

## A Mother's Prayers

May 10, 2015, By Heather Davalcu

Happy Mother's Day! Thank you for having me today. I was honestly completely shocked when Gloria asked to me to prayerfully consider sharing my story today. I am, I think, an unlikely choice for many reasons which you'll find out. But A few weeks prior to Gloria asking me I had actually proclaimed to my family over lunch "I love Gloria so much that if she asked me to jump over this table right now I'd tell y'all to get outta my way." So here I am but jumping over a table seems somewhat easier than this, right now.

So for those of you who don't know me let me introduce myself. I am a mom to Isabella (16) & Eliza (12). I've been married to my best friend for 24 years. I'm a native Texan, going many generations back. I'm an artist and an illustrator. I am also a Jr High youth group leader mentoring the 6<sup>th</sup> grade girls since last September. I never thought I would be a Jr high group leader or that I would be standing up here talking to y'all about my faith.

This can only be God. And the result of a lot prayer mainly my mom's. But they became my prayers too although they certainly didn't start off that way.

To tell my story I'd like to start with my parents. They are both from a very small town in East Texas where their parents and grandparents had grown up as well. My mom grew up in the church and loved it. She always said it felt like home to her. When her parents had a falling out with the elders & stopped attending, my mom continued going. She said "It fed her soul." My dad, on the other hand, always felt like he was being "dragged" to church.

Being raised in a strict Southern Baptist home meant church 3 times a week Sun mornings & evenings, plus Wed evenings too. My parents eloped when my mom was just 19 and I came along 2 years later, and my brother 2 years after that. For the first 10 years of my life we moved to 8 different towns from Virginia, to Indiana, and all over the great state of Texas. We always attended church but we were never really part of a community. (I remember hiding in the bathroom during Sunday school because I really did not like it at all.) The result of all that moving was a general sense of not belonging. I had no real concept of community or home. I was always the new kid, and being an artist, I turned to my sketchbook for company. Drawing was my constant companion and a source of comfort during all the moving. We didn't have a lot of money but I never went without art supplies my parents always encouraged me. They did without so that I could have the lessons and supplies I needed. My mom also told me many many times my art was my gift from God, and to waste it was a sin. That my purpose was to use my gifts to make the world a better place. She never let me forget that either. (Still doesn't!)

When I was in 5th grade we finally settled down in my parent's hometown and joined a church, but I dreaded going on Sundays. There was no youth group to speak of and I didn't really have any friends in church. Church became a chore and as I got older I started to question its purpose at all. But my mom seemed to love it so much, I just didn't get it. I was faithful though. I read my Bible, and I prayed. But I asked A LOT of questions. I

doubted, I challenged, and I was suspicious. And I didn't understand why my faith looked so different from my mom's. She seemed to accept things that I just wasn't willing to accept. My mom prayed that I would come around. She encouraged me to make friends from "good Christian" homes, and to date boys that went to church. I tried, I dated a preacher's son and in this case the stereotype was very true. And unfortunately during our time together his father was asked to step down amid a scandal. So Church?

I still wasn't buying it.

When I moved off to go to college, my mom prayed, and encouraged me to find a church, a youth group, and make Christian friends. One of my first college dates was to church and it was the beginning of a relationship that eventually became emotionally abusive, and finally physically abusive as well.

Church, hmmm? Still not seeing it.

It was during this time that 2 sets of my aunts & uncles divorced. My uncles, both elders in their churches, had been unfaithful. At this point I figuratively threw my hands up in the air and said "That's it. I'm done with church!" That didn't mean I was done with my faith not at all. I prayed and I visited church occasionally. I even met with our family pastor who was new to our church. He was a man I truly admired. He was a soft spoken country preacher who was called to the pulpit from a career as a police officer. He listened. And he told me that it was ok I didn't have to fit into the church mold and that God loved me just the way I was. He encouraged me to let

go of all of the doubts and questions and disappointments and just imagine Jesus as my friend and constant companion. He was the first person, outside of my parents, that had inspired my faith. I'm sure it will come as no surprise to tell you that shortly after this I fell head over heels in love with someone who was not a Christian. I called home to tell my ever faithful mom"

His name is Akin, he's Turkish" and her question was, "Does he wear a turban?" No, mom, he doesn't wear a turban. He's got a heart of gold, but he's not a Christian, his heritage is Muslim." The prayers of my mom for me to meet a nice Christian boy what had happened? She must have had doubts, but I never knew them. She and my dad

met him and saw his heart too and fell just as much in love as I had. He was THE ONE and it didn't matter to me in the least that he wasn't Christian. But did it matter to God?

A friend told me "You can't marry him; you won't be with him in eternity. What about your children?" I was shocked. I prayed. I read my Bible. I checked out books from the library on comparative religion. I prayed more. And then, I believe by divine guidance, I read 1 Corinthians 7:14: For the unbelieving husband is made acceptable to God by being united to his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made acceptable to God by being united to her Christian husband. And I felt that God had reached out his mighty hand and placed it on my shoulder. Jesus, my friend was sitting with me, saying it's going to be ok. We married. He credits my parents' unconditional acceptance and love of him as one of the main reasons he eventually became a Christian. Their love was transformative. And seeing them love him was transformative for me too.

But Church? Well that was still a problem. Akin being completely open, suggested visiting churches. And I reluctantly agreed always finding fault and seeing the negatives. We attended, and even joined a church but my heart wasn't in it. I was very skeptical and we weren't a part of a community. I still didn't really understand what that even was. After 6 years of marriage we had our first daughter, and 5 weeks after she was born I was admitted to the hospital for a chronic, unending migraine that had begun post-delivery. The migraines came frequently, daily and it made it hard for me to care for our daughter. We moved to the east coast shortly after that and without family around it became a challenge to manage the pain as well as be a mom. I occasionally drew, & even painted a little, but the distractions of motherhood and chronic pain killed any inspiration I might have had.

Four years later we had our second daughter, Eliza. And again the migraines took me down. I was in and out of the hospital & infusion labs repeatedly. I was on anti-seizure medications, blood pressure medicine, pain killers, anti-depressants, & antianxiety meds. And the side effects were just as awful, my hair fell out in clumps, I gained weight, I lost weight, I was tired, I was depressed, I had panic attacks. I met with all kinds of specialists, therapists, and counselors. In the midst of all of this we moved to Yardley and Akin began his doctoral work at the University of Pennsylvania. With everything that I was juggling small children & my own health issues I had real difficulty forming friendships and becoming a part of a church or the community as a whole. I was doing good just making it through til nap time every day. I never drew I only occasionally scribbled down pictures of my pain. I couldn't draw anything else. Drawing had been my comfort growing up and now I didn't even have that. Some gift, I thought. With no family and few friends around I was very much alone and getting close to a breaking point. I continued to pray, as did my parents.

My mom's prayers for us to move back to Texas, for the pain to end, for me to find my way to a church. I just prayed to make it stop. Dark days for sure.

Despite my strong foundation of faith all of this was challenging and many times my faith wavered. I railed against God too. I asked why me? Was he even there? I felt sorry for myself, and grieved for my old pain-free life. And I begged. One particularly rough morning feeling completely out of resources, Akin drove me to the ER. On the way I prayed for God to make the pain stop. I couldn't really walk so the very kind nurse brought out a wheelchair for me. I was weak and broken and I thanked the nurse for taking care of me. I asked her what her name was and she said "Its Hope" and I just cried. I felt like God was saying to me "Do not lose hope Heather, I am here." My faith deepened in the middle of that fear, loneliness, and pain.

But still church? Where did that fit in? I had my doubts & when we visited area churches I still felt like a square peg in a round hole. After much deliberation and counsel with many doctors it was agreed that my migraines were likely hormonal and that maybe a hysterectomy could help. It was a gamble because hysterectomy is not a treatment for migraine, but I had hope. I was willing to take my chances and I'm so glad I did. I've been migraine free for 8 years this month. But it was faith more than gambling I felt like God was with me, leading Akin and I to the answers and doctors. I trusted Him. Once migraine free I felt like I'd gotten my life back. I had to learn to live again. I started to paint again too and I now painted my pain. I was still processing the experiences, and painting it out made me feel better. I was able to connect with other sufferers too. Maybe I could use this gift for something I thought? But what? I still didn't know. Aside from my family, I still felt very much alone and trying to figure out how to piece my life back together. I specifically prayed for friends.

And it was around this time Karen Webb invited me to her Friday morning small group. Let's just say I was suspicious but I thought why not? God got me through my nightmare, maybe I outta just see what this is all about. The church was under construction so we met at Linda Marr's house. This was a huge blessing because this artistic introvert needed the small group, casual environment. Being in a church had not been comforting to me in fact it made me feel irritated. So having these open conversations about faith in someone's home felt so right. I grew to LOVE this small group. In fact I told them all once "I really didn't think I was gonna like you." They challenged me, loved me, comforted me, and showed me faith in action faith as a verb. They taught me about community and they healed my hurt feelings about church. They healed that little girl inside of me that hated church that was let down and disappointed by church. I learned that my faith was ok my faith, be it different from others, was valid. My questions and doubts were received with love and kindness. My mom's prayers were being answered. And mine were too.

I think one way my mom's prayers were answered was in the faith of our girls. They have both taught me so much and continue to do so every day. But the girls are very different as siblings usually are. Isabella is like me the introverted artistic questioner & challenger. She has a strong moral compass and argues for the disenfranchised and

marginalized in our world. She's taught me so much about fighting for justice and humanity. Her faith is deep and quiet and strong. And Eliza is like my mom pure, open faith. I used to come to our small group and share all of the funny things Eliza would say about God when she was little. And these were before we even went to church! Once, driving through the countryside in Texas we witnessed a beautiful sunset one evening Eliza(maybe 4 years old)announced "Isn't that gorgeous! Don't y'all think we should pull over and pray?" Or another time she had been in bed sick, came downstairs and told me she as all better Jesus had healed her. She asked to go to church and she asked to be baptized. I was reminded of Matthew 19:14 when Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." So off we went to church! Church!

Eventually Akin and I joined the church despite my proclamation that "I'm never joining another church as long as I live." My mom's prayers were being answered again. And mine were aligning with hers more and more. I prayed that my will would be God's will and I was starting to see it happening. Seeing the differences in the girl's faith, seeing Akin come to faith, has helped me understand my own faith. It looks different, because it IS different. Because God gave me unique gifts different but not wrong.

Now, joining and attending church is one thing but getting involved? That's another thing entirely. And my first attempts at doing so illustrate my total lack of experience in being a part of a community. There was the time I was asked to help out with VBS & I relayed the invite to my small group with the, now famous, response "I would rather scrub the toilets." At the encouragement of Karen Houser & ELIZA I had a very short lived stint as a greeter too. Being an introverted artist this just did not feel right so I tried to bow out gracefully. But I really did want to contribute and serve genuinely. I wanted to go on a mission trip too but that just hasn't been feasible either. I prayed on it. And I kept signing up for things behind the scenes where I was way more comfortable, like cleaning the kitchen or prepping meals. But when Eliza became more and more active in the Jr high she asked Akin and I if we could get more involved.

Despite my sorely lacking Biblical knowledge, something about it felt right and we both said yes. I prayed for God to show me how to use my gifts to be of some service. How could I fit into this? Honestly made fun of kids that went to youth group when I was in middle school. How could I possibly lead these girls? How could I possibly answer their questions? But Gloria told a story about her youth group leader when she was growing up. She said she didn't remember the biblical truths and lessons she learned as much as she remembered the example this woman was the way she lived her life had made a profound impact on her. And I realized yes, I can do that. So I dove into leading these 6th grade girls and I have enjoyed every single minute of it. Not to sound cliché, but I'm getting a whole lot more out of it that I had imagined. I was scared, really. I tried to imagine what would have gotten me to youth group in 6th grade. What would my 11 or 12 yr old self wanted from youth? Praying on it for quite some time, I felt that my mom's wanted to use mine. My 6th grade self would have wanted art // that would have been the carrot to get me to youth group. So each week I began illustrating the lessons from The Story. I try to frame the lesson in a way that speaks to a preteen how does it apply

to their lives? And each week I pray for God to give me some inspiration on what to draw because some of these chapters have been TOUGH! I bring my little drawings for each of the girls to take home and they ask me lots of questions that I do not have answers for. But I listen. I tell them their questions and concerns and fears are valid. They are heard and prayed for. The experiences that lead me to right now as painful as some have been, have helped me to embrace this role as mentor.

It's all God.

And my mother's prayers. I've learned that "church", just like the concept of "home", is less about a place and more about people. A community of believers. Believers who have taught me how my differences, and even weaknesses, can be used for God's glory. That my greatest work of art can be a life lived in service of God & in striving to be the hands and feet of Christ.