



Leaning Into the Heart of the Holy

2016 Lenten Devotions

Thursday

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By Elizabeth Edwards

I met April when she was 16 years old. She was the granddaughter of the host family with whom I lived for two summers when I worked as a summer missionary in the western part of our state. April is a 4-foot-tall bundle of energy and laughter and song who has Down Syndrome. Although she would never be able to hold down a job or rear a family, April filled every room she entered with pure joy and light, and with noise! She spoke and laughed loudly, very loudly, and often at times that for others would have been inappropriate. She loved to tell silly jokes, especially knock-knock jokes, always followed by unrestrained laughter and an enveloping hug for the recipient of her joke. April loved to sing: She participated in a community choir for developmentally disabled people where each singer would try to sing louder than the next one, and where she could often be heard making a joyful noise above the entire crowd. And April loved chocolate. She loved chocolate so much, in fact, that on more than one occasion she walked down to the corner store with treasures from her grandpa's rare coin collection which she had found on his desk, hoping to buy candy bars for herself and all her friends. April was generous and joyful and loud, and her spirit was often infectious.

There were some occasions, though, when April's loud voice and laughter would give way to more thoughtful reflection. When she wanted to share something she considered to be serious, she would motion with her finger for you to move in closer, and she would speak very softly. "I love you," or "I'm sorry," or "I need some help" were phrases she would say almost in a whisper so that others would have to lean down close to hear them. I'm not sure if she understood them to be more intimate expressions that didn't need to be shared with everyone, or if the emotions involved simply led her to change her mood, but in those moments, April's expression and posture, and voice would change from her usual exuberant tone, and she would become pensive, earnest.

It so happened that during my second summer with the family, their old dog Jethro died. A black lab who had been with them for almost two decades, Jethro was nearly blind and was suffering from the hip dysplasia so common for labradors. Jethro had been the guard of the driveway, a playmate for April, and a constant companion for my host dad, but by the time I met him, Jethro was temperamental from the constant pain and inability to see who was approaching him. But one day Jethro didn't come out to meet the car, and after a couple of days of searching the large wooded area around the house, he was found some distance from the house where he had wandered off to die.

April, of course, was very sad to hear the news. After all, she had never known her grandparents' house without Jethro. One day soon after he died, April came over to me and waved her finger for me to lean down close. "Jethro died," she said softly. "Grandpa is sad because Jethro was his friend." And after a pause, she said, "I think we should be grandpa's friends now."

In the simplicity of her words and the depth of her grief, April offered a love and generosity as profound as any I've ever seen, and standing in her grandparents' kitchen, we shared a sacred moment. It was only years later that I would realize how much closer to the reality of God's love April may be than those of us who clutter life with complications. Perhaps most of life should be about boisterous, joyful celebration, singing and laughing and enjoying all the sweet gifts God offers to us. But when life is more tender, more raw, more vulnerable, we should lean in further to listen for the gentle, loving whispers from the heart of God.

Prayer:

Dear God, I thank you for making me wonderfully unique. You knit together my talents, my flaws, my moods, and my dreams. At the moment of my creation you were there, loving me beyond measure. You know what it is that I need for this day and for this season. You provide me with abundant blessings and gifts to meet each challenge with love and patience.

On the days when I can't seem to get anything right, you are there, holding me gently.

On the days when I can't stop comparing myself to those who are smarter, better, more successful, or just MORE, you are there, reminding me that I am your beloved child.

On the days when stress, fear, doubt, and worry threaten to stop me in my tracks, you are there, gently nudging me forward.

On the days when words don't seem adequate to thank you, to praise you, to glorify you, you are there, understanding the prayers that spill from my heart.

Dear Lord, help me to listen to what it is that you ask of me today and in this season. Let me live and act with compassion and kindness. Help me to love boldly. Guide me in following the example of your Son, Jesus Christ, in all that I do and say. Amen.

—Sheri Dursin, adapted

Psalm 139: 1-18, 23-24

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
O Lord, you know it completely.
You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night',
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.

My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written
all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.
How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
I try to count them—they are more than the sand;
I come to the end—I am still with you.

Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.