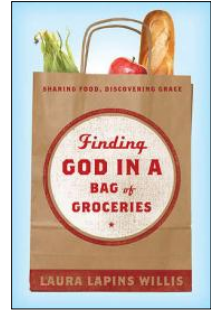


*Finding*  
GOD IN A  
BAG of GROCERIES  
Sharing Food, Discovering Grace  
by Laura Lapins Willis  
©2013 Abingdon Press Nashville



***This book is a MUST READ for anyone working in a feeding ministry!  
It is also on the 2015 UMW Reading List.  
(200KReasons)***

***Chapter 1: STEPPING Out-of-BOUNDS***

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**Be who God meant you to be and you will set the whole world on fire.**

**— SAINT CATHERINE OF SIENA**

...it was ridiculous to think I was the only person who could bring her to God. Wouldn't God find her whenever God wanted, without me?

Most of us come to moments like these in our lives—moments when we didn't know the answer, or maybe even the question, but knew God's grace blessed our actions; moments when God directed us in ways we did not understand but that led to a richer life—to a place where we could love and serve God best.

...no matter my vocational calling, my first calling is to live out Christ living in me. Maybe you, too, encounter times that challenge you to listen to that still, small voice that comes to us when we are open to it. Perhaps like me, you have found that these occasions, however they come, are always worth honoring. They are one of the many ways God finds us when we cannot always find God.

***Chapter 2: LOVE Available HERE***

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***My goal in life is to unite my avocation with my vocation, as my two eyes make one in sight.***

**— ROBERT FROST**

## Review of: Finding God in a Bag of Groceries

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Little did I know that this seemingly simple job would force me to recognize my own poverty of spirit, help me accept that I was imperfect and unable to solve the problems of others, and embrace my brokenness as a way of drawing closer to Jesus.

And God met me right there, among the sickest, neediest, poorest people in my community. Because I was the first one who needed help, who needed God. I was one of those people too.

Just as Jesus called the disciples to walk away from their jobs, their families, and their safe lives, we are called into places of uncertainty.

Following Jesus always starts by doing the next thing God puts in front of us.

If you asked someone waiting at my office why they were there, they would tell you, "For a bag of groceries." But I believe most people came because of the love we offered. The food was just a way to get people to walk through the door.

... recognizing our own needy places is essential to our spiritual life.

... in feeding the hungry, I saw that poverty can be an absence of economic prosperity but also a spiritual emptiness. I saw my own poverty: poverty of faith, poverty of compassion, poverty of openness. I saw that God could find me in unexpected moments and that I could find God in the most unlikely places, too. Even in a bag of groceries.

### **Chapter 3: COMING Home**

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***The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned.***

**—MAYA ANGELO**

They were a good reminder of why [we] existed: to help people who tried hard and yet couldn't make ends meet. ... [They] had both worked their whole lives.... I didn't want to confront the reality of the poverty in which they lived. I liked it much better when our relationship was safely ensconced in the neatness of my office at the church, where we all could ignore the fact that they lived in a hovel that made my three-bedroom house seem like a mansion. ... I also wanted to do something about getting them out of that wretched space. I was so naive, I thought they would listen to me when I encouraged them to make a change.... I was on a mission. I was sure I knew better than Carter and Frances what was right for them, and I was determined to talk them into it.... I was treating them like children, not caring about what they wanted but trying to impose my will on them.

I was ashamed of the times I had complained about my own house, my selfish desires for more stuff, and my frequent whining about wanting something new. I was disgusted by how I took all my life's abundance for granted. I prayed for forgiveness for my arrogance and for my selfishness. Sort of. Mostly, I prayed that God would give Carter and Frances a new house.

... an important lesson. People came for financial help and for food, and if they wanted counsel about an issue, they would ask for it. I should not have dispensed advice without being asked. No

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one likes to be nagged about how to live his or her life, with all the implied judgment that comes along with those words.

I was glad we had these things to offer, but I felt I was perpetuating a hierarchy—the wealthy telling the poor what to do and how to live.

It is so easy to judge people, to decide what's right for them, and to be certain about the lives of others. And we are often so wrong, either with our intent or our timing or both.

### **Chapter 4: MY Calling CARD**

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***The mystery of poverty is that by sharing in it, making ourselves poor in giving to others, we increase our knowledge of and belief in love.***

— **DOROTHY DAY**

As I became more aware of the abundances of my personal life, even in the clothing I wore, I tried to bridge the gulf between me and my clients by dressing simply.

What is the role of a layperson in caring for the sick and the hungry and the poor? What is the role of an ordained priest in caring for others, and how is it different from that of a layperson? Jesus wasn't speaking only to the Pharisees when he declared in answer to their question, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. . . . [And] love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:37, 39). Jesus was speaking to all of us, no matter our role in society:

When we feed one another, we remind ourselves of the power of food and its role in sustaining life. We share God's love in a way that is familiar and accessible. ... "Eat and you shall be satisfied," Jesus said. When I carry a casserole to a neighbor, I am saying, "Your life matters to me. I want you to live, and I want you to eat and be satisfied." ... the groceries in those brown paper bags were the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ feeding her soul and nourishing her family.

### **Chapter 5: ONE of US**

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***Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place.***

— **HENRI J. M. NOUWEN**

It is easy for us to sanitize Jesus into someone whom we would want to be friends with, but I don't think that is what the Gospels tell us. They tell us Jesus ate with the lepers and the prostitutes and the tax collectors. He rejected the traditional ways of reaching out to others so He could meet people in the most unexpected places: places of illness, of pain, and of suffering.

When is Jesus among us? ... is Jesus also the person who frustrates me when I call about my credit card bill? Is Jesus the person in my office whose every action annoys me for inexplicable reasons? Is Jesus the woman who lives in my building, who I see every day but never stop to ask her name? Is Jesus my

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former brother-in-law, alcoholic and lost to this world? Is Jesus the once-close friend with whom I haven't spoken in eighteen years? Is Jesus the people in our life who make us the most anxious, angry, or uncomfortable? Jesus is each of these people—... the ones we love, the ones we hate, the ones we don't even notice.

Jesus is in the messiest places of our lives. And Jesus calls us to love those places where He comes to us, even when we don't think we can do it.

### **Chapter 6: FEED My SHEEP**

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***If you judge people, you have no time to love them.***

**— MOTHER TERESA**

I did the thing God placed in front of me that day. I fed the sheep Jesus put in my care.

"If we could wave a magic wand and solve addiction, mental illness, and the nation's healthcare crisis, we could solve rural poverty"...

"We are putting tiny bandages of love on gaping societal wounds," I said. "That's all we can do. We feed people, we love them, we offer them a safe place to come and talk, and we share their sorrows. That's it. We cannot fix the education system, get transportation for families, or create jobs for the unemployed. We are not in the business of solving rural poverty. We are in the business of feeding people with love."

No one wants to know that poverty is never simple. Yes, much of what poor people suffer is preventable—but to overcome poverty it takes money, and life skills, and more money, and transportation, and good doctors, and a roof that doesn't leak, and generous employers, and perseverance, optimism, support, and more money.

Poverty is much more complex than it looks. And rural poverty can be nearly invisible.

Homeless people in small towns sleep in cars and stay warm wandering twenty-four-hour stores ... Real poverty is complicated, confusing, and uncertain.

[The] truth was, as I should have told the church lady, it was a constant battle not to judge or criticize my clients. It was hard to love people who regularly made bad choices and weren't prepared for the consequences. It was hard to remember that one financial setback in my life might be an annoyance to me, but in their lives it was devastating. I had to choose to love even when it didn't fix anything.

But loving them was what I tried to do—every day. And by doing it for those who came to [me], I learned to do it better for those nearest to me, for those in my family, and even for myself. Because, like my clients, like you, I am poor, too—in even deeper ways than I can understand.

None of my insignificant concerns mean a thing to people who have real problems, who truly live on the real fringes of society.

But the stories in the Gospels show us the reality. The blind, the unwashed, the poor—Jesus loved them all. From them, we learn that we, too, are loved. We are not left out.

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### **Chapter 7: WALKING into MYSTERY**

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***When ambition ends, happiness begins.***

**—THOMAS MERTON**

ONE OF the many things I couldn't fix in our community was others' perceptions of the needy among us. But I did welcome opportunities to talk about the complications of poverty and the beauty in loving strangers. I saw educating others about rural poverty as part of my calling, and I tried to let God do with my efforts what He would.

[I heard] stories of real people in poverty, people who didn't choose this life for themselves or their families but lived it nonetheless.

...Poverty is all around us. We cannot ignore it. And we cannot forget that hospitality to one person makes a difference.

### **Chapter 8: HOLY Listening**

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***God's first language is silence.***

**— SAINT JOHN OF THE CROSS**

Where is God in this? How could God watch this march of poverty and sadness and indifference and need and not intervene? I couldn't change their lives. Most of the time, I can't change my own life. I couldn't tell my clients that things would get easier, illnesses would be healed, or debts would be paid. All I could say was that there are many things we simply don't understand. All I could tell them was that they were loved, that someone cared enough to help, to offer a bag of groceries, and that they were not alone. I could carry some of their pain, ease their burden, if only for a few minutes.

Knowing the pain and sadness of their families' lives helped me recognize those same things in my life—the things I wouldn't be honest about, either, unless I was in sacred space, with someone I could trust. I could try to be for them the face of Jesus that I wished to see in my own life, just as they were Jesus for me.

Real ministry for me required an emptying of myself hour after hour, day after day. It never made me feel good or special or saintly... After a day that stretched my imagination, my compassion, and my heart, I felt more broken than ever, and I knew others were more broken than I could ever see.

And so I am beginning to learn that God does not call us to "fix" things through our vocation. God calls us to live our vocation.

One of the ways I have discovered this truth, and continue to absorb it, is through contemplative prayer. This ancient form of silent prayer is a way of communicating with God by allowing God to speak to us, rather than our speaking to God. Some have described it as a way we experience God's presence within us, "closer than breathing, closer than thinking, closer than consciousness itself." This form of prayer is both a relationship with God and a discipline to foster that relationship.

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...experiencing the peace of quiet grew to a daily practice of sitting erect, eyes closed, clearing my mind of thoughts and concerns, for twenty minutes. [It brought] a realization of how I could learn so much more by being quiet... to be quiet and listen carefully, to love deeply, and to recognize that God was in charge of all things. The problems of the world were not mine to solve.

My contemplative prayer practice fed my ministry, which was fed by my trip to the Communion table, which was fed by my caring for the poor.

When I was frustrated by my inability to transform the lives of all the people in need that I met, I turned to silent prayer. When I was mad at poverty and the politics behind it, I turned to silent prayer.

Prayer helped me shed my anger and confusion and helplessness. During those twenty-minute times of quiet, I imagined myself resting in God's great hands, where I was safe and cared for, and God was in control.

... we should be quiet and listen—listen to our intuition; listen to our heart; listen to God. And when we see we aren't getting answers to the questions we are asking, we might need to ask different questions. The silence helps us be content with no answers at all. It helps us see that above all, we need God's grace.

...although it might be easier to divide service and poverty into "us" and "them," into people with abundant resources and people with little, the people in need are really you and me. We are as helpless as anyone with a hungry belly...

The stranger and the starving and the hurting remind us: we all hunger for God.

### ***Chapter 9: THE Kingdom of GOD***

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***The future starts today, not tomorrow.***

**— POPE JOHN PAUL II**

No matter how often people came to special events such as this breakfast, each occasion changed lives. Whether it was with insightful sixth-graders or college students or community volunteers, these gatherings of disparate people sharing a meal were the table fellowship that Jesus encouraged through his life and actions. When Jesus ate with tax collectors or lepers or women, he was showing us that the kingdom of God knows no boundaries. Heaven is a table where we can all sit together: rich and poor, men and women, schoolchildren and adults. At its best moments, that is what ministry is—God among us and within us, a glimpse of heaven.

### ***Chapter 10: WOUNDS of LOVE***

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***The truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it.***

**— FLANNERY O'CONNOR**

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In every relationship I had with people in my work, I realized I saw into their lives through only one portal, yet they lived in a very big space with many secret rooms, sometimes rooms that had been untouched for decades... I tried to remember that I could never know what had transpired before I became involved. But there were a few situations when I felt God draw me into these families for a reason.

I completely misunderstood what was going on, on a cultural level and on an emotional level. I really didn't know what I was doing... I had to trust God to take care of the problems I couldn't solve, the ones that were so much bigger than a check or a bag of food could resolve.

### **Chapter 11: CONFESSION and CALLING**

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***To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.***

— C. S. LEWIS

Losing your false self means losing who you thought you were. It means believing that God is working in you to make you better—to make you wholly you, wholly like Christ. When I find myself clinging to my craving for affection and esteem, power and control, and security and survival, I know I am not on the path God wants for me... living into our calling means knowing who we are before God.

### **Chapter 12: MIRIAM'S Second DEATH**

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***We have been called to heal wounds, to unite what has fallen apart, and to bring home those who have lost their way.***

— SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI

I was reminded again of how foreign many parts of my clients' lives were to me... It was as if we lived in two spheres, right next to each other, that had little overlap for me except when I sat in my office, surrounded by bags of groceries.

How can I make this situation better? But I realized no person—pastor or priest, parent or prophet—could... The only thing I could do was be a witness: to friendship and compassion, to pain and grieving. Please help, God, I prayed. Let me know what to do. Please. God. Help.

I followed where God's peace was, trusting that God would use my calling to bring peace to others, too.



### **Chapter 13: VISIONS of JOY**

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***Joy is a mystery because it can happen anywhere, anytime, even under the most unpromising circumstances, even in the midst of suffering, with tears in its eyes.***

**— FREDERICK BUECHNER**

When I first began my work at CAC and people offered me gifts—jars of jam and pickles, handmade crafts, a bouquet of wildflowers in a mayonnaise jar—I would accept them, say thank you, and then turn around and give them to someone else. I had a hard time truly accepting anything, especially from people who I knew were in need. Over the years I learned that receiving a gift means humbling myself, acknowledging that I really do need what someone else can offer. It means recognizing my own poverty. And I learned that, like God, gifts often show up when they are least expected.

Our ministry at CAC was a movement of gifts, in and out, every week. People across the community hosted food drives or toiletry drives and brought the items in. Scouts arrived with boxes and crates of food they had collected by walking around town, leaving grocery bags on doorsteps, and going back a week later to gather the filled bags. College students brought bags of extra shampoo and conditioner they'd bought on trips to the store. People moving out at the end of the semester (college students, seminarians, adjunct faculty) emptied their pantries and shelves to our office. Sometimes the items were in pristine condition. Other times there would be half-eaten boxes of cereal (to the trash), almost-full bottles of detergent (saved and given away), cases of ramen noodles (happily redistributed), or single-serving pouches of macaroni and cheese or instant oatmeal and cocoa (dropped in this week's grocery bags). On Pantry Sunday, the first Sunday of the month at area churches, people wanted to participate even if they had forgotten to buy food during the week, so they would cull their own shelves for items they no longer needed or could easily replace.

The Pantry Sunday offerings were often a funny collection of the boring (chicken noodle soup, tuna fish, kidney beans) and the bizarre (she-crab soup, marinated artichoke hearts, sliced jalapeños, and Twining's tea). The most unusual item ever donated to CAC was a jar of vermouth-soaked cocktail onions, something one might use when making martinis—not a regular beverage of the Appalachian poor. Whenever these stranger items came into the office, we set them on a special shelf. Volunteers and board members and parishioners might come in and say, "I love . . .," and I would encourage them to take that item—garlic-stuffed olives, for example—and bring back a jar of peanut butter. It was an even exchange: they got something they wanted and we got something we could use. The Indian curry mixes, water chestnuts, and anchovies all got moved through like this.

I received dozens of Ziploc bags full of coins—nickels and pennies and quarters, all poured in together—from generous children in our community. I could see that these young children were truly concerned for the needs of others. Children were also a special, essential part of the volunteer pool. Looking back at the daily logs of activity over those ten years, I found that... all the children who helped wanted their name to be in that book, to record their work, to let someone know they cared, no matter what their age.

Virtually every client said thank you to me sometime, somehow. Sometimes clients got angry with me because I didn't give them exactly what they wanted. Sometimes they took out their frustrations on



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me, much as a child throws a tantrum at home with those whom they most love. Sometimes the gratitude took shape as words and hugs. Sometimes it was a card or note. Over the years, I got to accept all kinds of beautiful, precious gifts. Gifts, all of these. Gifts to God, really, offered to me because of this work, just as gifts carried to the altar in church are handed to a minister. The gifts I received may have been quilts and cards and photographs, but they were no less precious than the gifts of the Magi at the birth of Christ. They came from God, just as the food we offered came from God. All of them, in turn, returned as thanks to God. Over the years, I saw my own need. I saw God in the hands reached out to me. And I received.

### **Chapter 14: THE HANDS of JESUS**

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***What does love look like? It has the hands to help others. It has the feet to hasten to the poor and needy. It has eyes to see misery and want. It has the ears to hear the sighs and sorrows of men.***

**— SAINT AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO**

I spent a lot of time working with my hands during my ten years at CAC: unpacking cardboard cases of food, repacking food into grocery bags, serving breakfast to clients and schoolchildren, and holding the hands of others. My nails were always short, my cuticles ragged. It took many hands to make the ministry possible—hands to give and hands to receive.

During those years, and since then, I was often the chalice bearer at my beloved parish, offering the cup of wine at the smooth oak Communion rail on Sunday mornings, saying the words that I loved, the same words I said to Rebecca and her mother: “The blood of Christ, the cup of salvation.” There I learned that in a close-knit community it is possible to recognize people by their hands alone. At Communion, I could identify every person without looking at his or her face as that person came to rest his or her hands on that rail. Each person’s hands were known to me, known to one another, and most important, known to God. I knew the pattern of how each pair of hands folded together—whose hands were wrinkled and gnarled; who had the hands of laborers and who had the hands of professors; who had young, smooth hands; and whose hands shook with disease. Without hearing a word from these friends or ever looking up, I knew them. Those moments watching the hands of my community pass in front of me remind me of how intimately God knows us. God knows the oddities and beauties of our hands, the way they show our work and prayers and joys. And of course God’s understanding of us goes far beyond our skin, our fingers, our understanding of one another. It is God who knows us when we don’t even know ourselves.

“Bless these hands, dear God.” And as I prayed, I kissed each peeling palm and then placed them on my cheeks. I held them to my face as you might cradle a child’s face with your own hands. “Comfort [her] and shine your healing light on her during this time of pain.” Perhaps there was talking going on around us. Perhaps everyone in the room was watching Frances and me. I don’t know. Something greater than me was at work, something that told me how to pray with Frances. I wanted to be Jesus for her, to touch her wounded places and make them whole. And Frances did the same for me. She

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became Jesus for me in those moments. Her hands touched my face and healed my pain and made me whole, in the way that only Jesus can do.

I have no illusions that anything I did cured [her] hands. That wasn't the point. It was an impromptu prayer on a busy Saturday morning that drew us closer to each other and closer to God that day... praying with her hands on my face, and kissing those broken and raw palms, changed me. It gave me the chance to know how it feels—for just a few moments—to be Jesus for someone else, to be Christ on this earth. It also gave me the chance to receive Jesus, to feel His broken hands on my face and let Him heal my wounds. It was a reminder that as I offered God to others, God was offering Himself to me.

I realized my work was right in front of me: to be Christ for others and to let them be Christ for me; to understand that following God's calling begins with recognizing my own need for nourishment, for healing, and for help—my own hunger for food from the hands of Christ.

### ***Epilogue: FINDING God***

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***No pessimist ever discovered the secret of the stars, or sailed to an uncharted land, or opened a new doorway for the human spirit.***

**— HELEN KELLER**

The lines of people outside, combined with the rows of people inside, along with those who had come to help—it was not so different from Sundays at my church as the Eucharist begins. Hungry souls patiently stand in line, with a sense of need, moving toward the abundance that awaits them.

Through this little local ministry tucked away in the old parish hall of a church, hundreds of people had an opportunity to see God—to see God as they gave away juice boxes and crackers, cans of soup and fruit, jars of jelly and tubs of peanut butter; to see God as their cars filled with more groceries than most had ever seen; to see God in the eyes of the stranger; to see God in the hands of the giver. Just as my journey of feeding the hungry day after day was a way for God to feed me, community events like these opened up space for God to feed all of us.

[I] had learned to love better and more deeply in my work at the CAC. I had learned to see God in the faces of my clients, in the strangers who came by, and in the young people who helped out. This ministry, so needed in our community, was about a living, breathing God, accessible to anyone.

Christ comes to me in extraordinary ways, in the most ordinary experiences... as I watch broken, sinful people like me move through the church, I remember it doesn't matter what clothes we wear or where we stand or sit on Sunday mornings—we are all needy for God.

If I move toward the priesthood, it will be as a woman still seeking—because we don't answer God's call to solve problems in our lives, we answer because God calls us.

There are many stories I didn't write about, stories without endings and stories that are too complicated to explain. Isn't that the way life often is? Without an ending, complicated, and hard to explain. But when we listen, through silence and through service, God puts the next step in front of us.

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We don't have to figure out the future. We don't have to fix anyone's life, even our own. Instead, we will pray, listen, give, and receive with beloved hands. We will look for God in the simple and the surprising and remember that God will come to us, too, in the most remarkable ways. Even in a bag of groceries.

### Notes:

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*This synopsis was created through a compilation of passages taken directly from the book with added/modified words for readability only. The book is available for a 2 week loan for the Kindle reader. Contact 200KReasons for more information on borrowing the eBook.*

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The mission of 200,000 Reasons is to have 100% of United Methodist churches in Arkansas participating in an initiative to significantly reduce childhood hunger through feeding ministries, public witness, and education for long-term stability.

To learn more

- send an email to **200KReasons@arumc.org**
- visit the website at **www.200KReasons.arumc.org**
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