

The Chapel of the Wash and Dry

It can't be morning already.

Everything outside me is saying *yes, it is*, but everything within still says *no!* The alarm sounds like a faraway foghorn. My body feels weighed down with anchors and my eyelids are stuck at half-mast. I heave myself over to peek at the time. Six o'clock and already the day's not adding up: although I went to bed at 11:00, I feel like I've only gotten a few hours sleep.

With the shock of a shipwreck it hits me—I *have* only gotten a few hours sleep!

Awareness washes up in waves, bearing glimpses of scenes from the night before: Joshua coughing up a storm quelled only with cough syrup, Benjamin sobbing for a prayer to soothe away a bad dream, baby Jonathan calling for his lullaby tape, Zachary's wet bed.

And how could I forget being startled at 3 A.M. to find Sophia hovering silently at my bedside, waiting politely for her mommy to open her eyes? I guess she wanted quality time.

"Count it all joy," I mutter as I sit up and—not wanting to break my meager momentum—lunge for the laundry room.

The slick linoleum under my feet is a wake-up call. Once over the threshold, my body carries me through the familiar routine of stuffing sheets into the washer, measuring soap, and setting dials. The whoosh of the water into the machine is refreshing, like a splash of cool water on my face.

Lord, Please Meet Me in the Laundry Room

Contemplating the mounds of clothes around me, I am reminded and reassured:

*I lift up my eyes to the hills—
where does my help come from?
My help comes from the LORD,
the Maker of heaven and earth (Ps. 121:1-2).*

Here is where I get a second wind. Here is where, like a shipwrecked survivor, I grab the life preserver of the Lord. Because, Lord knows, He is the only One who can get me through this day.



It wasn't always this way. I used to think my laundry room was just a laundry room. This is the story of how I learned how much more it could be—and how much more I could be—once I let it become more than just a place to wash my family's clothes.

I was a new Christian 16 years ago, and the world was a different and delightful place. I'd finally met God and knew He loved me. With 30-some years of ramshackle living behind me, I finally felt secure—and suddenly alive, like the sleeping princess awakened by the prince to find the perfect happy ending.

Really, it was just the beginning.

I'd been a believer for just a few weeks when I signed up for my first women's Bible study. It was there that I began to see my inadequacies on parade.

I hadn't grown up with the Bible and so was starting from scratch. That was bad enough. But worse, I suddenly found myself surrounded by a bunch of wonderful women with flawless hair and hands who made it look easy to look good. For me, it wasn't so easy. With seven children at home—six under 10—my morning had been pretty hectic just trying to detach. All I had to do was tilt my head a little to the left for a pungent reminder of my motherhood—the smell of spit-up on the shoulder of the T-shirt I'd had no time to change before dashing out, only to arrive late as usual anyway.

I kept my hands folded to hide my scruffy, half-bitten fingernails, but there was nothing I could do about the rose tattoo on my right hand—the most visible of three acquired during my 1960s and 1970s hippie days. In 1987 there just weren't many women sporting tattoos—especially in Bible studies.

Would they wonder if I was a real Christian? I mean, I had no doubts about my faith, but I worried that they would. After all, there was no way for me to stand up and announce, *“Oh, by the way, I got this tattoo a long time ago before I knew the Lord, before I understood the emptiness inside that drove me to fill it in ways that would never work. All I ever really wanted was to feel special. And now that I know God, I do. I'm just stuck with this tattoo to remind me what it was like without Him.”*

Now I was sure I was special in God's eyes—well, maybe almost sure. Little doubts were prowling like critters around my new spiritual shelter, looking for just the teensiest crack to slip through. And sometimes they'd find one.

Which is why sometimes in Bible study, I'd catch myself wondering if some were more favored than others. I was so far behind! I was 39, just learning the difference between the Old and New Testament, scrambling to locate certain verses in my painfully obvious new-looking Bible.

Others seemed to find them with their eyes closed. Their Bibles had quilted covers that unzipped to reveal well-worn pages, notated here, there, and everywhere with things they'd been learning during the years I'd wasted on things like rose tattoos. Things they'd learned in years of Bible studies and hours of *quiet time*.

Oh, the concept of quiet time! It loomed over my life with the gravitas of a Goodyear blimp, a constant reminder of yet another something I needed to do. Another something on the crowded list of things I woke up every morning with every intention of accomplishing, then regretted not doing at the end of the day when life with my family left me too pooped to pop.

Lord, Please Meet Me in the Laundry Room

Another something to feel guilty about.

Long about the third week someone mentioned a *prayer closet*—as in “I fled to my prayer closet and poured my heart out to the Lord”—which I took to be a place where a believer could find solutions to the weightiest problems, a place that maybe if I had one I could make my quiet time come true.

Ah, so that must be what was missing! I needed a prayer closet to flee to. Unfortunately, when I hurried home to look for some previously uncharted territory to call my own, I could find nowhere with the sustained privacy necessary for even a prayer shoebox.

Not with the hordes in my house.

Maybe that was my problem—too many children. Lord knows, I’d been hearing that enough, as in “I don’t know how you do it—two’s all I can handle” or “I just don’t have the patience” or worse, “I’d go crazy with that many kids.”

Actually, I’d want to say, two used to be all I could handle. I wasn’t patient myself until I had a lot of kids, and How do you know you won’t go crazy without them?

Then, too, I kept hearing that God didn’t give us more than we could handle. So He must expect me to handle it and measure up to all the Christian stuff I was supposed to do too.

Weeks went by as I pondered these things in my heart, battling my growing sense of self-doubt. In so many ways my life was getting better and better—more patience with my husband and children, more enthusiasm for my life at home. But in the spiritual arena, I wasn’t making the progress I thought I should. I mean, not only could I not find a prayer closet or quiet time, some weeks I waited till the night before to answer a week’s worth of questions in our Bible study book—even though our leader had warned us not to.

Some weeks I never got to them at all.

Day after day, I’d think I’d get a start on developing a spiritual

life, and day after day I'd fail. My days were already way too crowded, but even when I'd carefully plan some quality time with God, something unexpected would set me back—from small things like runny noses and broken plates and stitches to major events. As when two-year-old busiest-boy-in-the-world Benjamin brought in a garden hose to water our green carpet—just like Daddy and the grass!—causing a tidal wave that left behind pulled-up soggy carpets and a week of roaring turbo fans.

"Honey, the hose is for outside only," I'd said calmly, removing the hose and walking it outside as though this wasn't one of the greatest domestic disasters I'd ever seen. It wouldn't help to get mad at my little boy. After all, Ben was driven by every toddler's desire to serve, the same one that moved him to shovel all the ashes from one fireplace and try to carry them to another. No way he could possibly understand what he did was wrong.

So, yes, I was calm. And any mother who's had to clean up the consequences of a child's innocent attempts at helping will know what I mean when I say how proud of myself I was for not losing it. Moments like that at least made me feel like I was on the path to becoming a good mother, though there was always plenty to keep me humble.

But would I ever become the believer I wanted to be? Evidently not with little people like Ben consuming every available minute in my life.

One day in the laundry room, while wrestling with the lights and darks, I wrestled with my dilemma. *Oh, Lord, I thought, is there a prayer closet somewhere for me? And what about this thing they call quiet time?*

Aren't you praying now? This question was wordlessly impressed upon my heart. It was a question, but it was an answer. And I hadn't expected an answer, so it caught me off guard. But I knew who it came from.

Yes, but, Lord . . . and things began to spill out of my heart

Lord, Please Meet Me in the Laundry Room

that I hardly knew were there. They spilled out even as I was realizing how much He already knew.

I didn't have to tell Him how hard it was to feel like a light-weight when others had more spiritual muscle to flex. He already knew.

I didn't have to tell Him how much I wanted to be the best I could be, and how far from the best I often felt. He already knew.

I didn't have to tell Him how much I missed the afterglow of the decision that changed my life forever, now clouded by my frustration with my inability to jump through the hoops I thought I should. He already knew.

I didn't have to tell Him that no matter what, I would follow Him. He already knew.

I didn't have to tell Him anything about me, because He already knew everything there was to know.

But since I knew He was listening, I told Him anyway. And somehow He gave me an answer. Somehow He made me understand that a mother of toddlers just isn't like anyone else. Most of the time, my life was not under my own control at all, but more like a series of random events. It was in the way I responded to the events that my spiritual life could be measured. As when I handled Ben's indoor garden party so well. That wasn't me at all—so patient, so calm, such the good mother—but me stepping aside to let God respond as the perfect Father.

It isn't about a set-aside quiet time. It's about prayer that requires nothing more than a willingness to pray.

I was OK just the way I was, as long as I wasn't content to stay that way but willing to grow—to grow through pouring out my heart to Him and waiting for answers impressed without words

on my heart. Finally, I understood it wasn't at all about a set-aside quiet time—especially at this season of my life—but more about prayer that required nothing other than my willingness to pray.

Victor Hugo, author of *Les Miserables*—my second favorite book after the Bible, and like the Bible a great tale of redemption¹—once wrote, “There are moments when whatever the attitude of the body, the soul is on its knees.” My soul was truly on its knees that day as I wailed to the Lord. I was in a desperate way. Yet that day I learned I didn't have to wait for desperation for my soul to kneel.

And so my laundry room became my prayer closet. For years it's been the place I meet the Lord each morning before my children awake, and at intervals throughout the day as I transfer clothes from baskets to washer, from washer to dryer, from dryer to baskets again. In those 12- and 20-minute snatches, I found my quiet time.

I never have any trouble finding God in my laundry room. He is always ready to receive my praise, my thanks, my prayers for family and friends, my joys and heartaches too.

My son Jonathan—now 11—was born with Down syndrome.² That wasn't a heartache, but a joy. When they placed him in my arms, I thought, *God must love me so much to give me such a special son.* I can't explain the confidence I felt, except to say God must have prepared me somehow in advance. I had a sense that we were at the beginning of a great adventure, as though we'd been carried to the top of the roller coaster, with the most exciting part about to come.

But the joy was short-lived. After the first night of sweet bonding, all kinds of scary things began to happen as the doctors found all kinds of things wrong with Jonny's little body. I couldn't hold him without the help of two nurses who sorted through the bundle of tubes and cords and sensors to place him in my arms. He needed a complete blood transfusion. He needed oxygen. And

Lord, Please Meet Me in the Laundry Room

finally he needed more—surgery to straighten out his twisted little bowels. I watched helplessly as they packed my technologically swaddled baby into a portable incubator for emergency transport to the big university hospital across the San Francisco Bay.

And the unthinkable happened: I walked out of the hospital with no baby.

Shattered and in shock, before driving across the bridge to join Jonathan, I stopped at home and did a load of laundry.

For three weeks, Tripp and I switched off, saying hello and good-bye twice a day, taking turns at the hospital with Jonny—so pale and limp and vulnerable—and at home with worried brothers and sisters. Friends, neighbors, and even people we barely knew brought meals, baby-sat, took all seven of our kids bowling and swimming. I never felt so loved and cared for—and never so exhausted.

One night I dragged myself home, feeling about ready to give up, and found two friends waiting to surprise me. I had to admit, as caught up as I was in the drama of our life, I never would have let them visit if they'd called and asked me—which is why they probably came unannounced, as good friends should do if they have to.

And, oh, it was so good to sit and let them make me laugh while Christine gave me a foot massage and Sandy peeled oranges and fed them to me section by section.

All of my life I'd been in charge of taking care of others. Now I was learning to surrender.

Through it all the only thing I kept up with was washing clothes. The truth is, my laundry room—with its reassuring routine and memories of mornings with God—had become the most comfortable place for me when I couldn't be with Jonny. People must have questioned my sanity when I staggered in from a sleepless night at the hospital and made a beeline for the laundry room. How could I explain what it had become?

And so our big adventure proved to be not what I'd expected but a crash course in becoming completely dependent on God and friends to see us through the tough times. At the same time, we were discovering in neonatal intensive care just how much tougher life could be. Some babies were worse off than Jonny. Some were dying. Some had no one by their sides. I felt like all my life I'd been clueless and unaware—and I knew I'd never be the same.

We brought Jonny home three weeks later on a sun-drenched Easter morning. I'd brought so many babies home before him, I guess I must have started taking it for granted. Jonny's homecoming—after weeks of worry—was unremarkable on the outside, but seemed a magnificent affair.

But then, Jonny's birth changed my perspective on so many things. Just as my moment of belief had marked the previous years *Before Christ* and the following years *After Christ*, now there was another set of eras: *Before Jonny* and *After Jonny*. Everything—the way I viewed others, my church, my community—was different. As though Jesus had spat on the ground and made mud and put it on my eyes and made me finally, truly see.

Jonny's medical problems didn't end that Easter. In fact, there would be 14 more months of heartache/joy cycles as he was hospitalized again and again. Through it all I tried to be the model Christian mother, relying on my laundry to help me keep my sanity.

We'd managed to string a few healthy months together and Jonny had just celebrated his first birthday when sister Madeleine was born. A month later, Jonny was in intensive care, nearly dying of pneumonia, and now it was worse than ever, being split between two babies who needed me. Still, I hung in there, trying to be a good girl for God, keeping in mind what everyone kept telling me—God doesn't give us more than we can handle.

Oh, but He does!

Jonny'd been home only a few weeks and I'd only done two dozen loads of laundry before he was sick again. More rounds of

Lord, Please Meet Me in the Laundry Room

lab work and X-rays, then a call from the doctor, “Bring him to the hospital right away. He needs another operation.”

Enough! Now I'd really had enough. Sick of being the perfect long-suffering Christian mother, angry at God for not rewarding my good behavior, like a tantruming toddler, I threw myself on the dining room carpet, banging the floor with my fists and raging: “Why, God? Why? What are You doing? I can't take it anymore!”

Ordinarily, I would have thought it wrong to be so disrespectful. I mean, He is God, after all. But these were extraordinary times and I was fed up. Fed up enough to stop acting the way I thought I should act and start acting real. How would God handle my eruption? Would I be punished? While I might have gotten away with whining on occasion, I'd never been angry with God. Was I allowed to be?

*God sometimes gives us more than we can handle
so we can learn to be totally dependent on Him.*

God was bigger than my anger. He could handle it. I wasn't punished. In fact, after that operation followed by three weeks in the hospital, Jonny and I never went back again. His body was fixed for good.

Now I could see that contrary to popular belief—*God doesn't give you more than you can handle*—He does indeed sometimes give us more than we can handle, so we'll learn to truly rely on Him. Looking back, I think God was just waiting for me to let go and give Him the whole mess of Jonny's medical problems. He must have been as sick as I was of Barbara the Brave, Long-suffering Supermom. He must have delighted in hearing from Barbara the Angry-but-Real Frightened Little Girl.

Yet another lesson learned not during quiet time, but in real life—about what God expects from a believer. It isn't about

where or when or how I pray. Instead, it's about realizing God is always there, whether I pray or don't pray. He's always ready to receive me.

It's not at all about prayer closets and quiet time—though they're nice if you've got the lifestyle to allow you the luxury. But for workaday moms like me, it's about getting real with Him, staying real with Him on a minute-by-minute basis. What God wants isn't my current version of what a faithful follower looks like, but an authentic relationship, where I don't hide who I am or how I feel.

This thing called prayer turned out to be not at all the way I first imagined—quiet moments with God in pastel places, like the atmosphere evoked in Thomas Kinkadee paintings. Mine was more heavy brushstrokes like Van Gogh—or sharply angled like Picasso.

*God wants an authentic relationship with you—
a relationship where you don't hide who you are
or how you feel.*

I've never had the reputation of a "prayer warrior," for which I am grateful. I'm always glad not to be called on to pray in public—and have actually been known to say no when asked. I'd rather hear other people pray. I admire the cadence of self-confident prayers pounding like waves on heaven's shore or the quiet rhythm of praise pattering like raindrops on a leafy carpet.

My prayers aren't like that. They're full of starts and stammers and stops. Well-turned phrases are few and far between. While usually—as a writer, as a wife, mother, and friend—I'm trying to choose the best words to communicate clearly, with God it's different. I'm just desperate to communicate. If what comes

Lord, Please Meet Me in the Laundry Room

out is confusion, He'll clear it up—like someone who helps me unlock the meaning of that Picasso painting.

What's most important: being real. And there's nothing like motherhood to bring out the real in a woman, is there?

Over the years, my prayers have changed. As a new believer, I turned to prayer when times were tough, when I was unhappy, when I needed answers. For a while, it was all about me—until I caught a clue I could pray for others, too, and probably should. So I prayed for my family and friends and then beyond to people I didn't really know—like people in the houses or children in the schools or shoppers in the malls I passed each day. I'd even pray for those I didn't want to pray for, like that driver who cut me off or the coach who yelled at my son or the friend who gossiped about me.

My prayer life grew a little richer when I latched on to this formula I learned somewhere:

Adoration

Confession

Thanksgiving

Supplication

Using this structure, I'd start by worshiping God and who He is. Then I'd call to mind and acknowledge my sins, asking for His forgiveness. Then I'd thank Him for my many blessings. Only at the end would I ask for anything I needed.

This was a good discipline. It gave me a firm foundation in not always thinking of myself. And once I overcame the limitations of being a "good" girl and praying just the right way—once I got real—it meant I'd probably cover all the bases in prayer, though not in such a structured way.

More and more, my prayer life became not just a compartment of my life, but part of me. From the early days praying in the laundry room, to the discovery of what it meant to get real with God, I realized that the limiting factor for my prayer life was

only me—and the thoughts that cluttered my mind. I could choose to pray anywhere, anytime, while doing anything. All I had to do was turn my thoughts to God.

I've since discovered that this revelation—though very spontaneous and personal—was not unique. Some years ago, I came across a slim volume called *The Practice of the Presence of God*, a book that can be read in an hour and offers a lifetime of change.

In it, I found described what I as a busy mother had grabbed onto as a spiritual survival technique, described by a 17th-century French monk, Brother Lawrence, who taught himself to respond to God's presence at all times.

He wrote, "The time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer, and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen . . . I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees at the blessed sacrament."

And so we moms, too busy for quiet time and prayer closets, may find good company in this gentle soul. Housework doesn't have to be something that keeps us from prayer but something that brings us to prayer.

And it isn't just housework, it's whatever, wherever, whenever. So instead of listening to the radio, I can instead tune in to God. As Brother Lawrence says, "Lift up your heart to Him . . . the least little remembrance will always be acceptable to Him. You need not cry very loud; He is nearer to us than we are aware of."

Whenever I think of Him—and I'm constantly trying to increase the amount of time I spend thinking of Him—I thank Him for everything I can think of to thank Him for. I pray for Him to help me entrust the things I worry about to Him. I see the splendid trees, the Blue Ridge Mountains, the legendary Shenandoah River, or I hear a piece of music and thank Him for the abundance of beautiful forms with which He filled our world. I mean, as I remind my children all the time, He could have made only one kind of tree, only one kind of flower, only one cloud formation. We

Lord, Please Meet Me in the Laundry Room

might have all looked the same or had the same voice. The world might just be black and white. The fact that the world is rich and full of variety constantly reminds me how much He loves us to surround us with such variety and beauty to make our imaginations soar.

It's that soaring imagination that every mother needs. It's that soaring imagination that makes it possible to be content as I fold the clothes and drive the car and stir the spaghetti sauce. It's that soaring imagination that lifts me out of the humdrum routine and helps me see my husband and children not as just the ones with the clothes habit that keeps me in the laundry room so many hours a day, but as the constantly unfolding miracles they truly are. It's the soaring imagination that keeps me mindful that even though the things I'm doing might not seem so important, in my Heavenly Father's eyes they always will be.

When I turn my thoughts to God, loading the dishwasher, sweeping the floor, getting up to nurse the baby at night, even changing a diaper can be a prayer. And as I turn my thoughts to Him, I pray for all the mommies like me who are too busy wiping peanut butter and jelly off little faces and kissing owies to maintain the practice of what the less encumbered call quiet time. I pray for mommies who can't remember how it feels to lie on the couch listening to the rain or reading a book, who can't grab five minutes in the shower without the world falling apart.

I know there are mommies whose prayer closets are buckets and scrub brushes, sewing baskets, garden patches, or car pools. And there are mommies who work outside the home whose prayer closets are assembly lines or switchboards or operating rooms. Everywhere are mommies squeezing moments of quiet time between customer calls or the clamor of kids.

I know this because now I understand that God is bigger than any place I set aside to meet Him and as near as I invite Him to be.