for a moment. Soon, he saw a dozen or so kids get off of the bus and go into motel rooms there. "What in the world is going on?" he wondered.

John was compelled. So he parked his car, went into the motel manager's office, and asked why the school bus stopped there. The answer from the manager, of course, was that kids lived there in the motel rooms with their families.

John stewed about this all the way home. He couldn't sleep that night. It bothered him the next day in the office. Why were kids living in a motel in his own town? Finally, he told a co-worker about seeing these kids get off this bus and go into motel rooms to live. At the end of the day, his co-worker handed him a wad of cash. She'd collected it from other folks in the office. "Here," she said, "We want you to bring those kids dinner tonight." And suddenly,
not in flashes of lightening across the sky,
not in loud bells ringing,
but in a small, significant way,
God spoke to John.

"Okay, I'll bring them dinner," John said to his co-worker. "But you have to go with me!" John's church soon joined him in serving meals at the motel every Monday night. And his co-workers too.³

If you have ever asked God, "Why don't you do something about this?" and heard silence as your answer, think about that.

Could it be that silence *is* God answering?

It may be that God's soft voice is asking you a question: "What are *you* doing here?" Just like God answered Elijah.

I'm guessing that God is answering in a smaller way than you are looking for.

A beloved pastor named Fred Craddock once said that when we become Christians, we feel like we're giving God this one million dollar⁴ check. We're turning over our whole

³ You can learn more about this ministry at theriverkc.org

⁴ Fred Craddock. He actually said \$1000 check in a sermon I heard about twenty years ago. I've upped it for inflation.

Unbinding Your Soul, Sermons

© 2010, GraceNet, Inc., all rights reserved

Sermon 3: "Humble Heroes"

Page 3 of 5

lives and saying, "Here, I want to follow Jesus." But Fred says then God surprises us. God gives us back the check in quarters. Then God tells us, "I want you to follow me one quarter at a time."

God wants to use you in an amazing way, and it will start small. Like noticing a school bus at a motel. These next few weeks in our church some people are going to be inviting friends to be in an Unbinding small group with them.

[*Give the details of your Unbinding Your Soul study here*]

This takes an amazing amount of courage—to simply ask someone to come. Don't try it without prayer. Even if your prayer is like John's, under your breath, a half accusation, "God, would you help me out here?" You'll be amazed at the shifts prayer can make. God will make a small opening. You just need your quarter to put in the slot.

Your church is giving you a quarter today. It's so you can remember to look for God in the small things, and to ask God to use you in small ways. [*Say more about how your church is passing out the quarters here. Maybe there is one taped to each bulletin, or an usher brings them down now. Or, they pick one up after coming forward to receive communion.*] Put this quarter where you keep your driver's license in your wallet.

A mom I know⁵ prayed for her children. She asked God to help her elementary-aged son and daughter have Christian friends around them. One day, a girl from school was over at the house playing. She heard her daughter ask if the girl went to church. "No," the girl said. "My mom works on Sundays." "Well, no problem," the daughter said. "My mom will pick you up every Sunday!"

"Okay, God," thought the mom. "Didn't know we would be creating our own Christian friends. But I can at least pick this kid up one Sunday." So the mom figured out how to squeeze that pick-up in the next Sunday morning.

Sunday came and they were running late as usual, of course. When the mom got there, the girl and her three brothers were all there, waiting for the ride to church. Let's just say there were some seat-belt laws temporarily violated.

The next week, as the mom rushed into the front door of her home from the grocery store, bags balanced everywhere, the phone rang. She started not to answer it, but a very subtle sense told her to answer.

It was the mother of the children she had taken to church last Sunday.

⁵ This is my experience.

And she wanted to know, Could she get her children baptized in their church? And, she had never been baptized herself, would they maybe baptize her also?

The mom sat down on the porch, cell phone in hand, groceries all around. And she heard the very quiet sound of God.

Pray. Ask God to use you. And do the very smallest thing that comes to mind.

Unbinding Your Soul Sermon #4

(Chapter 2)

"God Sightings"

Exodus 3:1-12 and John 1:35-39

Set-up: Fill your narthex, children's area, and education hallway with seeing paraphernalia. Set-up a microscope, a telescope, a kaleidoscope! Put out binoculars and magnifying glasses. Silly spectacles and eye pieces are good too! You're creating an atmosphere that says "Step aside and look for a minute, will you?" One church has a large kaleidoscope at their entrance. It is focused on seasonally-changing pots of flowers. It's a great introduction to the experimental attitude of their church.¹

Testimony: Ask someone new to your church (attending less than 2 years) to tell about what they first saw when they began coming. Humor would be great here, if they could talk about things that confused them. Like what in the world is a narthex? Ask them to say what they saw at the church that made them come back. Did they catch some tiny glimpse of God?

Litany:

Leader: Holy, holy, holy God. Heaven and earth are full of your glory!

People: We have come to look. We want to step aside from our rush and see you in our midst.

Leader: We ask for patient eyes and open hearts.

People: We pray for you to make us aware of whatever you would like to show us.

All: Holy, holy, holy God. Heaven and earth are full of your glory!

Sermon:

Annie, my bohemian-wanna-be friend, backpacked around Greece a few summers ago.² When Annie hit Athens, she was ready for a break. She started sizing up the hostels near the ancient market. She was looking for someplace to lay her head for the night, not too expensive, with a clean bathroom. Ahh, heaven, she thought.

One particularly dingy-looking option had an old Greek merchant standing outside, hawking his place. "Come and see!" he pleaded with her. "I, George, will show you the view!"

Annie looked up at the vintage 1950s sign, flashing the hostel's name: "Parthenon Paradise."

"Suuure," she thought to herself. But George was quite persistent: "Come, come and see! I show you the view!" So Annie followed George up the rickety, winding staircase

¹ St. Andrew's Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Olathe, Kansas

² This is my story. But names have been changed to protect the innocent. George, however, is really named George.

of the place. George burst open the doors of an attic room at the top of the staircase. He proudly displayed a room that looked as if it hadn't been dusted in *years*. Annie shifted on her heel to turn and get out of there. She was on her way to more sanitary conditions. Then, George peeled back the dust-laden curtains of the room and triumphantly proclaimed, "The view! The view!" Annie stepped over to see what could possibly redeem this dump. And then, she saw it:

The view.

Just out the window was the Parthenon. Laid out before her eyes were the ancient ruins of Greek worship. A perfect blue sky was the canvas for this wonder of the world. Annie could have reached out and *touched* the statues. It took her breath away.

Annie figured she could sleep on *top* of the sheets.

"I'll take the room," she whispered.

What if we could actually see God? What if, in the dust and dimness of this world, we could glimpse God?

Moses did. He was out sweating, taking care of somebody else's sheep one day when it happened. Moses was looking around, counting sheep's noses – is that 98 or 99? – when something caught the corner of his eye. Was something on fire? Moses looked more closely and there it was. Right there in the middle of the field. A bush was on fire. But more than that, the bush wasn't burning. It was just *blazing*.

Now Moses didn't just move on, thinking, "Wow, that was weird. Must be getting dehydrated out here. Better go get some Gatorade." Instead, Moses thought, "I need to check this out!"

And the Bible says that when God saw that Moses stopped to look, *God* started talking to Moses!

God called Moses by his name. Then God told Moses to take off his sandals. Apparently you're not supposed to wear shoes when you're standing on holy ground. You need to be able to actually *feel* the holiness with your toes.

Then God started telling Moses *God's* name. God started letting Moses see something of who God is ... giving Moses *more*. All the while, Moses is standing there, in his bare feet. Moses is standing there, toes a-wrigglin', looking at this amazing flaming foliage. And seeing God.

The poet Emily Dickinson wrote, "'All the earth is crammed with heaven and every bush aflame with God, but only those who see take off their shoes.'"³

³ Emily Dickinson, *Aurora Leigh*, 1857.

As Christians we believe we did, and do, see God. Especially through this human being named Jesus. We believe that God showed up in Jesus. And God could be seen clearly by anyone willing to notice. Anyone who stopped to look at a baby in a manger, or a carpenter teaching children
or a man touching another man's blind eyes
or a person dying on the outskirts of town.

Anyone willing to look could see God in Jesus.

This is, actually, what Jesus invited people to do. The very first words Jesus says in the gospel of John are: "What are you looking for?" Jesus said it to two potential followers. *They* said, of all things, that they wanted to see the room where he was staying in town. So Jesus simply invites them. He says, "Come and see."

Come and *see*, Jesus said.

Sometimes I'm afraid people who don't go to church think we Christians just want to get them to *believe* a certain thing.
Or, make them *act* a certain way.

I wonder if they think we are going to try to cram a bunch of doctrine in their heads.
Or try to get them to quit watching Mad Men and change the channel to religious television.

I hope that's not true about us. Jesus didn't say "come and *believe*." He didn't say "come and get your *act* together."

He said, "Come and *see*."

What if you started looking out of the corner of your eye for burning bushes in the yard? What if you lived life on the lookout for views of the Parthenon out dusty windows? What if you looked for God in your house? At work? What if you looked for God in the homeless guy you always pass by? Or in the faces of those who say 'hi' to you at church?

What if church were a place where we opened ourselves to "come and see," where we actually *looked*? Let's conduct the "God Experiment" this week. Let's allow ourselves and others the space and time to experiment, to test out, to taste, to see God. [*put in any specifics you want to about your church's Unbinding Your Soul emphasis here*]

Laura Hall is best known as the pianist on the comedy show, "Whose Line is It, Anyway?"⁴ She did not grow up in church. But she married a guy who did. He didn't push her about coming with him. He just invited her occasionally and that was it. So,

⁴ This story told with permission from Laura Hall. See laurahall.com for more about her. She's the real deal.

one day, to put a smile on her husband's face, Laura came to church with him. She was impressed that people spoke to her warmly. And she liked the music. So she came back.

She liked it more, so she came back again.

Pretty soon, Laura was going to church.

But she still wouldn't take communion. And she certainly wasn't going to be baptized or join or anything like that. The church people told her that was completely fine. They said they were just glad to see her.

And they *meant* it.

She could hang around as much as she wanted. Check out anything she liked. They were just happy she was there.

Seven years later, *seven*, Laura saw the communion tray coming for her. Something shone extra brightly about it that day. It was kind of, well, blazing. She was compelled to hold it for a while longer than was normal. But no one yanked it away from her or looked at her funny. The usher just stood there, quietly, gently waiting. Laura touched the bread. She deeply breathed in the scent of it.

And she could see God.

Unbinding Your Soul Sermon #5

(Chapter 3)

"First Steps"

Luke 15:11-24

Set-up: Put running shoes of varying sizes everywhere. Hang up big banners and small posters with "Just pray it!" and a slanted cross on the walls. Give everybody a sweat rag, or even better, put together a little goody bag like you get when you're in a 5k race. Put a few Scriptures on index cards, a pencil, a small spiral notebook, a tea light candle, and phone numbers of people who have agreed to be "running buddies" of those learning to pray. [*Your Stephen ministers, or elders, or Unbinding Your Soul group facilitators might be candidates.*]

Testimony: You are looking for someone who made a big change in their lives: they lost 100 pounds, or quit smoking, or decided to dramatically reduce their carbon footprint. Or maybe, they learned to pray. Ask them to talk about how they began, their very first steps, and what kept them going.

Litany:

Leader: Teach us to pray, O Lord.

People: We want to know you more!

Leader: Help us to turn away from all that weighs us down.

People: Help us to step into in your love that sets us free!

Leader: Chase us into your eternal arms, Holy Spirit!

People: Strengthen us with your powerful grace, Jesus.

All: Let us run the race set before us to win the prize of real joy!

Sermon:

Once, there was a son who was more than ready to get out from under his parents' roof. He wanted to throw off the rules and expectations of the family. He wanted to do life *his way*, without any interference from mom and dad. So one day he took everything that belonged to him, told his parents off, and headed out on his own. He traveled the world. He traveled through several romantic relationships. He traveled through all his money.

The son had to get a job working at a pig farm just to feed himself. One day, when he was out slopping the pigs, he hit rock bottom. This was not at all the life he had envisioned. He was broke, alone, in a disgusting, dirty, dead-end job, hungry, and everything he'd dreamed of for himself had disappeared.

Now what?

Do you know a guy or woman like this? Maybe it's you.

Jesus told this story. It's known as the story, or parable, of the prodigal son. Some really religious people were giving Jesus a hard time about having dinner with "sinners."

So Jesus told this story to people who thought they were God's favorites. Jesus wanted religious people to understand more about how God operates. He wanted us to know how to grow closer to God.

The rest of the story goes like this:

"Now what?" the son thought. There was no hope for the son where he was. The pigs were pretty poor company. So the son decided to head back home. He knew he would need to apologize. And he knew his family had the right not to invite him back in. But he decided to try his luck anyway. That took some pretty amazing courage. The son started walking home.

But something even more amazing happened. That dad, the one the son had told off? He ran out to meet the son. Listen to that part of the story again. It's in verse 20: "When the son was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; the father ran to him and put his arms around him and kissed him."

When the son was still far off, the father ran! The man *ran*.

This, Jesus wants us to understand, is what God is like! God sees us taking one small step towards God, God sees us headed towards healing in the tiniest of ways, and God is full-speed ahead, running towards us.

God is *not* waiting on us to make the whole trek towards heaven on our own.

God is *not* testing our willpower to see if we'll be hardy enough to make it to spiritual maturity.

God is looking for the slightest *inkling* that we want to reconnect with God, and then God is pumping legs to get to us and sweep us up in divine embrace.

All God needs is to see us taking that first tiny step.

If we are going to develop a real, powerful, delightful relationship with God, all we have to do is step towards God every day. And we will discover that God has already moved towards us far more than we can ask or imagine.

How do we step towards God everyday?

We pray everyday. We read a little bit of Scripture everyday. And we ask God to use us to help somebody else everyday. These are our spiritual exercises. They don't have to be heroic. They don't have to be pretty. They just have to be done.

Pray, read a Bible verse, and ask God to use us. Every day.

Doing these spiritual exercises are the tiny indication to God that we are moving towards God. They let God know we are moving towards healing, towards

reconciliation, towards freedom, towards *life*. We pray. It's *our* step. God does the rest.

Now there are two things that are really going to increase your chances of stepping towards God everyday.

One is, to have a buddy. We step towards God both alone and with others. We have to make the steps ourselves. But we are *much* more likely to pray and read a Bible verse everyday if we have a partner doing this with us. [*Say more about your UBS groups and prayer partners here, or about the arrangements you've made to offer prayer partners in your goody bags*]

Two, to increase your chances of stepping towards God everyday, you need to step towards God at the same time everyday. Give God the fifteen minutes before you go to work, or the fifteen minutes before you go to bed, or on your lunch hour, or whenever it is, every day. If you set a specific time to step towards God, you'll get in the habit of stepping towards God everyday. Sure, give God other times too. Spontaneous times are great! Just be sure you give God the planned time.

Imagine God waiting on the front porch, looking out to see if you're heading God's way at the time you said you'd be there.

Now, sometimes, maybe most of the time, we won't do this very well. Martha Grace Reese, the author of *Unbinding Your Soul*, writes, "Our best efforts usually have a 'sorta, kinda, oh wow I forgot' quality to them. . . the good news is that if we'll even *try* to show up, God can work with us. God can work *miracles* with that. Our part in this divine-human conversation is pretty humble."⁵

Romans 8:26 tells us that "The Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray like we ought."⁶ If we show up, and try to step towards God, God is already running full-tilt to meet us and help us. One step towards God. Every day. It's all that God needs from us.

God is ready to move us the rest of the way:
 towards the healing
 towards the joy
 towards the freedom God has in store for us.

Derek Redmond was a world-class runner who made it to the finals of the 1992 Olympics.⁷ He started out strong in the 400 meter. Everyone was cheering him on.

⁵ Martha Grace Reese, *Unbinding Your Soul*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2009, p. 37.

⁶ From the New Revised Standard Version.

⁷ Whoa, the YouTube videos on this are really moving. Show it if you can.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0t-NAum8kY8>

But all of a sudden, heartbreak. His hamstring muscle popped. Derek was immediately on the ground in a heap.

What now?

This was the Olympics. Derek Redmond wasn't about to be carted off in a stretcher as his final moment on the world stage. His training kicked in. He had run this race nearly everyday of his life. He got up. Barely. And he started hobbling towards the finish line. The crowd went wild. Then Derek stopped, grimacing in pain. He wasn't sure he could make it.

Suddenly, someone else came on the scene. Pushing past the guards was a determined, older man. No one and nothing was going to stop Derek Redmond's father from getting to his son.

Derek's dad got to him down on the track. Derek's dad wrapped him in his arms. He took on Derek's weight. Together, with tender determination, father and son headed towards the finish line. Derek Redmond finished that race.

Derek just kept on stepping. His dad did the rest.

Unbinding Your Soul Sermon #6

(Chapter 4)

“Step Over the Line”

Joshua 1:1-9

Testimony:

Ask someone in your church who knows what it is to surrender to God to talk about it. A good candidate is a recovering alcoholic with some years of sobriety under his belt. Ask him to explain step 3 of AA's 12 Steps: "Made a decision to turn our lives and will over to God as we understood God."

Set-up:

You may want to take communion by people coming to the altar, with a line marked on the floor that people step over to get to the bread and cup. It could look like a finish line, or be a big thick rope, or a pile of sand with a line drawn in it. Make as **many** stations as you need with multiple cup and bread-bearers if necessary for timeliness.

Sermon:

Have you ever been on a road trip that you thought would never end? Maybe you had a flat tire or took a wrong turn. Hours, maybe even a day or two, were added to the trip time. The company in the car was surly at best. The snacks were out. Your sister was snarling. You had to peel the back of your legs off the leather seat. You couldn't wait to get someplace else, anyplace else but in that car.

Forty years. That is how long Joshua's road trip was. He and his extended family of Israelites left Egypt hoping for a better life. They had been walking together to a new place to live for forty years. Forty years of being with the same people. Forty years of the same trail mix. Forty years. Are we there yet?

Then, the moment came for Joshua and his family. A chance to move into a new place. An opportunity to live a life he had only dreamed about. A challenge and blessing beyond his imagining.

Joshua and God are looking out on the horizon together. There is the Jordan River. And on the other side of that river is a whole new life for Joshua and his family. All they have to do is cross over the river, just step over the line. And they will enter a whole new world.

Looking down at that river, how did Joshua feel? Elated? Relieved? READY? Maybe. But the text says he was mostly scared.

God was about to lead him and all of Israel into a new chapter in their life together. They would receive the blessing of bountiful land. Finally, they could rest from their weary travels and live in peace. Instead of wandering, they would be settling down. Instead of moving, they would be making a new home. And as much as Joshua and the people had hoped for this, now that it was here, well . . .

They were scared.

We know this because in just 9 verses, God has to tell them 3 times to be courageous. And, God tells them twice that God will be with them. And, God tells them to not be terrified.

Can you imagine? God says, "Here, I have this great life all ready for you!" And they respond with *fear*?

Seems like no matter how things are going for us where we are, it is scary to leave what we know for a new place. Even if our daily lives are painful, or purposeless, it's what we know. So we stick with it.

But we don't have to.

Moments come for us when God says, "I have another option for you. Do you want to trust me?"

Anne Lamott is a beloved American writer. She is also a serious Christian. But the Christian part didn't come until she was in her 30s. She was once living on a houseboat, trying to write in the daytime and drinking herself into oblivion every night.

One Sunday she noticed gospel music coming from a church across the street – St. Andrew Presbyterian. "I began stopping in at St. Andrew from time to time," she writes, "standing in the doorway to listen to the songs." The sanctuary was drab and rundown, but it had "a congregation of 30 people or so, radiating kindness and warmth." The sermons were usually "all about social injustice -- and Jesus, which would be enough to send me running."

That April she "was sadder than I'd been since my father died." Drinking and pills helped dull the pain. One night, lying in the darkness, "I became aware of someone with me, hunkered down in the corner." She knew it was Jesus.

"I felt him just sitting there on his haunches in the corner of my sleeping loft, watching me with patience and love." For the next few days she sensed Jesus following her everywhere, "like a little cat."

Finally, she writes, "I took a long deep breath and said out loud, 'All right. You can come in.'"¹

Sweet surrender! Sobriety came slowly, over the next year. Then, at last, peace and joy came to Anne Lamott. Not a perfect life, mind you, but a healed life.

¹ Anne Lamott, Interview http://www.bookbrowse.com/author_interviews/full/index.cfm?author_number=125

Martha Grace Reese writes, "Self-relinquishment is at the heart of (Christian) faith."² Most mature Christians have many moments of this surrender in their lives. Daily surrender keeps us from staying put where we are when we could really be somewhere else with God.

A youth at camp had a Joshua experience. During one of the worship services, she felt this nagging sense that God had something for her to do. It was pervasive enough that she was compelled to go up to one of the adults after worship. She explained that she felt like God had something for her to do, but she didn't know what it was. The adult told her that sometimes we need to say 'yes' to God before we know what that means.

So the youth wrote in her Bible that night: "I say 'yes' to you, God. Whatever that means."³

"Be strong and courageous," God told Joshua. "I will be with you wherever you go."

Today you are invited to say a new "yes" to God. Maybe your 'yes' sounds like Anne Lamott's: "All right, you can come in." Maybe it sounds like a youth at camp: "I say yes, God. Whatever that means." Or maybe, you can say 'yes' *your way*.

Today you are invited to come forward to receive communion [*or a blessing, or a gift*]. There's a line here you'll need to cross to receive it. It's Joshua's Jordan River. But it is also your place to cross over into more trust in God. Ask God what you need to surrender . . . what you're afraid of . . . what's holding you back. Ask Jesus where he wants to give you new life if you'll let him. When you're ready, ask God to help you cross that line.

Be courageous. And the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.

² Martha Grace Reese, *Unbinding Your Soul*, p. 51.

³ This was my calling to ministry in the 9th grade.