

Sermon by Janet Gray Volkman  
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## Getting to Know God

Several years ago I was seeing a psychiatrist who took many long vacations—four to six weeks each. She was one of those button-lipped psychiatrists who rarely said more than “Uh hmm,” so I knew nothing about her personal life.

But finally one day there was the slightest crack in her demeanor, and she allowed as how she was about to depart for India, again, to continue her (her words) “spiritual quest.”

Afterward I thought about that quite a bit. What, I wondered, is a spiritual quest? How, if one wanted, would one “go on” one? Would it necessarily involve worldwide travel? Frequent flier miles? How would you get started? When, if ever, would it end? What were the road signs?

That was about seven years ago—before I was associated with this church—and strangely enough, that question stayed with me. And no one could be more surprised than I to find that I am now deeply into my own spiritual quest. Unlike my psychiatrist, I see it as an inner journey—perfect for the armchair travel prefer, and not without numerous experiences and adventure.

So today I want to describe to you two paths my spiritual journey has taken. One caveat before I go on, however—I am not a minister and nothing I say here is prescriptive. Everyone’s spiritual journey is unique. I’m describing mine in the hopes that in the words or between the lines, something might resonate with some of you. Take what you like and leave the rest.

Last year, when I spoke to you on July first, I was just finding the beginning of the path—at the trailhead, so to speak. I talked then about incidents of synchronicity in my life that I felt were places where God’s path and mine had crossed—in finding my dog and this church.

Soon after that, and I really don’t know why, I made the conscious decision that I wanted to deepen my relationship with God, although I wasn’t really sure what that meant. All I knew was that the Sunday service, as wonderful as it is, wasn’t enough for me. I needed more.

But how do you do that? Do you just put it out there and then wait for it to happen? Do you make it a point to look at more sunsets, rainbows, wildlife? Do you start reading the Bible? Meditate? Do you take a course? Google something?

After procrastinating for weeks, I went to see the one person who might have the answer: my pastor. Duh. How do I go about developing a relationship with God? I mumbled. The blush on my face was hot enough to set the office on fire. I had never said words like that before.

Work on your prayer life, she said.

Prayer life. I wasn’t sure I had one. Make it a practice, she said. Feeling just a little foolish, I nevertheless proceeded to put aside a half hour or so every morning upon

arising for spiritual reading, meditation and prayer. But then the questions. Do you talk out loud? What do you say? Who are you talking to? Sometimes I think my dog, Zachary, is God, he is so totally the embodiment of love, but even he looked at me oddly when this praying thing started.

Immediately I ran into more obstacles. I would simply "forget" the quiet time routine entirely. I would fall back to sleep in my recliner, I would meditate and my mind would drift to potstickers, the kitchen floor, gas prices, my third grade teacher, anything. I got stuck on what it was proper to ask God for, or even whether asking itself was OK.

Being your basic book nerd, I started reading books about prayer, Before too long, it was like a window had been opened and a fresh breeze blew through my brain and my heart.

I found out that there are many, many ways to pray, and God isn't too fussy. You can sit or stand or kneel or lie down. You can speak out loud, or in your head. You can use words, or not. You can read prayers written by others or make up your own. You can ask for a million bucks or tolerance for your grumpy boss. One thing I found out right away is that it is OK to ask. None other than Jesus asks for four things in the Lord's Prayer. He asks for bread, to not give into temptation, to forgive our debts and freedom from evil.

Then odd things began to happen. I still wanted more. What did Paul mean when he told the Thessalonians to "pray without ceasing"? Paul's phrase intrigued me. I wanted to be in touch with God all the time, not just 15 minutes in the morning. As Bernie Ward says each Sunday morning at the end of "God Talk," "The world is alive with the glory of God." I wanted to feel that. All the time.

So I went back to books. Some people, it turns out, pray while walking. Others while doing the dishes. Some take advantage of all those in-between times, the cracks in the day when we have to wait—the dentist's office, the DMV, the supermarket checkout—to pray. Sometimes people would say a comforting phrase over and over. Local author Anne Lamott said she has only two prayers: Help me, help me, help me and thank you, thank you, thank you. Gay Anglican Bishop Gene Robinson said he doesn't use words anymore—he just sits and feels the love of God wrap around him. A monk in the early church said everything you need to know about God you can find in your kitchen. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, best-selling author Rachel Remen says "It is possible to be standing in your kitchen and feel the breath of God. I wanted that. I put Post-it notes around the house, over my sink, for example, saying simply "Pray."

Finally I put together some spiritual goals: Pray without ceasing topped the list. I put the goals on a card and carry it still in my pocket. I can still forget. And I can still have doubts. As Marjorie Suchocki repeats in her wonderful book "In God's Presence," "How do we know that it's God that we know when we think that we know God?" Indeed. Or put another way, "Do we really talk to God, or are we indulging instead in simple meditative communion with ourselves?" God is presence, she says, filling every nook and cranny of the universe. I like that and also the image of the fish and the ocean (not original with me). The fish is in the ocean, and the ocean is in the fish. Similarly, we are in God, and God is in us. Life itself can be a pilgrimage, literally a journey to a sacred place.

So a year later, was it worth it? Am I better off now than a year ago?

NO question. I still have good days and bad days, moods, frustrations, etc. As many of you may know, the spiritual journey is like the labyrinth, full of twists and switchbacks, times when God is close and God is far away. But overall I feel less fearful, less alone. I'm more tolerant (although still working on that). I see the gifts in every day, or most days anyway. My life is richer, fuller and whatever happens, I'll be OK.

The second way I came to know God this year was totally unexpected. Becoming chair of Lay Care scared me to death, frankly. What do I know about taking care of anyone, when I can barely take care of myself, I thought. Nancy insisted that she thought it was a good niche for me, so I said I would "try it."

The first time I had to visit someone in the hospital, all I could think about was what was I going to say? I tried to center myself, calm myself down that is, in the car in the hospital parking lot. Starting that long walk down to the skilled nursing area, I suddenly began to pray, "Please, God, give me the words, the most helpful words, give me the courage to do this." Then I put one foot in front of the other and crossed the threshold of the room. I sat down, took a deep breath, and said, "Tell me how you're doing." That was enough.

Since then I've walked down that hall many times, and I always ask for help, and it has always come. The surprising thing, though, is not what I have given, but what I have received.

I'm supposed to be giving love, but I have received it ten times over. And also, I've learned so much about myself, about what's important in life, about how to be healthy in spite of illness, about accepting life as it comes, with all the pain and heartache and joy courage, about living authentically, without the social masks we usually wear, about aging, about facing suffering and uncertainty with equanimity.

Every person I've visited has been far braver than I think I would ever be, facing pain, disability, the powerlessness of illness and perhaps an uncertain future. And they greet me with such warmth. I think, what am I doing? Nothing, really, except to sit and listen. But the privilege of doing so has opened my heart in ways I didn't know it could open.

When I sit with someone, squashed between a wheelchair and a commode, and they trust me enough to tell me about their pain and their fears, I am receiving the greatest gift anyone can give. One person didn't want me to see her because of the way she looked, you know, hair disheveled, the fashion statement gown (NOT), the twisted sheets. But it was Christmas, so I went to see her anyway, saying I wouldn't look at her. But I did peek, and what I saw was nothing about her hair or her gown. I saw extraordinary bravery in the face of bad odds, a look in her eyes of warmth and love, toward me, me who just "popped in" for a few minutes. I discovered in those few moments that I didn't have to go to India or Nepal or Tibet to know God. Right in front of me, in that bed, was the true face of God.

For that and so much more, thanks be to God.

Amen

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