

## Meeting the God of Grace in Places of Sexual and Relational Brokenness Testimony of Jill Rennick

It is with a great deal of excitement and joy that I share my story today. In this my 45<sup>th</sup> year, I am again taking a new step in my journey. Although the step is new, God continues to direct me on a familiar path. In my childhood, He started me in the right direction through the gift of my family; a place where genuine faith and life's realities intersected to build an unshakable belief that *God* holds all the answers even when my questions remain. As I grew, God provided sweet communities of friends who journeyed with me and explored the meaning of *living with God* as your *deepest* reality. God's pursuing presence kept me safe in the midst of teenage years that swung often from deep joy to deep pain...from quiet confidence to reoccurring doubts. At the times I least understood myself, I would cry out to my Father God who invited me often to sit in His lap. The compassion I was just beginning to glimpse stirred my heart with hope for the pain I saw both in my own life and the lives of those around me. As a girl of fifteen I walked around often singing Amy Grant's Father's Eyes song as a passionate prayer. I had no idea then of the journey that my Father would continue to walk me through in order to fashion me into a daughter who would have "eyes full of compassion...just like my Father's eyes".

During my twenties I began to wrestle with how the reality of a God of grace touches the reality of my life. As a youth volunteer who walked with students whose lives were difficult, I found myself unconvinced at times that God was really able to touch the deepest, darkest places in our lives. I wanted to give answers I didn't have. My doubts came from the deep, dark places buried in my own life...thoughts and feelings I ignored and denied. I swung between walking with God sincerely and simply pursuing spiritual activities hoping that through them I could either "manage" the pain and temptations myself or that God would honor my noble activities and remove them. I became increasingly frustrated and related to what Paul says in Romans 7, "For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing." My own needs and emotions often selfishly directed my choices and my desire to genuinely love and serve others was tainted with impure motives. I became more and more aware that my inner world was holding me captive and the path to real freedom was in answering God's call to honesty and vulnerability.

Ultimately, our God of grace allowed the pain of it all to become bigger than my fear of rejection and condemnation. I was finally able to be honest with myself, God and a few trusted others. The love and grace of God began to filter into the places I had been trying to fill in my pursuit of same-sex relationships. Admitting my struggle with homosexual attraction was difficult, something I had long believed was unacceptable to discuss in "the church" and something which I had long believed was simply a result of evil people pursuing evil things. As a result, I had also long believed Satan's lie that I was unworthy of God's love and forgiveness and that my pain was my punishment. It was through the gracious responses of God's people and my own family that I became overwhelmed by His grace. I saw their "eyes full of compassion" and was able to believe that they were reflecting "my Father's eyes". I often still tear up when I recall how tenderly God wrapped His arms around me through His children at that time. I began to realize that the cross *was* big enough and His grace was sufficient after all. And so, the journey of being set free from the bondage of relational addiction and idolatry began.

The journey continued through my thirties. God and the people He provided walked with me step by step. We spent time looking back and God entered into the wounded and painful places I had protected...or pretended were fine...and became my Healer. We spent time uncovering the lies I had built my life upon...and *His* word became my Truth. We spent time looking at the patterns of self centered and self protective behavior I had built...and His strength enabled me to begin to change...to have the courage to *want* change. At times I got ahead of Him and in my pride fell hard...He became my rescuer and warrior. I responded to the truths of Hebrews 4:14-16 which says, "Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

Mostly, I am learning that He loves me and delights in our relationship. And even when I still demonstrate I am a sinner, His love is still demonstrated through the cross. I can run *to Him with* the struggles instead of hiding. And as He has healed wounds, enabled me to experience His consistent love and grace, and taught me how to develop sweet friendships that meet needs as He intends, the temptation to pursue inappropriate relationships has lost the power it once held over my life. His peace and joy have become faithful companions. I can now say that as painful as the struggle has been, I am grateful that God did not answer my teenage cries for Him to "just take it away or take me home" but has instead used it in my life to develop in me "eyes full of compassion...just like my Father's eyes".

Looking back, I can see that He was working His grace in, around and through my life all along...never defining me by my weaknesses or failures but always inviting me to live more and more in light of His love and grace....and remarkably allowing my life to reflect His grace to others. I started out wanting to "save the world" and swung from believing I could, to believing I had nothing to offer...now I'm becoming more and more convinced that there is only ONE savior and I am *not* Him...but I *know* Him. It makes ministry much less stressful and much more fun. I can simply let the Spirit do His thing. My job is to keep looking into His eyes of compassion and inviting others to look too. Along the way God's people have counseled me, prayed with me, listened, cried with me, shared hurts and failures, and believed in His redemption in my life...some even before I was able or willing to acknowledge the struggles to myself. It is now my joy to walk with others as many have walked with me. I am privileged to journey with precious women who are discovering freedom from the bondage of homosexuality through the pursuit of holiness.

I also wanted to say that I am very aware that my story may have touched a tender place for some of you...or raised questions, concerns, or disagreements...or stirred up a variety of emotions...including anger or fear. My heart is not to offend but to offer help and hope to those who seek it. In addition to walking with the women God directs my way, I'm hoping to be a resource for local churches who desire to grow in their ability to be safe places for the sexually and relationally broken...places where the broken can both give and receive in genuine community. I am convinced from my own journey that these folks need the church and the church needs us.

It's sweet and challenging and amazing and crazy and scary and wonderful to be a part of the greatest story of redemption ever...and I love it! Thank you Father for your heart and eyes full of compassion!