

Pray Big

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The first Gather in Novel

Georgia VanSant



Pray Big: The first Gather In Novel
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Republished by Redemption Press 2017

Published by Redemption Press,
PO Box 427, Enumclaw, WA 98022
Toll Free (844) 2REDEEM (273-3336)

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ISBN : 978-1-68314-289-8
ISBN epub : 978-1-68314-290-4
ISBN mobil : 978-1-68314-291-1

Acknowledgments

I'd like to thank my family for their unselfish support of this project, a special gift from God. Thank you for all you continue to do in support of my work. I'd also like to thank my sister-in-law, Amy Reed, a true artist, for the cover design. I want to thank Marcy Downey for her constant review of each chapter and her feedback along the way. Finally, I must thank each lady who supports Gather In Ministries in various ways. It is a pleasure to watch God work through each of you.

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Foreword

Claire pulled into the driveway exhausted but feeling good. It had been a great time with the ladies, and God was working in ways she had never imagined. Funny, she used to wonder who would show up, but God has shown her He sends the people she is to reach with His word. Louie was the spark tonight, praising God for His hand in her husband's life. And what a life! But God is faithful, as Louie always says, and she will keep moving ahead. Claire needed those words as much as the other forty women did. Funny, she thought, how God always knows what we need and then sends it through some of the strangest ways. "My ways are not your ways."

Claire got out of her car and started to carry her belongings into the house. She just started to gather the coffeepots when Alan came out to help her in. She was so thankful for her husband, who was so supportive of her and her (God's) ministry. She had a tendency to be manic, in a calm, stealth sort of way, but he kept her balanced and steady. He got the coffeepots, the CD player, and she carried her case with her outlines and Bible to the house.

"How was Bible study?" he asked. He always asked, and she knew he really wanted to know and was not just making

conversation. Anyone who knew Alan knew he never just made conversation. Part of her comfort with him was his blunt assessment of any situation. She learned to trust his opinion and knew God had put him in her life because she needed to be grounded.

“Great, Louie was praising the Lord because Rob is doing so great! She said he still thinks he is improving on his own, but she and the rest of us know it is God answering our prayers.” Claire and Alan had known Rob and Louie for twenty-five years and had been sharing God’s love and praying for him just about as long. “It was so uplifting, great for ladies who have been praying and wondering if God is hearing them. We all were encouraging each other to never give up. God is still doing great things so we will keep praying *big!*”

Claire started to put the items from the Bible study away while Alan went back to the golf channel. She was humming Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir’s “God is Still Doing Great Things” and thinking back on how far He had brought them to her. Going back ten years to the start of this group of ladies, she was amazed at how He had transformed her, and as a result, how He had transformed them—how He was still transforming her and them and how little she actually was involved. God brings the harvest!

Louie and Sue were dear friends of Claire’s. They would often gather for tea at someone’s home, and Claire always loved their chats. Louie, ever so chipper, and Sue, always the encourager, would look to Claire for biblical advice on issues. They thought Claire was pouring into their lives, which she was, but they never recognized how much Claire appreciated their positive encouragement. During one particular time, when both Louie and Sue were dealing

with “life,” they asked Claire to start a Bible study. Claire was certain that was the last thing she’d ever be doing. One thing God has taught Claire is “We plan, God laughs.”

The Tuesday Ladies Bible Study was the most unusual group of women God could have brought together. He wanted to make sure everyone knew it was all Him and not in our own power. Claire thought about the ladies in that group and how they all came to know each other and smiled at God’s imagination.

Jolene, just a teenager, had learned to love the word of God and had come to think she now has twenty mothers. She came with her mom, Abby, who was one of the charter ladies. Elaine, an older lady Claire met at the golf course, was one of the “blessed additions” God brought to the group. Claire was amazed at how the love of God can breach all barriers, age, race, church, and pasts and bond His body in the unity of the Spirit.

Claire thought back to that first night. It included Abby, Louie, Sue, Paige, and Deb. They came to Claire’s living room, sat on the couch, and agreed that God’s word would be the final authority and they expressed a deep desire to know Him more. Claire knew Abby and Paige and was certain when she asked them that they would think it was a dumb idea and that would settle this nagging from Louie and Sue. Funny, Claire could now see the Holy Spirit was using them to start His work. Not only did Abby and Paige love the idea, they wanted to bring others with them! Claire had cringed.

God’s timing is amazing. Claire thought, *I love the times God shows up and does the miraculous.* What she was recognizing was that God also shows up when He is working on the plan He has for our lives. One of Claire’s

favorite verses was Jeremiah 29:11: “I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.” As God was leading her along, Claire was kicking and fighting the whole way! Funny, that verse was wonderful in her life when it was *her* plan; she wasn’t quite so sure when God had a different plan for her.

She remembered the time she thought she was going to be a building inspector. She was sure God would give her the job, even though she had never lifted a hammer or knew a thing about building anything. After all, people were praying! At times, Claire would get crazy ideas, and this was one of the craziest. Alan did not want to discourage her, but he also did not want his wife embarrassing herself. Well, Alan finally got through to her, but only after he brought home the job description and the test and Claire realized this was not where God wanted her. She thought, “I still don’t know what a header is!” When God shuts a door, He *really* shuts the door. God definitely did not have that planned!

Back to God’s timing: Claire was starting to think perhaps God wanted to have these ladies learning more of His word, but she was sure she could find someone else to do it! You know, sort of help God out a little. She told God if this was what she was to be doing, He’d need to show her in a definite way. God was not slow in answering that prayer!

That afternoon, Deb, a friend of Claire’s for many years, stopped by for coffee and a visit. During their usual chatting about family, work, church, and friends, Deb’s demeanor became rather serious. Being friends for so long, Claire could pick up on the subtle change. Because their

friendship had allowed for blunt, clear conversation without hesitation, Claire started her inquiry (Claire’s word, Deb called it cross-examination!) Claire might have been less aggressive had she been able to see where the conversation was leading, but being herself, she was not going to stop until the situation was resolved. Little did she know, Deb’s solution was a question that stopped Claire in her tracks, “Why won’t you start a Bible study?” Claire could be naïve and slow at times, but this was clearly a sign from God, even she could see that! So Tuesday nights were now scheduled at 7:00 p.m.

Only God knew that small group would start a study that reached around the world. Wow, as Claire was making the coffee for the next morning and getting ready for bed, she became overwhelmed at the work God had done. Years later, the group was growing. That charter group along with several more women God sent were still coming every Tuesday night to pray and listen to God. Claire crawled into bed and went through the room in her mind and prayed for each lady and the challenges they were all facing.

Morning came too soon, as it always does for most people. Claire wondered if getting out of bed was the gift of a new day or God’s way of teaching us discipline. Of course, she knew it was a gift, but some mornings, it took all the discipline she could muster to get started. She went to the kitchen thankful for her sister, Annette, who bought her the coffeepot with the timer on it. Coffee was always ready for her at 6:15 a.m. She poured her first cup and went to the study for her morning devotions, prayer, and her quiet time with God.

She still had the Bible study from the night before on her mind. She sat down with her Bible, Charles Spurgeon,

and her prayer manual. Sipping coffee, she leafed through the prayer manual and paused on the answers to prayer she had seen God manifest. She reminded herself that God is constantly answering prayer, just does not show us immediately, another instance of God's timing being far different than hers! She loved the Psalms that confirmed God hears us and encourages us to trust Him. She once heard a pastor speaking on patience and how patience is not defined as how long we wait, but *how* we wait. Boy, did she ever have a long way to go with that one!

After her devotional and Bible reading, Claire started her praying. She always included her daughter, Diane, who was just starting college. Of course, Alan was always on her prayer list, but more as praise than a request. She started praying from her prayer manual, it had all the requests about which anyone had asked her to pray. She sensed the Spirit urging her to *pray big!* Claire started praising God for who He is, for what He can do, and for the privilege of being His child. She did not know how long she had been praying, when she said her “amen,” she looked at the clock and knew she needed to hustle to get to the office.

“God is still doing great things...” Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir, BTC, as her friends called it, was serenading her to work. She still was meditating on her time with God this morning and His prompting to *pray big!* She could see God was, indeed, still doing great things and knew He would continue because “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.” God was up to something, and she was going to do her best to stay out of way this time!

1



Jesus Loves Me, This I Know Jesus Knows Me, This I Love

As Claire looked around her dining room table, she was rehearsing the points she wanted to make for the study as she greeted each lady. When they came in, there was always a lot of talking, catching up on the week, comparing kids, jobs, household chores, and husbands. She enjoyed the uniqueness of each lady and loved the fact they all enjoyed the uniqueness of each other. Ellen was sitting in her usual spot, although looking rather pale this evening. She had a quiet demeanor but had a very deep thought process. Claire could never quite read her. She did catch Ellen's eye, and they shared a smile. Claire wrote her name at the top of her study paper; she must remember to pray especially for her this week.

Louie walked in, and the ladies all cheered. She was always the most welcomed sight; she could bake as well as anyone the group had ever known. What touched the ladies was not just the delicious baked goods, but the thought and care that went into each special surprise she prepared.

Tonight was wonderful chocolate cookies with cream in the middle. How Louie stayed so thin was an enigma to Claire. She knew if she baked like that, she'd weigh four hundred pounds. Louie would pretend the compliments were overdone, but deep down, she looked forward to the accolades and it was a nice, safe place to soak in the kind words. She would quietly thank God for the gift of baking and for giving her a group of soul mates to share it.

As more ladies made their way into the dining room, Claire rivaled for their attention. She finally said in a voice rather suited for a football game, "Jesus loves me, this I know." The ladies came together, focusing on Claire and repeated, "Jesus loves me, this I know." Claire then announced, "Jesus knows me, this I love." Right on cue, the ladies repeated, "Jesus knows me, this I love." Claire paused for just a few moments to let that register in their minds. What an amazing thought, the Creator of the universe loves me! She felt that was a great way to start a Bible study.

As Claire pulled out her prayer manual for requests, there was a commotion at the door. Every one stopped because they heard a girl yelling, "I hate you too! Never talk to me again!" She laced those sediments with a few words a truck driver would have a problem repeating. It didn't take long for a young girl, Claire guessed to be about eighteen, to walk in and ask if this was the Bible study. She was thin, too thin, with roots almost grown out an inch. (Claire had decided right then and there she would call Jan first thing in the morning to get her own roots done.) She was dressed in a halter top, shorts, and boots. Claire was not sure when the girl had her last shower. She plopped down in a chair and slouched.

Claire, usually extremely well controlled, tried to hide her shock and disapproval. She put on a face that only a well-practiced church lady could have perfected and introduced herself. Becky, as she found out was her name, was sent to her Bible study by her mother's friend. Claire found out later her mother's friend, Joy, challenged her to a bet she could not go twelve hours without cussing. If she was successful, Joy was taking her shopping. But Joy could not spend all day with her "potty mouth" as Joy described it. However, if she could not survive the twelve hours, she agreed to attend Bible study for the six months! "God, this is *not* funny!" was all Claire could even allow herself to think at the moment.

Joy, who was sitting beside Ellen, smiled and introduced Becky to the group. Becky responded with a grunt to a few and a slight nod to the rest of the group. Claire was thankful feelings are not visible because if the ladies knew what their Bible study leader was feeling at that time, they'd have either bolted for the door or started an all-night prayer meeting for her. She was so careful to make sure everything was exact, as much as was in her control, and this was not part of the plan! She didn't mind the ladies who came with problems that were manageable, but this? Yes, Claire was proud enough to think she could manage their problems, pray the right prayer, and keep things looking "spiritual." Becky did not fit the pattern and Claire did not know how she would be able to teach with this interruption.

Claire regained control of the ladies and asked for prayer requests. Ellen again asked for her health; Abby, Sue, and Flora all had unspoken requests. Louie asked all the ladies to keep praying for Rob, and Claire asked for prayer for Diane, her daughter. She had just started college

and that was a constant request. Paige asked for prayer for her sister, who needed a job and was struggling to keep things together. Kathy held up her hand, she had only been coming for a short time and wanted to be respectful. Claire called on her, and she said she needed a job.

Abby asked, “What kind of job are you looking for?”

Kathy said, “Anything, office work. I would be willing to learn anything.”

Abby lifted her hands and said, “Praise the Lord. We haven’t even prayed yet and God answered prayer! Come to my office tomorrow, and I will have a job for you.”

The group started clapping, raising hands, and praising the Lord! Claire jumped in right on time and said, “God is good,” and the group responded, “All the time.” Claire then declared, “All the time,” and the group yelled, “God is good.” That is everyone but Becky. She sat slouched and rolled her eyes. Claire really wanted to slap her and Joy as well, but prided herself on her amazing self-control and overlooked the whole thing.

The Bible study started with the ladies looking up Luke 8, the story of the dead girl and the sick woman. Claire was bringing to mind her preparation for the study from the night before and waiting for the ladies to find their page in the Bible. She was careful to not start too soon. Some of the ladies were new Christians and needed a bit more time finding scripture passages.

“Shit!” yelled Becky. “These cookies are the best damn things I’ve ever tasted!”

Claire turned fifty shades of red. Abby, Paige, and Sue laughed and agreed. The rest of the ladies were chuckling at the new colorful girl God sent them. Louie sat at the table with a smile as big as the Grand Canyon. Even the

new girl loved her baking! And Louie was sure the new girl didn't love a thing. She made a mental note to make sure she got any leftover to take home with her.

Claire decided it best to ignore the choice of expression Becky used and move forward. As Claire was explaining God's timing and His love for the man with the sick girl and His equal love for the woman bleeding, her first point was Jesus loves us all equally, has enough love for all of us, and wants us to open up to His love. She looked at the ladies and asked, "Do you know God loves you as much as He ever has and ever will?"

For the first time, Claire made eye contact with Becky. She was not sure if God used that exchange to start a melting in her heart or in Becky's heart, but she felt something inside. She needed to push that aside; she had ladies waiting for the next point in the study. So Claire looked away first, but not before she saw what appeared to be a tear in Becky's eye.

Claire finished the Bible Study right at eight o'clock; it was her promise to each lady and she was going to make sure she never went past her time. She wondered if her rigidity was a gift from God or a personality flaw. She couldn't entertain that thought at that moment because she had ladies to see to the door. She waited at the door for the ladies to say their good-byes. This was an event all in itself because the ladies loved to talk and catch up with each other. Often two or three would gather, and Claire would see them huddled in a small group praying about something. She again marveled at what God had brought together; she never would have imagined these ladies being so concerned for each other and so willing to give of themselves.

It suddenly occurred to Claire that she had not seen Becky leave. Curiosity got the best of her, and she was anxious to leave her front door and find out where she was. She thanked God Alan was watching TV in their bedroom and therefore knew her jewelry was safe. She immediately felt ashamed for even thinking such a thing and was again thankful no one could actually see thoughts. She remembered, “Out of the heart, the mouth speaks” and thought it wise to just keep her mouth shut for a while.

“Great study, just what I needed tonight.” Her thoughts were interrupted by Kathy and Abby leaving for the evening. She smiled at them and started to apologize for the rude interruption. Abby, always so blunt and outspoken, stopped her before she could even finish the sentence.

“Are you kidding? She reminds me of myself bc!” Anyone who attended the Bible study for too long knew bc meant “before Christ” in a personal way. “Anyway,” she continued, “you said tonight Jesus loves us all the same and has enough love for all of us, so I guess he loves Becky as much as he loves you and me.”

Cold water in the face would not have shocked Claire as much as Abby’s innocent response to her apology. Claire regrouped quickly and agreed, “Yes, God does love us all.” As she closed the door behind them, she secretly acknowledged she had a long way to go with this one God put in her lap and knew this was going to be the subject of prayer for a long, long time. She was sure God would understand; after all, He made her the way she was. He wasn’t asking her to change who she was, and she was nice. But Claire knew all the words she hated the most; “nice” had to be at the top of the list, or close anyway. So being “nice” was not going to get her a pass with God. But...she

still had the comfort He made her this way. He did, after all, want her to function within her creative being. That eased the disease Claire had been feeling initially, and she concluded, of course, God would understand her reasoning.

As she was finally firm-footed again, Becky and Joy were saying their good-byes to Lisa. She watched as Lisa hugged them both and told Becky she would see her on Friday. Lisa, a tall, elegant lady was a counselor and had become a very dear friend to Claire. She and Elaine attended the same church and had been friends for years, which was her connection to the Tuesday Ladies Bible Study. When Claire first met her, she immediately enjoyed her vivacious personality and her ability to connect so easily with people. Claire understood a counselor needs to have that characteristic. Still, Claire was a bit taken back when she observed the easy conversation and how relaxed Becky seemed.

“Just call when you get done with work,” she heard Lisa saying to Becky.

“I will, and thank you, you’re cool for an old broad,” Becky replied.

Claire was again embarrassed at Becky’s lack of respect and rudeness. Imagine, calling Lisa an old broad, that is absurd, she and Lisa were the same age! Joy was oblivious to Becky’s response. She was beaming and praising the Lord for bringing them together. As the group got to the front door, Joy was overjoyed (Claire wondered if she knew she fit her name) so thankful for the ladies’ Bible study and could not wait to invite Becky’s mother, Terri, next week.

“After all,” she continued, “Jesus has enough love for all of us! Praise the Lord for that, I need to remind myself of that with the crew I live with!”

Keep your mouth shut, keep your mouth shut, keep your mouth shut, out of the heart... Claire kept repeating to herself. She smiled and blessed them with a wonderful week as they were leaving. The rest of the ladies left, but Claire did not remember much of what happened with them; her mind was on Becky. How come everyone was “feeling the love” except her? She smiled at herself and recalled the many times she had told the ladies, “Be careful what you pray for, you might just get it!” She made a mental note to rephrase the prayer, “Send me the ladies you want to hear your word.”

As was the pattern for Tuesday, Alan returned to the TV in the family room after all the ladies had left for the evening.

“How was Bible study tonight?” Alan asked and wanted a genuine response.

“Awful! I cannot believe Becky! Can you believe a girl would walk in, cuss, tell me I’m old, roll her eyes, and everyone was just fine with it? I wasn’t, I think I covered it up pretty well, but she has to come for the next six months! What will I do? We need to pray she can find a Bible study more suited to her liking, that’s what we need to do. Pray, yes, nothing is impossible for God!” Claire was on a roll and hardly stopped for a breath.

Alan, being wise, as well as knowing his wife, let her continue until she said all she had to say about the evening. Once she stopped her mini-temper tantrum, he tried again, “How many ladies were there to ‘not support you and support Becky?’” He put his fingers up to make quotations in the air.

“Twenty-two,” she replied. “And...Lisa is meeting with Becky, Joy is bringing her mother next week, and Louie gave her leftover cookies.”

“Well, that sounds like God is up to something bigger than you.”

That was not the answer she was looking for, but she could not argue that God did not need her permission to work out His will. Alan interrupted as she was processing that thought and asked, “What was the study about tonight?”

“Jesus loves us all and loves us equally, and loves us always, and loves us unconditionally.”

“Really, did you listen to your own teaching?”

That disease Claire had been able to rationalize and reason away suddenly came to the surface again. Deep in her heart, she knew Jesus loved Becky, she knew Jesus loved her, and she knew Jesus loved her even when she was acting like she was just as he loved Becky while she was acting out tonight. Wow! Now overwhelmed, she went to her study to sit and absorb as best she could, the love of God. Tears started flowing and in those tears, anger, resentment, and guilt filled the drops until they felt heavy on her face.



Claire headed up the highway to work Wednesday morning. She was so thankful it was only a half a day. She did not sleep well at all last night. Her thoughts kept vacillating between guilt and anger and had tossed and turn until the blanket and sheets were a tangled mess. She wanted to be angry, but she knew that if she really had asked for forgiveness the night before, that was unreasonable and immature. But she was comforted in knowing God knew she would falter, so He provided His mercy; it was new every morning, great is His faithfulness. She needed to know God was faithful even when she was not. But she could not get Becky’s face and rolling eyes out of her mind!

Claire enjoyed her position as the office nurse/manager, one she had filled for twenty-five years. One of the blessings in Claire's life was her staff. She had a group of employees that made her day as smooth as any day could be. Well...most days anyway. Jolene, the young girl from her Bible study worked at the office. She always had a happy disposition and kept the office in a pleasant manner.

"Good morning," Claire said that to the staff every day when she walked in. Sometimes, it was a stretch because a lot of mornings were not so hot, but she felt it was a great tone to set for a day's work.

"Good morning," they always responded; she was sure sometimes out of obligation and not because they were feeling it either.

She continued to the lounge for her tea and toast. As she was waiting for her toast, Jolene walked in. She started to talk about how awesome it was that Becky came, how her mother, Abby, could relate, how everyone loved her honesty, and how cool it was that she was there for six months. Claire stared at the toaster, wishing it to pop up so she could go to her office and hide. Obviously, Jolene did not pick up on that because she continued with the thought that she and Becky could be great friends, and how appropriate the study was last night. "Jesus loves me, this I know. Jesus knows me, this I love."

Claire finally made it to her office and wondered why she ever had Bible study ladies in her office. She sat down and started working when her phone rang.

"Hi, my mom is on the phone, she wants to talk to you," Jolene announced in that perky voice people so loved.

Claire picked up the phone, only to hear Abby repeat almost word for word what she had just heard from Jolene.

“Okay, God, I hear you” was all Claire could think. She agreed with Abby on the phone, thankful she could not see her face. Abby went on to say Kathy agreed to take the job and was finding it amazing how God knew exactly what we needed and when we needed it. She then added that God sent Becky because some of the ladies at Bible study needed her as much as she needed God. Claire squeezed the phone tightly, convinced she was going to drop it at any moment. Abby hung up, and before Claire could resolve the conflict in her mind, her work took over, and it became a very busy morning. Claire was just as happy she did not have any more time to think.

On her way home, Claire stopped by the grocery store to pick up fruit and rolls, thinking she’d do a summer grill dinner. Hamburgers and pineapple on the grill with a salad would be refreshing. Deb called and wanted to stop by for tea. Claire asked her if she wanted to stay for dinner, and Deb was quick to take the invitation. Claire, thankful she and Deb were such good friends, set the boundaries: no Becky talk!

Claire flipped on the kitchen TV and started preparing her dinner. She decided to throw some vegetables on the grill with the burgers since Deb was joining them. In the background, she heard Paula Dean praising the goodness of butter. But her mind drifted back to the Bible study from the night before and was shifting from God testing her, to God using her, to Satan trying to stop the Bible study. She really wanted this to be an attack, for then she could pray for Becky to leave and return to her safe zone. She finally decided she would let God show her, yes, she would “Let God be God.”

She decided BTC was better for her right now than the benefits of pounds of butter in each recipe so she turned the TV off and put her favorite CD in her machine. *God is still doing great things. His power has never changed. Yes, God is able to transform your life. God is still doing great things.* She heard that song many times, but this time she felt as if God was singing this song directly to her. She did not hear much after that; she lost herself in the way God loves us, the patience He uses in the constant transformation of each of His children, changing us from glory to glory.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a loud “Hello, is anyone here?” Deb strolled into the kitchen with a smile—no, smirk on her face. She could not hold it any longer; she was ready to bust!

“So how are you today?” with the emphasis on *you*. She knew the agony of Claire’s last eighteen hours without Claire saying a thing. Claire started to talk about how great she was, how she was enjoying her afternoon off, and how nice it was to sit and enjoy a friend’s company.

Deb, not able to contain it any longer, busted into laughter. Now, she did not laugh like most people—no, not at all. When she started, it came from her toes, and after the initial burst of noise, it became silent, along with the bending over and holding the stomach routine. Part of Claire was laughing and part of her was disgusted. She knew exactly what Deb found so funny and she had already set the boundary: no more Becky!

Claire waited patiently for a few minutes while she got it out of her system. Deb acknowledged that although God sent Becky, she loved Becky and saw this as an awesome display of God’s trust in those ladies. She understood Claire’s conflict. To change the subject as fast as she could,

Claire agreed and said she was praying about all of this. That seemed to appease Deb, and they were able to enjoy a relaxing evening and visit with Alan.

As Deb was leaving, she turned and looked Claire in the eye. “Last night was really a great study, I need to hear often how much God loves me and how much love He has for all of us. I keep repeating, “Jesus loves me, this I know. Jesus knows me this I love.”

Claire knew Deb was sincere, and she did, indeed, agree that the wonder of God loving us was something we all needed to know every day. She hugged her good-bye, and as Deb was leaving, she closed the door, leaned on it, and said out loud, “Thank you, Jesus, for loving even me.”