

## Jennifer Caruso

### Maturing in a love for one another as we walk where Christ walks...

*God loves interacting with us inside challenging relationships with the ones closest to us, so we can see the markers of growth in more detail. Check out Jennifer's journey of growth. (First Word)*

**T**wo things have made a difference in my life this year. The first is servitude. Pastor Joel preached this past year on servitude in the church and in the community. I have been a volunteer at St. Joseph's Children Home for 3 years, but I held back volunteering in the church. I took a step by volunteering at First Free when I joined the choir. The next step I took in volunteering for First Free was teaching the 1st grade Sunday school, which I enjoy very much. The second thing that made real impact on me personally, this year, is practicing unconditional love.

In my growing up years I always wanted to be a wife and a mother, besides being an actress, a lawyer, a missionary, a nun, and the list goes on. Now I am 34, and married with 3 children whom I absolutely adore! However this last year I have been learning about unconditional love. I have realized that being a mother and loving my children unconditionally is not as easy as I thought it would be. Sure. I love them no matter what, but it is walking in love daily. On the days when they give me such a hard time by arguing constantly I end up asking myself, "Now why am I doing this?" Even when they repent right away and give me a hug and ask for my forgiveness, I know it is temporary and before long I am right back in that last argument with my blood pressure running high with a couple extra grey hairs. This challenge is the true test: The ability to love my children without conditions.

I might not feel like giving unconditional love, and even though I want to tell them to give me some space, I have learned to take to heart what our Father God often talks about in the Bible regarding love. The more I spend time with him and keep his council, the easier it is. In 1st John 2:5 and 6 it says, "*But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.*"

So walking uprightly, walking in love, being a servant, including whatever lesson(s) I may learn, I am still discovering and growing. Life is such a blessing, as well as family, friends, and church. I have grown from many lessons in love, servitude, and forgiveness. In the process I am thankful and appreciative of each experience.

### 1 John 2:5-6

***But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.***



# Pam Owens

## Maturity in Letting Go because God is in Charge



**Maturing in Christ can also involve letting go and giving our lives to HIM who is able to change the course of things for His own perfect purpose. Pam is challenged as she watches her children grow...and in the process, she is growing right along with them. (First Word)**

Every day is a new opportunity for growth with two little ones at home. I see growth and changes in my children all the time. It is harder to recognize growth in myself when I'm so busy with the kids. Often times I become worried about things, and it is easy for my worry to take on a life of its own. This year I have really sensed God saying to me, "Slow down, stop worrying, I'm here for you and your family. "Trust me."

I have to remind myself of God's comfort of "trust me" all the time, especially when I'm particularly worried about something - or during the times I think I need to have all the answers. It is good to let Him do the worrying for me. It is nice to know that He is in charge.



James 4:8a "Draw nigh to God, and He will draw nigh to you."  
**DRAW NIGH TO GOD** James 4:8a

## Vanessa Stacknik



Throughout my growing up years, we kids have had many 'adopted' grandparents/aunts/uncles. Elders from the churches we've been involved in have been like relatives to us. This year, around Christmas time, I had the privilege of visiting 3 elderly people who have all lost their spouse in the past year. Marvelle, a 90 year-old woman who has known me my whole life, is still mourning the death of her husband Howard. The couple was married for over 50 years. I cannot imagine her pain. While we were visiting her, we asked if she read a lot. She replied that she doesn't read much, except the Bible. She said she did not know how someone would survive her situation without the Lord. Marvelle has lived her life for the Lord, and reminds us that we are always in her prayers. That is such a testament and challenge to me as I strive to grow closer to God through reading His Word and interceding for others. Sometimes I lose sight of God's influence on my life, and my Bible reading becomes monotonous or seems inapplicable to my life. People like Marvelle remind me how important it is to stay connected to God's Word. "Draw nigh to God, and He will draw nigh to you." (James 4:8a)

There is one other woman who I will mention. Grandma Helen is like a grandma to everyone who knows her. She is caring, dedicated, and constantly interceding for others. I have been able to know her and learn from her what a godly woman looks like. Although I do not have real grandparents who have provided that for me, God has blessed me with many examples of godly people who have stayed faithful to God for generations. It strengthens my faith and encourages me to continue to serve God. I know that I have a long way to go, but because of the people in my life and those who are praying for me, I am on the right track. I continue to read my Bible daily, and pray that God will use me in amazing ways.