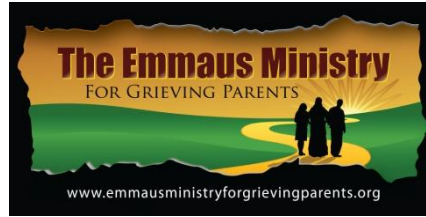




St. Anthony Shrine & Ministry Center



EXCERPT

FINDING GOD AGAIN

Brown Bag Lunch Retreat

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St. Anthony Shrine & Ministry Center

by

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Without even knowing it, I have always had this clear window within me revealing a crisp, well-focused picture of God. I could see God watching over me and those I love. The pixels in this picture have always been so perfectly placed that I saw Him in high definition. My perception of God was a father figure, a protector, one who would always make sure I was safe from harm because He loves me. I believed my family would be safe from harm because He also loves each of them. I thought I knew God, knew how He worked in my life. I thought I knew what he wanted me to do. No shock or surprises. His will for me and my desire to please Him never caused any real inconvenience for me. Nothing unexpected happened. As I grew up experiencing new levels of life, the normal pebbles of disappointment came my way.

...Sometimes, I was puzzled as to why God would allow people around me to say and do hurtful, mean, and cruel things to each other. Each chipped the glass, every

so often, blurring my vision. I knew God was there. I knew, as Max (Lucado) explained, that He was in my life because He loved me; but now and then, He seemed a little different, I had to stretch myself because He was not always, as clearly recognizable.

Then, it happened. A boulder, a huge boulder was thrown full force, crashing the window in my heart changing everything. My vision of God was not just distorted, but totally eclipsed. My once-clear view of God was smeared and impeded by my shock, anger, hatred, and unforgiveness. It is hard to see God when you and all members of your family are suffering at the news of someone you love dearly being murdered. It is hard to visualize a God of Love; it is hard to visualize an all-powerful God; it is hard to picture an omnipotent and omniscient God when your best friend, your younger sister is brutally bludgeoned and strangled by someone we did not know and for a reason we will never really know. Where was our protector when my younger sister Eileen needed Him? How could He allow Eileen, someone He loved to be murdered? How can he allow members of a family He loves, to suffer this violent and barbaric loss?

...Everything I knew about God came into question that day and my trust evaporated, my beliefs dissolved.

...Shortly after dinner that night, my mother unexpectedly appeared in my home saying she wanted to speak with me. She sat in my room and with calmness I came to know as shock, she told me one of her babies, my 34 year old sister, Eileen was dead. The weight of this statement continuously pounded at that window through which I saw my protector. I asked if there was a car accident. With a glazed look in her eyes, she told me no. The words I heard next forever changed my life, my parents' lives, my brother-in-law Arthur's life, and my

siblings' lives, along with our children's lives. I could not take my focus off my mother's never- been- seen -before facial expression. I realized she was not calm, but a shell of a human being trying to say words she could not and would not ever get a handle on. My mother told me Eileen was murdered by someone, who was unknown to her, a 21 year old man, who came to give her an estimate for lawn care service, which was to be a surprise gift to her husband. I gave her the advertisement for this lawn service, and still struggle with a gnawing guilt for doing so. To this day it follows me like some dark shadow.

...This murderer, this killer, took Eileen's life, and in that time span snatched from us life as we knew it. Gone was any sense of safety in our homes. He not only killed her, he killed something within each and every one of us and within our children. There is never one victim of any crime, but many. Some call it the domino effect. The information we learned caused us to fall like dominoes. Each of us fell one at a time leaning on the other sending them off balance. Our precious Eileen was murdered during Holy Week and we were hurled into an unwanted, extended stay in the garden of Gethsemane. My family, each of us ravaged with shock and pain, lived their own Good Friday while standing next to Eileen's coffin.

...Five ideas were clearly thought through and five decisions were clearly made resulting in the gruesome murder of my sister, whom we all loved. I could not understand why God did not stop him and help my sister? This question made a home in the channels of my mind filling so much time in my life. We then heard this man tell everyone present in the courtroom of returning to work to complete his schedule, going home to his parents and sisters, sitting with them, eating a steak dinner, watching television with them and going to his room to lay on his bed to watch more television.

He did all of this after taking the precious life of another human being. As those horrendous words left his lips, the sound entered into the air and landed like lead in our ears. Those sounds fell on our spirits like a jacquard knife crudely ripping our bleeding, almost defunct hearts wide open. Never could they be taken back. Each word resulted with more and more boulders smacking into and fragmenting the unmarred window through which I once saw my God. The God I could no longer see. My once-clear vision was just a memory. If God is real, how could He let any of this happen to those He loves?

...No one, absolutely no one should be called to bury a loved one twice, and yet this murderer imposed this deed on all of us. My unending and unanswered questions continued. How could you allow this, God, when I know you can stop anything you want at any time? The anguish of this experience changed each of us; none of us for the better. This traumatic ordeal left each of us scarred, blemished, wounded and forever impaired on the inside where on one can see the extent of the damage or the depth or breathe of our continued suffering.

...How could God and why would God allow this to happen to my sister, Eileen, who loved Him so --and tried to reflect Him in her day? How could God and why would God allow two parents, who faithfully attended Mass, lived their faith and taught their children all they knew about God - -to suffer like this? For the rest of my parents' lives an ache propelled their every heartbeat. Each of us tried to live what we believed and yet --it happened anyway. Our Eileen was murdered.

My beliefs were fractured, beyond weakened, there were destroyed. I felt abandoned by God. I felt abandoned by His so called care and protection. Part of me wanted to cry, and part of me wanted to kick and fight. Anger, hatred and

unforgiveness were making their way into my life, finding a home, becoming my everyday companions.

About a year later, while having a cup of tea, a very good friend of mine and our family asked me if I believed Eileen was in Heaven and I answered yes, of course, I believe Eileen is in Heaven. He then told me if I believe she is in Heaven, then I must know she forgave the person who killed her. Like a bolt of lightning, this statement stopped me in my tracks and made me think. The tenderness of his brave words was the first drops of healing glue used to begin repairing the window in my heart.

...One summer day, about a year later, while reading Scripture, and I could not believe I was reading Scripture; I came across the passage in Luke about judging others and forgiving others. I read “Judge others and you will be judged; Forgive others and God will forgive you.” I also read that God will use the same measure for me that I use for others. O-O-O-O that was the last straw!!!! This brought my raging anger to another level and I found myself telling God that it is different in my situation.

...How dare you God demand this of me? How dare you! I was so livid my breathing was shallow. My friend Charlotte came to my home that afternoon and sat under a shady tree in my yard with me watching my two children and their friends swim in our pool. I asked her if God really expected me to forgive the man who murdered my sister, Eileen. Charlotte in a quiet, tender voice and a saddened expression about her said yes, God wants you to forgive him. I could barely breathe. The anger began to rise within me, choking me; then, I thought of my own sins, my own failures. I am not only asking for, but depending on generous amounts God’s forgiveness and generous amounts of God’s mercy. Without them,

I don't stand a chance of seeing my best friend, the sister I miss each moment of each day. It made me absolutely physically sick to think I had to somehow learn to extend the same measure to this murderer that I was asking God to extend to me. Something within me screamed this cannot be true; and yet in my heart of hearts, I knew it was. I knew I had to change my thinking and yet, I did not know how. Courageous people do things like this, and I am not courageous. I clearly told God how I felt. I told God I cannot do it. I do not know how to do it. *I do not know if I want to do it.* I said God you will have to do it through me, for I am not capable of doing this myself. After all these years, I can still see the kind, yet heavy-hearted expression on Charlotte's face, as she told me the truth; the truth I did not want to hear. Her courageous actions were more droplets of healing glue that continued to piece the shattered window glass together. Charlotte's actions will always be the kaleidoscope that brought me a clearer picture of an adult image of God.

...Max Lucado spoke of this in his story and I soon internalized his words about a new, adult image of our God. He suffers with you and me, cries with you and me; and like Charlotte, He is a friend, who walks with you and me when we hurt. These healing droplets of glue did not make my work any easier. It was my work and it took a long while. To be honest, I still have days when I have to work at my decision to forgive. I will always remember these two honest and brave friends taking time out of their lives to blow new life into the dying embers of my faith.

...I had no idea what to do or how to do it. Knowing this area had to be cleared and restored led me on a quest to make dramatic changes in my life. This sometimes unwanted, but needed, change within did not happen overnight and I did not change instantaneously. It began one day with a decision. It was my decision to forgive.

With education and time I did learn something; as a matter of fact I learned many things and I would like to share them with you:

- - I learned everyone has a free will and they can use it whenever and however they want. I began to understand that God does not interfere with our free will choices.

- - I learned God sometimes says no. Just as I have said no to my children when they were growing up; God says No to me. I said no for their safety; and God sees more than I ever will and I believe that His answer of No is for my safety and the good of mankind.

- - I learned I can shake my fist in anger at God while crying and screaming. God considers this conversation; He calls it prayer; so He listens. Even when I don't think he is; the listening happens because He cares.

-- I learned when my perception and sense of God's Presence diminished; my awareness of his nearness began to lose strength. Even when my love for Him and His love for me was in question by me; even when my heart was indifferent; He was there. When I stopped allowing negativity to rule my days; God bridged the gap of where I was and where I needed to be. He not only healed me, but He forgave me.

-- I learned God places people in our lives to help us along the way. There may be obstacles along your path and mine; but God sends people into our lives to help us work around and get over these obstacles. A kind word, a smile, a listening ear may be all that is needed.

- - I learned we are responsible for our decisions. No matter what the increment of time available, we need to stop and think of the consequences of our actions for ourselves and others. Saying I didn't mean this to happen doesn't lessen the harmful effect or affect of what you and I do to others. We are asked to think of the consequences of our actions before making a decision.

-- I learned that the murder of another is not only taking someone's life from them. When we lash out to others with hurtful words, actions, when we bully, when cyber space is used to assault someone – part of the victim's wholeness is taken away; it is destroyed. It is murdered. You and I are also responsible for the consequences of such actions. When we strike out and hurt another with our behaviors and words, we are also striking out and hurting the God, who lives within. Every adult knows bullying does not stop when you reach adulthood. I and, I am sure others in this room, have worked with bullies. The behavior only stops when we decide to put a stop to it within ourselves.

--Many people in my life carried drops of healing glue that helped me put my image of God back together reminding me He is always walking with me. They helped me redefine or refocus my view of God. Their actions helped me to align my expectations with a more mature faith. God is a Father to me, He loves me, and He disciplines me. I guess all those years I was looking for, as Max says, a grandfather who says "give Peggy whatever it takes to keep her happy with a smile on her face."

-- I know that God also put people like Max Lucado, with his inspiring writing, in my life to help me move along in wholeness. I know firsthand God may not stop every pain in your life and mine; but He will travel beside you and I giving us the grace, the divine energy needed to continue on our journey.

-- One of the most important lessons I have learned is the need to rid myself of anger, hatred, and unforgiveness. They are very heavy, cumbersome, deterrents and we are not made to carry them. It can be compared to trying to fit a square peg in a round space. Doesn't belong, never fits correctly. It is necessary to acknowledge when they are in our lives; but it is just as necessary to ask God to release the shackles, help us put them down, and walk on in freedom. This Divine help, the gift of grace is yours and mine for the asking. Unforgiveness can be compared to a malignancy that lives within the core of our being.

It is like a cancerous tumor, which begins with one cell, dividing itself again and again. With time and without treatment it grows and continues to grow consuming healthy cells. The disease and sickness of unforgiveness grows, becoming bigger than us; it becomes us. I know this from experience. **Not forgiving is, as written, like drinking poison and hoping the other person dies.**

-- Sometimes life is just not fair. There is nothing on our birth certificate that states it will be. There is our name, date of birth, place of birth, but no promise of fairness.

-- God sent His Son, Jesus, Emmanuel (meaning God is with us) to heal and that healing includes the brokenness of spirit and the wounds inflicted on us by others. Once we know hurt and brokenness, you and I are asked, no we are charged to, reach out and help the hurt and broken around us when we see it. I believe you and I are called to reach deep into our experiences, deep into the painful memory of what changed us forever. Because we have been sensitized by life, sensitized forever, you and I are called to pull up and share our learned understanding, encouragement, compassion, tolerance, acceptance and hope with those around us. Maybe, just maybe, my or your display of these actions might breathe new life into the dying embers of another's faith without your ever knowing it; just as my two friends' display of tenderness, kindness and courage renewed a faint glow of faith within me.

... You and I are *invited* to be a squeaky, clean, windexed window, a crystal, clear glass. It is through this crystal, clear glass, you and I are *called* to reflect a bright, crisp, vivid picture of the God, who always lives within. No matter what happens in our lives, God never leaves us. Looking back in time, I realize God never left my side, He remained faithful; His Hand never let go of mine, but remained loosely cupped in mine; His glance never wavered; He remained focused on me. It

was me that did not see Him, my visions was clouded. It was me who did not feel His fingers loosely intertwined with mine, my sense of feeling was numbed, it was me who waivered. My intense anger, unforgiveness, and extreme disappointment were the components that darkened, truly darkened the glass through which I once saw God clearly. His patience, understanding, grace and mercy were and still are the components that cleaned that glass

...Whether it be a faint glow or a blazing light, His indwelling, His loving, comforting Presence within you and me longs to be seen, projected, and recognized through the clarity of glass we provide... For this is my experience in my Finding God Again. Let everything that has breath praise God.