

Are you ready to hear the worst, corniest joke in the world?

A man is dining in a fancy restaurant and there is a gorgeous redhead sitting at the next table. He has been checking her out since he sat down, but lacks the nerve to talk with her. Suddenly she sneezes, and her glass eye comes flying out of its socket towards the man. He reflexively reaches out, grabs it out of the air, and hands it back.

"Oh my, I am so sorry" the woman says as she pops her eye back in place. "Let me buy your dinner to make it up to you. They enjoy a wonderful dinner together, and afterwards they go to the theater followed by drinks. They talk, they laugh, she shares her deepest dreams and he shares his. She listens. After paying for everything, she asks him if he would like to come to her place for a nightcap. They had a wonderful, wonderful time.

The next day they get together again, she cooks a gourmet meal with all the trimmings. The guy is amazed!! Everything had been SO incredible! "You know" he said "you are the perfect woman. Are you this nice to every guy you meet?"

"No..." she replies "but you just happened to catch my eye."

The first time I read that joke, I just started laughing. We can certainly groan at it (and we did). But for me, it highlights something so very basic. Most of us are looking for a wonderful relationship. We look for a great relationship with our spouse, with our friends, with members of our family. We are looking for even yearning for the type of relationships that help us to feel hopeful and fulfilled. We are looking for them, but they can be elusive.

We are in the midst of a sermon series called, *Living Freely, Unbinding Your Heart*. Most of us have learned to protect our heart. And *Living Freely* is what very few of us have experienced. We protect our heart from being hurt and broken. I believe that we live in a time when people are looking for and yearning for real, honest, authentic relationships. What on earth can we do to improve our relationships?

First of all, we need to work at developing our relationship with God. In our scripture for today we meet a woman who comes to draw water from a well in the middle of the day. This is a good indication that she is hurting. Because if you were going to get water in this part of the world, you typically went in the morning, before the heat of day arose.

But by going at noon, you also cut down your chances of running into others who might be at the well, who might not like you. She comes out and discovers Jesus there, who automatically engages her in a conversation. The conversation is a dramatic conversation. Eventually the conversation gets to the topic of worship and of what God is really interested in.

Jesus reminds her and us that God is really interested in having a relationship with us that is honest and straightforward. How is your relationship with God? Are you working at it? Or is this something you need to work at?

What I have discovered in my life is that the most important relationship I attend to is the relationship I have with God. When I take care of my relationship with God, the other relationships of my life have added depth and added meaning.

The challenge for me, and I grew up in the church, is that I never really learned how to develop this relationship with God. But through a lot of work and experimentation with different methods for prayer, I am discovering a relationship with God that gives meaning and hope to my life. It actually nurtures me and is helping me through the toughest challenge I have ever faced in the death of my daughter, Whitney, from last summer.

On the back of one of your inserts is a method of prayer that I offer to you. Set a goal of taking 15 minutes a day to begin working on this method. Do it for the next 21 days and just see what begins to happen to your relationship with God?

The second set of relationships we need to work on are those with members of the church. God has given us the gift of a church community. We are given the gift of each other, so we can help each other focus on God and face the challenges of living.

When we get involved in a small group, in a ministry group, in a study of some kind, we get to know other people in a way that often doesn't happen if we come to worship alone. It is in this smaller setting, where relationships are nurtured and they grow. It is in this smaller setting that we can challenge each other in ways that are honest and loving, so that real growth can happen.

In one small group I was a part of, a man who traveled for a living, surprised us after we had met for quite a while by saying that while he was on the road, he was often tempted by the pornography channels in the motel room. He also confessed that pornography was destroying his marriage. He asked us to pray for him and help hold him accountable to deal with his addiction to pornography.

So each week, we started asking him about it. We started helping him to find ways to deal with his addiction.

Because he was willing to be honest and real with us and with God, his life was changed. His relationship with his wife grew stronger. His relationship with his children grew stronger. He began liking himself more. A small group changed his life, because he was willing to let God work through the gift of community.

When we take seriously our relationship with God and with others in the church community, it will overflow into the rest of our world. Church is to be an igniter of faith for us. It is to be an instigator of growth that affects your whole life.

In our scripture, this woman was so touched by her conversation with Jesus that she ran back to the village and said, "Come and see a man who knew all about the things I did, he knows me inside and out. Do you

think this could be the Messiah?" Her life was so touched by God that she couldn't keep it inside.

When we say yes to God, incredible things can happen for us and to this world. Just listen to what happened in Atlantic City, New Jersey, where a former Casino Chef named Jean Webster said yes to God.

In 1986 she started to feed the homeless of the city out of her house, and today she runs a soup kitchen at First Presbyterian Church that feeds as many as 400 people a day, five days a week.

"She is a living miracle, in terms of the blessings she gives to others," says a senior vice president at a Casino/Hotel, who has known her for over 20 years. "I had no food in my cabinet," says a young, homeless man during a time of testimony and worship before lunch one day. "Then someone told me about Sister Jean, so I came here. I thank the Lord there's someone out there willing to help out."

Sister Jean herself says "God is the one who told me to feed the homeless, spiritually and physically. It seems like nobody wants to help these people, but they're human beings. So I just rely on God. God always gives me what I need to feed those who come."

Sister Jean Webster has learned that in saying yes to God, God is faithful. God is healing. God is caring. God is interested in working through us. Are you willing to let God work through you? Are you willing to deepen your relationship with God? Are you willing to allow others to help you?

May God give us the courage to live into a faith that is real, authentic and vibrant so we can learn to *Live Freely*, as God wants us to.

Amen