

Abba, give me a word

the path of spiritual direction

L. Roger Owens



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Abba, Give Me a Word: The Path of Spiritual Direction

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For my father, Max Owens
(1920–2009)

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My Father's House

I make the drive every month. I've been doing it for five years. It used to be only five miles, now it's forty-seven. It's still worth it.

I get in my station wagon after lunch, put a Diet Rite in the cupholder, and toss an apple in the passenger seat for the trip home. I back out of the driveway and away from all the things I have left inside the house—task lists, briefcase, half-written sermon, as many worries as I can. I leave my wife, Ginger, with whom I just had lunch, after I tell her that I will be back in time to pick up the boys from school.

I drive a mile and a half to get out of the subdivision, then onto the bypass, then onto the interstate. Finally I feel as if I'm on my way.

It takes a while to get out of Durham, North Carolina, since the limits of this city of nearly 230,000 seem to expand farther every day. But in fifteen minutes I pass over Falls Lake, and then my mind begins to quiet from all I have left behind. Crossing the bridge feels like a point of transition for me because when I see the ospreys and the bald eagles, I am reminded of why I'm doing this—to become like the ones the prophet Isaiah talked about, who wait on the Lord and mount up with wings as eagles, and run and run and never tire.

Just past the lake, I turn off the interstate and onto country roads and through towns that even sound rural: Butner, Franklinton, and, finally, Louisburg. Louisburg, the Franklin county seat, with a population of 3,000, has one grocery store worth going to, a small coffee shop and bookstore called the Coffee Hound where the people in town who like books can connect, and a couple of boutique shops that are closed every Monday. There's a declining two-year college in town, a monument to the Confederate

dead, and a plain brown office building on Church Street with a parking lot across the street.

That's where I always park.

The sign on the brown building next to the door tells me that I can find an appraiser and a lawyer inside, neither of whom I see very often. The sign outside doesn't say anything about the office at the end of the hallway, the one with a navy blue sofa and a candle already lit, with the bookshelves full of Bible commentaries and books on prayer, and contemplative music playing. The sign doesn't even have Larry's name on it, even though he's had this office since he retired years ago as the pastor of the Baptist church two blocks away.

It doesn't say he's there waiting for me or even hint at the odd and beautiful thing that will happen within as he listens to me and I listen to him and we both listen together in silence to the other Someone in our midst.

Here's why I see a spiritual director.

A few weeks ago I did a funeral, as we say in the ministry business. It was a graveside service, short and simple.

The cemetery was a mile from the Raleigh-Durham airport, and every few minutes a jet roared over our heads.

I'll always remember this funeral as the one where the casket began to roll away from me as I placed my hand on it and spoke the words "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust." The funeral director leapt to his feet and steadied it from the other end. He assured me afterward we had been in no danger, but I have my doubts. I saw the look on his face.

I had never met Betty, the deceased. She was the mother of a member of the church where my wife and I are the pastors. She died of complications associated with Alzheimer's at the age of eighty-one. Betty's son told me she'd never been a churchgoer, but she made peace with God in her own way. I wondered if the handful of people there, the ones seated under the tent and the ones standing in the wind, thought death was like getting on one of those planes and taking off to a better place—peace with God being the boarding pass.

The Scripture passage I read that morning could certainly suggest as much. "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places"—that's how it reads in the prayer book I was holding, but I said "mansions" because that's

how people who have ever listened to southern gospel or read the King James Version remember it. It's easy to think about death as boarding a flight, landing at a resort, and then checking into your mansion in the sky.

But I reminded them that, whether we know it or not, from the day we cry our first breath to the day we struggle for our last, God's own love is our home. God himself is the mansion in which we live here and now. In God we live and move and have our being, as Scripture says. Whether we know it or not.

I reminded them of that, but I think I might have been reminding myself.

I don't know if Betty knew it, but I know one thing: I want to. I want to know what it's like to live in the house that is God's own presence, to live there today and tomorrow, this minute and the next. And I want to be familiar with it. I want to be able to find my way around that house of love even in the dark, negotiating my way around the corners, up the stairs, into the room where I can rest. But how? How do we learn to live in this mansion now? How do we spend our days attentive to this love that surrounds us?

That's why I sit on that sofa every month in the last office just past the bathroom with the retired Baptist pastor twice my age sitting across from me, the coffee table with a candle on it between us. I do it because it helps me to see and find my way through this house of love in which I live.

There are plenty of books about spiritual direction. I've read some of them and recommend them. There are histories and theologies and how-to's, even though I wouldn't trust a spiritual director who learned how from a book. If you read some of those books you will hear wonderful stories and get to know fascinating characters. You will learn about the early Christian monks who left the cities after the Roman Empire had become Christian and fled to the Egyptian desert where they faced and fought temptation, because when everyone was a Christian by birth, being Christian was too easy. They went to the desert to find God, and they realized they needed each other to do it. So a younger monk would visit one of the older, experienced monks—an *abba*—and say, "Abba, give me a word." That was a request for the older man to give the younger

a nugget of wisdom out of the treasury of his experience. Those nuggets began to be collected, and you can still read them today in the Sayings of the Desert Fathers.

And you'll read about others as well, about the fifth- and sixth-century saints of Ireland who transformed the pagan Celtic practice of having a soul-friend, an *anam cara*, into Christian friendships in the Spirit. And about the spiritual friendship between St. Teresa of Ávila and St. John of the Cross in the sixteenth century. St. John of the Cross gave some especially dire warnings to spiritual directors who urged strenuous effort upon people seeking their advice. You'll read about St. Ignatius of Loyola, the sixteenth-century founder of the Jesuits, who assigned to a spiritual director the role of helping someone on a silent retreat interpret Scripture with the imagination.

And this: You'll read about how in 1962 Pope John XXIII inaugurated the ecumenical age by convening the Second Vatican Council.

You may have noticed how many of the people mentioned above have two letters before their names—*St.* That's because they are Roman Catholic saints. Spiritual direction was largely the business of monks and

nuns and priests and the people who came to see them. But when John XXIII called that council he opened the storehouse of Roman Catholic riches to the rest of us (except for the Anglicans, who seem to have had their own key to that storehouse for some time). In the past fifty years Protestants have begun to discover the practice of spiritual direction and have noticed ways they've already been doing it.

That's what you'll read in the history, theology, and how-to books. This is not one of those books. This book is an introduction to the practice of *receiving* spiritual direction, drawn from my experience. But that history has made this story possible. It's possible now—when it wouldn't have been fifty or forty or even thirty years ago—for a thirty-four-year-old Methodist pastor to tell the story of how his relationship with his spiritual director, a retired Baptist preacher (I hope those saints are enjoying this), helped him find the God who has been there all along.

Along the way I've learned something about receiving spiritual guidance—not only in the hour with a spiritual director but also throughout life. I've learned about what you have to let go of and what you have to embrace. That's

what I want to share with you, because what you have to let go of and what you have to embrace to receive spiritual direction happen to be what you have to let go of and embrace to live well in the mansion that is God's love.

A few weeks ago I mentioned my spiritual director in a sermon. The next Sunday morning a man in my congregation approached me before worship. I'd guess he's in his fifties. He has a wife and a son and he works at Sears. He's active in the church. He ushers often. He helps serve Communion. He's an ordinary guy.

And this is what he said: "You mentioned last week something about having a spiritual director. Can you tell me more about that? I think that's what I need. I'm not in crisis. I don't need counseling. But I feel like God is working on me, leading me to something, and I don't know what. It feels like I'm at a crossroads, and I need someone to help me figure out which way to go next."

For every person who comes and asks, how many more are there who are beginning to sense that God is more *there* than they had ever thought, but who don't know

how valuable a spiritual friendship can be to get to know, follow, and even love that God?

Maybe you are one of them.

Two weeks later another man in his late thirties asked if he could take me to lunch. He wanted to tell me how he's grown in his faith over the past few years. He's begun reading a psalm and meditating every morning because, he said, he wants to be better at staying focused on Christ throughout his day. He wondered what I thought about this. I told him he was discovering on his own a very ancient way of praying.

He didn't know what to call it, but he was looking for spiritual direction. How many more like him are out there—Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, seekers, and doubters—who don't know that you can seek *and* find, most often with someone's help?

I hope my experience might make this treasure of the Christian tradition available to even more people. Maybe the words Larry spoke to me, when I asked for them like those ancient monks and even when I did not, will speak to you as well and help you find your way through anger and pride, transitions and grief. And I hope what I have

learned about receiving spiritual guidance—about longing and finding, releasing and offering, trusting and attending—can help you as you seek to hear a word of guidance, whether that's from a spiritual director, a friend, a spouse, or the Spirit.

Maybe what I have learned will whet your appetite to know better the God who is already there and start you asking questions, so that eventually you might find your way to an office, or a family room, or even a kitchen table where someone will be waiting, someone who has lived in God's house for so long they can help you make yourself at home there too.

Longing

A young man just out of college and beginning a master of divinity degree at a nearby seminary sent me an e-mail saying he'd like to talk. Lonnie came into my office and sat in one of the two newly upholstered Victorian-style low chairs I had pilfered from a sitting room in the church when my wife and I had become the co-pastors six months earlier. One of my more superficial longings had always been to have an office of my own, a quiet place to read and write and think and work. When Ginger and I became co-pastors of this church, she got the real senior pastor's office—the one with two doors and two chambers,

the outer chamber with the big oak desk and the couch and rocking chairs, appropriate for looking important and doing marriage counseling and having small meetings to discuss budgets and the like—and a small inner office, what I call the inner sanctum, the private reading, writing, and praying room of the senior pastor. I'm not bitter that she got the grander space. It is also the office people go to when they have a question or a complaint, because it has a gold engraved plaque on the door that says "Pastor." People know where to find her.

I got the storage room tucked away in the corner of the church's library, a quiet, out-of-the-way room with no more than a few boxes and piles of books when we arrived. We quickly found an unused desk, and I put two rickety wooden chairs next to one another so that I might show at least minimal hospitality by inviting someone to sit. And then someone told me these would not do, even for the pastor with the library closet office. He told me about the two Victorian green chairs. I moved them in and thought they would do until I had time to find something more my style. But they are still here, and they are the chairs people like Lonnie sit in, and sometimes cry in, and often laugh in

when they have made a discovery and want to talk to me about it.

Lonnie seemed a little unsure how exactly to put into words what he needed to say. But it ended up something like this: I'm a new husband and a young man and a Christian, and there's a lot of stuff I don't know, especially about how to be good and faithful at any of these things. And I don't know how to pray. And I want to love God. My own dad was a pretty bad example of how to live, especially how to love. I want more than he had to show me. I want to be holy as a husband and as a Christian and eventually as a father, but I don't know how.

So far so good. Then he dropped the bomb.

"I was wondering if you might be able to mentor me."

I hope he didn't notice me glance over my shoulder to see if there was an old, wise-looking, gray-haired man standing behind me, to whom he might have been talking. But no, he was looking at me and talking to me, and he must have thought that the two gray hairs in my otherwise dark brown goatee qualified me as wise. And while at that moment I felt like an amateur—all the ancient teachers on spiritual direction would tell you to find someone with

more knowledge and experience than I possessed—I did understand one thing. I understood his longing, the longing to learn a life with God, to pray, to live well, the longing for guidance from someone wise. I had discovered the same longing in myself a few years earlier.

Beneath the longing for an office of my own or a plaque on my door or a big desk that made me look important, I had discovered a longing for God and for someone who could show me how to find the God I was longing for.

The search for spiritual direction begins with a discovery. Not many people begin relationships of spiritual direction—or begin practicing *any* of the spiritual disciplines—because someone told them to or they read in a book like this one that having a spiritual guide is a good idea, even though it is. You begin the search for direction in the ways of prayer and in a life lived in the house of God’s love because you have discovered a longing. I know this was the case for me, and I suspect it is the case for most others.

I had an old, gray-haired man in my life for almost thirty-four years. He was even wise sometimes. I called him Dad.

Dad was fifty-five when I was born, so his hair was thinning and gray as far back as I can remember. When my brother and I were kids, one of our favorite games was to stand behind Dad as he sat in his green recliner watching the Chicago Cubs lose on a Saturday afternoon and play with his hair. We'd comb it the wrong way, make it stand up straight, then watch it slowly begin to fall. Dad rented a small sales office in a beauty parlor, so we spent more hours than we can count watching women get shampoos and perms and sit under the domed dryers with curlers in their hair. After all that, we thought we knew what we were doing. But we never dared try to curl or cut or color his silvery tufts. We would just run the black comb he always had slipped in his back pocket through his hair and feel its silkiness with our fingers.

Dad was typical of his generation—he didn't speak much about things of the heart or the soul, so I didn't learn this stuff from him. He taught us a lot, mostly by example, not by having heart-to-hearts. Men of his generation don't have heart-to-hearts. They work. They watch baseball. They throw baseballs with their kids. They teach them to fish. Dad taught me how to golf and to tie a tie. He taught

me things he didn't even know he was teaching me, so now when I play with my own children, or wear tennis shoes with my khakis, or I don't care if the blue in my plaid shirt matches the blue of my sweater, I can see his influence.

He taught by example—I learned by osmosis. But there are regions of my soul this kind of teaching never touched.

One thing Dad didn't do was talk about faith or God. If he had a rich inner life, and he might have had, I had no way to know it. Not only was Dad typical of his generation in this way, Dad was also a midwesterner. Born in Indiana, he spent the summers of his youth in Chicago. He lived the rest of his life in Indiana, except for the few years he was in the Army Air Corps. And there is something about midwesterners—they don't wear their inner life on their shirtsleeves. While there is much of my dad's life I can see in myself, there is one part of his life that stayed a mystery to me—his soul.

Dad's faith was the habitual churchgoing kind. He loved going to church. He was a traveling salesman, and whenever he was gone over a weekend he would bring home the bulletin from the United Methodist Church where he had worshiped on Sunday morning. When he was home he was

always the first in the car on Sunday, not just to warm the car on cold days or cool it on warm days, but because of his eagerness to get to church and shake hands with the friends he hadn't seen in a week. Many Sundays he was an usher, and he relished the job of standing at his post and greeting worshipers with a handshake, a bulletin, and a jolly smile.

I think I learned this from him as well, because I am a habitual churchgoer, always the first one ready in my house, and not just because I'm the preacher.

But I didn't learn prayer, how to understand the motions of pain and sorrow, joy and hope that are like tides in the soul's depths. His life shed no light on that for me. I had grown up in a house with a father who taught me everything other fathers teach their kids. But I didn't learn the one thing I needed most—how to live in the house of the Father, in that Love that is our truest home while we are here.

When I turned thirty, I began to discover this longing—a longing for God and for someone who could show me how to love God. I wanted a fatherlike figure who could help me peer into my own soul and not be overcome by the darkness or blinded by the light. As my own life began to

settle—graduate school was ending and I had a family and a job—I began to sense an emptiness in soul-depths I never knew I had.

When I was eighteen, I moved out of my father's house to go to college. I'd had an experience of God (that's another story) and felt called to be a preacher. I went to college and studied religion and philosophy, and I discovered something called *theology*—the reasoned and systematic investigation of Christian belief and practice. And I was taken. From that point on I wanted to be a theologian. I thought being a theologian would make me the best pastor possible.

I somehow missed what the early Christian monk Evagrius of Pontus had to say about theologians: "If you are a theologian you truly pray. If you truly pray you are a theologian."

I skipped the so-called practical courses in seminary and stuck with the heady seminars—Karl Barth, Thomas Aquinas, Aristotle, who wasn't a theologian, obviously, but was influential on the theologians I liked best. And after

three years, I finished a master of divinity degree, and four years later I was a year away from finishing my PhD. I was almost a theologian.

I had never given up on the idea of being a preacher—there was something almost romantic for me about being a pastor-theologian, a resident scholar in a church who could answer all the congregants' questions, teach with eloquence, write articles and books on the side, attend conferences, and teach a course or two at the nearest college or seminary. So my wife and I asked our bishop to appoint us to a church together, where we could share one job and have time for our children and for me to finish my degree and keep reading and writing. The bishop agreed, and in June 2005 we loaded our two boys in the station wagon, hoped the moving truck would find the way, and drove to Christ United Methodist Church, a small rural congregation six miles outside of Louisburg, North Carolina.

And here, armed with brains in my head and feet in my shoes, as Dr. Seuss put it, I began to discover the poverty of my spirit.

One of the duties I inherited as pastor was teaching two adult weekday Bible studies, one on Tuesday morning, the

other on Tuesday night. A small group of seniors had been meeting every Tuesday morning for years before I got there. The evening class had been meeting together for fifteen years, and they would tell you, if you asked them, that they were the backbone of the church, the most committed and stalwart members—and they were right. They served on all the committees, did most of the work to prepare for church activities such as potlucks and the fall festival, and were probably the biggest givers to the church. These two groups were used to having the pastor every Tuesday come and talk to them about Scripture. So when Ginger and I were dividing up tasks, I got the Tuesday Bible studies.

Early in that first year we were studying the book of Ephesians. I spent Mondays preparing. I read commentaries. Sometimes I translated the text. I tried to figure it out so I could help them figure it out.

And then something disconcerting happened. I discovered verses I couldn't figure out. And it seemed as though these verses were speaking directly to me.

The book of Ephesians has some wonderful passages, but the verses I remember most, because they were the

verses God used to awaken me to some deeper realities of life with God about which I had been unaware, were from chapter five. As we muddled through, we came to these verses: “Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord” and “So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.” In a way I had never experienced before, these verses spoke to me, not as a puzzle to be figured out, an academic exercise in discovering what some ancient writer meant, but as if they were addressed to me—*Roger, do you know what is pleasing to the Lord? Do you know what the Lord’s will is? Do you know how to discern?*

I didn’t know how to discern. I didn’t know how to listen. I didn’t know what it meant to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. This was a mystery to me. And it was a mystery to the folks in the Bible study. I was the deaf leading the deaf.

This experience set off a chain reaction. I began to notice other verses in the Bible: “pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances”; “discern what is the will of the Lord”; “present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God”; “be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” These weren’t verses any longer about God—they

were words to me about the mystery of life with God, and they highlighted one thing—my poverty.

But they were also the beginning of a longing for someone who could show me the way.

When I wasn't at the church, I was either visiting or at home with my two young boys. And my growing longing made me ask: What are they learning from me? What can they learn from me? What do I have to teach them? With a pair of blue eyes and a pair of brown eyes looking at me, these boys were not old enough to tell me what they needed or expected, but they were already old enough to start imitating—old enough to learn. What were they learning from me? As we lived in this church-owned house together, what did I have that I could teach them about living in the house that is the love of the Father for the Son in the Spirit?

How could I teach them if no one had taught me?

I'm just guessing, but you have very likely already begun to make this discovery. You are becoming aware of at least a vague sense of longing for God—maybe not yet the deer-panting-for-streams-of-flowing-water kind of longing for

God. It may be a simple restlessness. But it's there and you know it.

And I suspect this longing for God is already associated with a longing for guidance—why else would you read books on the spiritual life?

Where can you go for help? Who can show you the way?

This is where the search for spiritual direction begins. But it might be some time before you come to the conclusion that what you need is a flesh-and-blood spiritual director, or before you find the right one. In the meantime, there are ways you can deepen this discovery and continue to cultivate the longing. These are practices that can take us all the way through the practice of spiritual direction, but they are particularly appropriate here at the beginning, at the recognition of that initial sense of desire—for God and for guidance.

And they are quite simple. The first is—find a pen and a few blank pages and begin to write about it. Don't know what to write? Try writing what I call a "longing list." At the top of a blank sheet of paper write, "What do I want?" And then begin to make a list of the things you are longing for. Don't try to be pious. No one is looking over

your shoulder to see if you are longing for the right things. Just begin. You might want to commit to writing for five minutes without stopping or thinking too much. Just write.

If I were writing my longing list today, it would probably begin with “a new van.” It would have the names of a few books. Now that we have two boys and a baby girl, the list would say, somewhere, “a little peace and quiet.” Sleep would be on it for sure (which is more of a spiritual longing than most would think). Maybe the van would come up again—or at least a new door on the old van. The list would be boring, mundane.

If yours is boring and mundane, that’s okay. Maybe you’ll need to start again tomorrow. Do this for three days. What do I want? What am I longing for? Write.

Sooner or later, I imagine, depending on how far along you are in making the discovery, the words on the list are going to be more like this: peace, rest (not in the “I-need-to-take-a-nap” sense, but in the “rest-for-my-weary-soul” sense), quiet, hope, love—or *to be* loved—life, strength. Maybe you write a line from a hymn you used to sing growing up—strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow.

And then maybe the word “God” will show up on the list, or maybe just “Love,” but this time you wrote it with a capital letter. Perhaps, “Direction.” You long to know where you’re headed and how to get there.

It’s useless to ask which of these longings are better—a new van is real and relevant to me right now. The point is not to judge the things closer to the top of the list. But the pen can be like an archaeologist’s pick, helping us slowly move through the layers of longing that characterize all of our lives, to get below the everyday, obvious longings and to get to the bottom, to the foundational longings that in some mysterious ways give shape to all the rest.

The other practice is spiritual reading. Reading the stories of others, in whom a longing for God has been awakened and who have pursued that longing, is a way not only of refining our own longing but also of cultivating it as well, of deepening it.

But let me warn you, spiritual reading has a danger, and we should be aware of that danger from the outset.

Let me say it as pointedly as possible: Reading about prayer, or the memoirs of saints and monks, has a subtle way of preventing prayer by replacing it. It can inhibit a

life of prayer and obstruct our journey toward God if we let ourselves think that this kind of reading *is* prayer, that it *is* the journey itself. You read instead of pray.

Prayer is mysterious. The silence it calls for can be off-putting. It's easier to pick up a book and let ourselves be moved by the story of someone else's life. If this happens, spiritual reading can distract us from our own longing for God as that longing gets diverted into a search for deeper and deeper spiritual *insight*—a new way of praying, or a new understanding of God. We begin to peruse the shelves of the bookstore looking for the newest and latest in spirituality (maybe that's how you came across this book) when we would be better served by getting our butts in our chairs and reading the Psalms.

I only know this from my own experience. I reached the point where I had to establish a firm rule for myself: You, Roger, are not allowed to read about prayer until you have spent time praying. To choose to read instead of pray is to succumb to sloth—laziness in the life of prayer. I have some expertise in succumbing to this particular temptation.

But once we recognize the danger and establish whatever boundaries we need to avoid it, spiritual reading

can help us recognize and cultivate the growing sense of longing for God and the sense of our own aimlessness, thus deepening our sense of need for direction. When we read about the prayer lives of others, it's like looking at a beautiful vision of what is possible—we might not know *how* it is possible, but we see it and want it. It allows us to ask: could God do this in my life? When we read how others have learned to live in the house that is God's love, we can become increasingly inspired to live in that house ourselves. If we already have the longing, this kind of reading can help us deepen it and spur us along the journey as we search for someone who can show us the way. The desire for direction begins to grow as we recognize the gap that exists between the shape of the lives we are reading about—the graceful ways their lives inhabit the house of God's love—and the fumbling ways we trip over the doorjamb just trying to enter.

As we read we might begin to have a growing sense that a book, as useful as it is to awaken in us a desire for God and show us our need for direction, cannot replace the person who sits across the coffee table and listens to our lives. Books aren't so good at listening.

This is what happened to me. I began to read books about prayer and spiritual memoirs. I devoured them, especially the ones that pointed to a contemplative way of living and praying. They showed me what was possible. They were the stories of real lives that were so close to God they might as well have been one with God. Maybe they were. They talked about resting in God. And I saw in them a mirror of my own longing for rest. But I also asked the questions: how is this kind of prayerful life possible, and who can show me the way?

Where will I find a spiritual guide?

I stood to preach between two oak lecterns, the one to my right the pulpit, the one to my left a little smaller, where people stood to read Scripture and sing solos and make announcements. With nothing between me and the people, I could see each one of them well. Like Santa Claus, I knew who was naughty and who was nice—or at least who was sleeping and who was awake. Bill and Jan sat to my right, four rows back from the front, right behind Bob and Diana. Behind Bill and Jan sat Jack and Ruth. Jack was Bill's cousin,

who began coming more regularly after we arrived and was always asleep by the time the sermon started. Ethel sat on the back row on the left side, where she kept a pillow on the pew to mark her spot and make the pew easier on her back. I knew them all—their names, their stories.

Closer to the front were two busy boys, two of the three kids in the sanctuary, sitting with whichever patient parishioner had volunteered to sit with them that day, two boys who loved to come to church, who walked with me across the field with smiles every Sunday morning. The field that on other days was our playground for chasing balls or each other on Sunday was a passage, and we crossed it with joy.

Standing between those lecterns in front of these people, I preached.

Sunday after Sunday I had a growing sense that I was preaching out of my own poverty, not a poverty of knowledge, but a poverty of prayer. I spoke about that which I did not know. Maybe my woven flax alb hid from them my poverty, and maybe it hid it from me for a while, and maybe I hid it behind book learning and funny stories, my two defenses against this one fact: they looked to me as a spiritual leader, and I needed to be led.

The stained glass window behind me was a picture of where I wanted to go. Above the altar, built into the wall and backlit by a light outside, was a colorful window, the same one in almost every small church—Jesus praying, perhaps in the Garden of Gethsemane, although he looked too serene for that. Kneeling, elbows on a tree stump, light shining on him from the clouds, blue and red robes, no doubt more expensive than the ones he really would have worn. And here was the most stunning part. Just below Jesus was a name: Alex Wilson. Likely the man who gave the money for the window, I saw his name there as a symbol. Here is a picture of the Trinity—the conversation of the Son with the Father in the Spirit, and Alex Wilson was being drawn into that. How did he get there, so close to that conversation? It was as if that window were Wilson’s new home, the home all of us are looking for—a home in God’s own life.

I wanted to be there. I wasn’t sure how, but I wanted to be drawn into that divine conversation. I wanted the kind of prayer that pastor and theologian Jason Byassee writes about when he says, “Prayer is ultimately an inner-Trinitarian conversation into which we creatures are invited.” I felt

that I was being invited, by a discovery of my longing and my poverty, into that life, which is the conversation of love among the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.

Isn't this the point of Jesus' farewell discourse in the Gospel of John? Isn't this window—in which Alex Wilson was lucky enough to find a home—what Jesus is saying God wants for each of us? What else could he mean when he tells us to abide in his love as he abides in the Father's love? He is calling us into the home, the house that is the Son's love of the Father in the Spirit.

And this is the mystery I could explain as a theologian but felt incompetent to lead people toward because I didn't know how to abide there myself. These people who could have taught me a million things I didn't know—how to fix a lawnmower, how to clean a chicken, how to make Brunswick stew—showed up week after week looking to me to teach them the one thing I couldn't teach. Hoping I might tell them how to get their name in that window. But I had to learn myself, first.

I was Lonnie. No longer a student but a young dad and pastor and husband with more people than I needed looking to me. And I needed a guide, gray hair optional.

Here's the difference: Lonnie had a door to knock on—
mine. Whose door did I have to knock on?

Whose door, I wonder, do you have to knock on?