

A Beautiful Adventure: the Gift of the Arts in Spiritual Formation

with Carolyn Arends

Transcript for Session 2

Wendy VanderWal Martin: Hello, friends. Welcome to session two of our 2024 meditation series produced by the Henri Nouwen Society. We are again so grateful to have Carolyn Arends with us. Carolyn is speaking on the topic of A Beautiful Adventure: the gift of the arts in spiritual formation. Carolyn, we're thrilled that you're with us again.

Carolyn Arends: Thank you, it's great to be back.

Wendy VanderWal Martin: Carolyn is an accomplished singer -songwriter. She has 14 albums to her name. She's also written three critically acclaimed books, teaches at universities and seminaries all over, and contributes to Christian publications. Carolyn is also the Director of Education at Renovare, which is a far -reaching organization focused on personal and spiritual renewal. Carolyn, we're glad to have you for session two. Take it away.

Carolyn Arends: Welcome back everyone to our exploration of the way that the arts can be unique allies in our spiritual formation journeys, our beautiful adventure with God. Today we're going to look at two ways in which exposure to art and the creation of art and receptivity to art can help us train instead of try when it comes to our life with God. Now there's just one thing I should say before we jump in and that's that the arts are not really required to do anything to justify their existence. Beauty in nature, in art, and in each other is God's goodness made manifest to the senses. Just by existing, art and beauty offer us a profound gift.

The late 17th, early 18th century philosopher, Lord Shaftsbury is known to have argued that, quote, the message of the flower is the flower. In other words, art and beauty do not have to be utilitarian to be worthy of our care and attention. But the thing is, it just so happens that when we give the arts our time and care and attention, they end up helping to shape us in a bunch of important ways. And it's that special feature of the arts that we're going to pay attention to for the rest of this series. So let's dive into it. How might the arts help us train instead of try in our life and friendship with God? Well, here is way number one. The arts help us train to pay attention.

Whoever has ears, let them hear, Jesus is captured saying in Matthew 11: 5. So, do we hear? Do I hear? I do believe that God speaks, not only in scripture, but also in community, in the stuff that's going on around us, and most especially in the movements of our hearts. Frederick Beuchner says that quote, God speaks into and out of the thick of our days.

I love that, and when I'm paying attention, sometimes I can tune into that conversation. Similarly, Malcolm Monkridge says, every happening, great or small, is a parable whereby God speaks to us, and the art of life is to get the message. When I'm paying attention, sometimes I get the message. But here's the rub.

It is so hard to pay attention. Even before the advent of Wi-Fi, Henri Nouwen diagnosed our problem in his book, *Making All Things New, An Invitation to the Spiritual Life*, which was originally written in 1981.

He noted that we live with so much noise, both in our environments and in our own heads, that we struggle to hear God. In the ensuing chaos, our lives become absurd. And absurd is a word we derive in English from the Latin word *sortos*, which means deaf. So a spiritually deaf life is an absurd life. Henri writes,

When, however, we learn to listen, our lives become obedient lives. The word obedient comes from the Latin word, *audere*, which means listening. A spiritual discipline is necessary in order to move slowly from an absurd to an obedient life, from a life filled with noisy worries to a life in which there is some free inner space where we can listen to God and follow his guidance.

Now of course things have only gotten worse since Henri wrote those words more than 35 years ago. As the full consequences of the digital revolution begin to catch up with us, sociologists are declaring a profound crisis of hijacked attention in our day, with some claiming we now live in the most distracted time in all of human history.

Not too long ago, I was talking to a professor, someone with a PhD who confessed he's been shocked to realize that after a lifetime of scholarship, in recent years, his neural pathways have been so rewired by the digital soundbite method of absorbing information that he now finds it very challenging, very difficult to sit and read a chapter of a book. Paying attention, moving from an absurd life to an obedient life, it's harder than ever. And this is a genuine crisis.

Because as the poet Mary Oliver once put it, attention is the beginning of devotion. Whatever I give my attention to will also eventually have my heart. Plus, there is an additional complicating factor that predates the digital revolution, and that's the human

capacity for a phenomenon called selective attention.

Have you ever seen that video testing selective attention that researchers Dan Simons and Chris Chablis released a couple of decades ago? In the video, there are three people in white shirts passing a basketball and three people in black shirts passing a basketball. Viewers are told to only count the passes between the people in the white shirts.

In the middle of the video, someone in a full gorilla suit walks into the scene and stands there facing the camera and pounding his chest. That gorilla is on screen for about nine seconds, yet reliably, anytime the video is shown, about half the viewers don't see the gorilla at all.

Full confession, the first time I watched the video, I completely missed the gorilla and didn't believe the gorilla was there. They had to rewind the tape to get me to believe that it was actually true that there was a gorilla in the clip. Now what happened to those of us who missed the gorilla, of course, is that we were focusing only on the players in the white shirts as we'd been instructed and screening out the players in the black shirts, which meant we also completely missed the guy in the black gorilla costume.

Now this capacity to focus on one thing and screen out other things that might compete for our attention, that's a God-given ability and a very necessary one. If we didn't possess the capacity for selective attention, we wouldn't be able to drive a car or carry on a conversation or really be able to function at all. But what our capacity for selective attention means is we will only see what we focus on. Let me say that again because it's really, really important. We will only see what we focus on. So whether or not we see and hear God moving in the thick of our days depends on where we place our focus.

Now honestly, I genuinely want to give the Trinity my attention. I deeply desire to have my heart focused on Jesus. And I bet you feel the same way. But if we just try to attend more, we're doomed. I mean, everything in our environment and even in our own wiring is positioned for us to fail. We'll be trying to run a marathon for which we have not trained. But the arts in concert with classic disciplines like meditation, silence, and solitude can be important allies in training to pay attention. The arts can help us disciple our senses.

Carefully listening to a great piece of music is a powerful way of disciplining our hearing, much the way that engaging with a work of visual art can train our sight. The sense of incense or lilacs can discipline our sense of smell. Rough wood or cool marble or rich fabrics or water or clay can rehabilitate our sense of touch.

The culinary arts can retrain our taste buds. So we learn to savor food which will both nourish and delight. And you know, sometimes it can be particularly helpful to be confronted with a piece of art that doesn't speak to you at first. That can be a wonderful invitation into some fairly intense training to develop the capacity to really look at something or really listen to something or really taste something long enough to allow it to begin to open itself up to you. Now this sort of training takes time.

And that's another huge challenge in our culture. A 2016 study at the Art Institute of Chicago found that the median viewing time per piece of artwork in the museum was 21 seconds. So people were going to all the trouble to come to the Art Institute of Chicago and then spending exactly 21 seconds per work of art gazing at paintings.

Contrast that with the attention that Henri Nouwen gave to Rembrandt's *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. Nouwen lovingly attended to that painting for years. He writes that when he got to visit it in person in St. Petersburg, he quote, sat before the painting for three days, two or three hours a day, pondering, studying, reflecting, and making notes.

Over time, the painting became for Henri a conduit for connection with the Trinity and a facilitation of deep inner healing. Eventually, Henri wrote one of his best loved books about it, a book that our host Wendy calls, *One Beautiful Extended Visio Divina*. I can't imagine any of that would have happened had Henri given the Rembrandt the 21 seconds that most people give a work of art.

So for a wee bit of training, let's try to take a couple of minutes right now to look at a couple of paintings. In a moment, we'll put a very famous painting, *Supper at Emmaus* by Caravaggio, up on the screen. And then what we'll do is we'll set a timer for two minutes and ask you to give your full attention to the painting for those two minutes.

There's nothing tricky about the painting. I promise no hidden code or anything like that. The point of this exercise is just to enjoy the art and to notice if you see anything in the painting after two minutes that you didn't see at first. You may want to have a pen and paper with you so that you can jot down or sketch out anything that you notice. Okay, are you ready? Let's begin.

This is *Supper at Emmaus* by Caravaggio, painted in 1601.

Okay, we'll hold two minutes there and then we'll come back in.

TWO MINUTE PAUSE

All right, how was that? I trust you enjoyed meditating on the Caravaggio. And then you got a little taste of how much more a work of art has to give you if you can give it a little bit of time. Before we move on, I want to offer you the chance to spend another couple of minutes with a slightly more abstract painting, just so that we get a chance to do a bit of training with something not quite as concrete as the Caravaggio. I will put up a painting called *Resurrection*, which was created in 1966 by Elma Thomas, an African -American artist and educator who worked in Washington, D .C. for most of her career.

Resurrection is an acrylic and graphite painting on canvas. And it was the first piece by an African -American artist to be added to the White House collection. Once again, I'll give you two minutes with the painting. And once again, your only assignment is to enjoy it and to notice if there's anything you see two minutes in that you didn't see at the beginning.

Here's Resurrection by Elma Thomas.

TWO MINUTE PAUSE

Welcome back! Thanks for giving those couple of paintings a go. I hope in the coming days you'll maybe try the same exercise with another one of your senses, perhaps by listening to a piece of music, or engaging with a particularly tactile textile, or trying a food you've never tasted before. Start to get in the habit of giving the art you find around you your loving attention.

Only God can release us from spiritual deafness and blindness. But apprenticing ourselves to art is one of the spiritual practices that we can use to cooperate with God in the healing of our senses. Receptivity to art teaches us to focus, to press beyond surface impressions and to look, listen, smell, touch and taste with care and thought and patience. It will help us learn to pay attention. Well, let's move on and cover another way that the arts can help us train instead of try in our life and our friendship with God. Here's way number two.

The arts help us train in longing. Yeah, the arts help us train in longing. Now it will be helpful to begin our exploration here with two passages of scripture.

The first is in Romans 8 verses 22 to 23 and verse 26. And this passage, it's incredible. It describes three great deep longings, the longings of creation, the longing of our own hearts, and the longing of the Holy Spirit, a longing of God. Let me read it to you. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. In the same way, verse 26 says, in the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. Three great groans.

And the second passage is a simple cry from the heart of the psalmist, as the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. That's Psalm 42 10.

Here's the deal, we live in a world that bombards us with the message that we are entitled to comfort and must do everything in our power to avoid discomfort. For many of us, the holy longing for God's kingdom that should characterize our existence has been anesthetized into a chronically distracted complacency.

But how do we recover the longing for God's kingdom, for God's shalom, for things to flourish and work right on earth as they do in heaven? The arts can be an important ally

here in recovering some of God's vision for the world and in helping us experience the gap between what the world is now and what it can and will be. Let me ask you, why do truly breathtaking things bring tears to our eyes?

Why does intense beauty actually hurt a little?

My daughter danced all through high school and there were times at her dance recitals when I could hardly stand the beauty. And it wasn't just when she or her troupe were doing heart-rending lyrical numbers, although I would cry in those. But sometimes it was the hip hop dances that would make me cry. Like just a huge group of kids all hitting their moves hard together and there was something in that synchronicity that somehow became something much larger than the sum of their parts.

Eventually my daughter had to ask me to sit in the back of the theater if I was going to cry at the hip hop routines. But the thing is, art has this power to reacquaint us with our incompleteness and awaken the hunger for more. Sometimes for there to be genuine hope, we've got to despair first of business as usual.

In his book called *Pursuing Christ, Creating Art, Exploring Life at the Intersection of Faith and Creativity*, Gary Mullinder makes just this sort of case. This is what he says, art not only communicates truth, it also creates emotional uprisings. In this way, art opens and then resolves nothing.

Many churches have never considered giving an entire congregation the chance to experience emotional uprisings. Many church leaders are uncomfortable if the final fill-in is left unfilled. It seems far safer to give people tips and techniques and formulas alone than to give them a license to touch a mystery.

Mullinder goes on, and yet for those who might consider allowing art to stir intense uprisings, they will soon discover the solemn beauty of art as an instigating tool in the hands of the potter. It gives people the chance to sit, to contemplate, and to experience a wider variety of emotions.

I mean, rather than causing us to leave church with a smile, what if God's will for us is to sit in our own personal pond of holy agitation the whole morning and actually experience the ache of seeing no way out? Art can remind me that not everything needs to be resolved for it to be beautiful. It also makes me think that we actually force resolutions and outcomes on people, because closure makes us feel better about everything.

But the tragedy with always providing closure is that real life hardly ever provides it. So,

paintings displayed at the right location, sculptures that people are forced to walk past, even to touch, a beautifully designed table during the Eucharist, images on the screen with maybe an underscore of silence, stories told beautifully.

Smells of smoke or roses or bread. Music that drops dead with dynamic and never rises again. Lighting that helps people focus on the beauty found in the moment. So what if art can provide an opening, not only a closing? What if every week your church had the ability to drop a beautiful piece of art into the worship experience and to just let it sit there?

Using art like this isn't the opposite of using art to communicate truth. It's actually the beautiful sister that many of us have never met.

Beauty wakes us up to our incompleteness and the sense that there's more to come. And this is where it's counterintuitive. If we let ourselves experience the longing, we often find that it leads also to wonder and maybe even awe to a sense that more is possible than we have yet seen. In this way, longing and wonder are oddly and importantly connected. But sometimes we have to train to enlarge even our capacity for wonder.

I saw this firsthand when early in my marriage, my father -in -law came from his home in Ontario to our home in British Columbia for a visit.

My husband Mark and I really wanted to host him well and truth be told, we were probably trying to impress him a little bit. We saved up our pennies and we took him to the nicest restaurant we could afford on top of a local mountain here called Burnaby Mountain. Fortunately, he loved the dinner and then we were excited to roll out the piece de resistance. Close to the restaurant on the top of Burnaby Mountain was a viewpoint where we knew we could sit in our car and watch the sun go down and the Vancouver lights come on in the valley below. So we pulled up into the lookout and we shut off our car so that our headlights wouldn't spoil the celestial ambience. And my father -in -law was truly overcome by the beauty that he saw. Within a couple of minutes, this is what we heard from the backseat. Ah. A view like this makes a man realize his place in the universe. Okay, let's go.

We were a bit taken aback given that we had planned to spend a couple of hours there and we'd been there about five minutes, but we obliged him and went home. Now that story makes me chuckle because it makes me realize how often we walk through life that way, brushing up against the transcendent and getting a little glimpse of it and then just hurrying on like the folks in the Art Institute of Chicago who only have 21 seconds to spare for each masterwork.

Friends, we must slow down and awaken to both the ache of longing and the ache of wonder. It is the ache and the longing that can awaken hope because they remind us that there is something to ache and to long for. This is how Henri Nouwen experienced the work of his favorite Dutch painters, Rembrandt and Van Gogh.

The yearning for a lasting home brought to consciousness by Rembrandt's painting grew deeper and stronger, somehow making the painter himself into a faithful companion and guide, writes Nouwen in *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. Somehow I sensed that seeing this painting would allow me to enter into the mystery of homecoming in a way I never had before.

And listen to the way he describes the counterintuitive but essential mix of longing and hope that art can awaken in his book, *Turn My Morning into Dancing*. Look, he writes, at the wonderful exuberant flowers painted by the famous Dutch artist Vincent van Gogh. What grief, what sadness, what melancholy he experienced in his difficult life. Yet what beauty, what ecstasy, looking at his vibrant paintings of sunflowers, who can say where the morning ends and the dance begins? Our glory is hidden in our pain. If we allow God to bring the gift of himself in our experience of it, if we turn to God not rebelling against our hurt, we let God transform it into greater good. We even let others join us and discover it with us.

So only God can make us hungry for God's self and move us from complacency to longing. But apprenticing ourselves to art is one of the spiritual disciplines we can use to cooperate with God in the stirring up of our spirits. We can train rather than try. So I invite you to do a little training now by listening to a beautifully evocative song.

It's called *Why Do We Hunger For Beauty?* and it's sung by my good friend Steve Bell. Have a listen.

SONG PLAYS

Well, my friends, we've been on quite a journey today, exploring the way that art can help us train to pay attention, as well as the way that art can help us train in longing. If you're interested in a practice you can try on your own that might bring both of those trainings together, I want to suggest that you try something called contemplative photography. This practice comes from Terry Gillespie's outstanding book, *Discovering God Through the Arts*.

In the book, Terry quotes another author, Dirk DeVries, who calls himself a contemplative photographer. Dirk writes, photography offers a means of meditation and reflection,

a method of prayer, a key to open the imagination, a doorway into stillness, depth, and meaning. For those who pursue it, contemplative photography invites us to slow down and notice, to heighten awareness, to see the extraordinary in the ordinary. Photography can be a form of contemplation, a spiritual discipline motivated not by the desire to produce something, but the desire to be in process, open and present, ready to be refreshed and to receive insight.

So the suggested practice is this. Take a camera, and it doesn't matter whether you have a fancy camera or just the camera in your smartphone. Take a camera and go for a walk around your neighborhood, pausing to capture photos of whatever catches your eye, or even better, whatever doesn't catch your eye, but comes alive to you when you give it some loving attention.

It might be a flower strong arming its way through the concrete or the glorious chalk art of the neighbor kids or any number of things. Pay special attention to anything that awakens a sense of longing or wonder. Let me quote from Terry directly to give you some final coaching. He says, photograph the intriguing textures, the splendid colors and curious forms that you encounter.

Stop and spend enough time to investigate the beauty you discover, allowing it to deliver a message about the God who created it. What does the intricacy of a fallen leaf, or the patterns on tree bark, or the colorful explosion of a wildflower tell you about God? If you ever think to yourself that there is quote, nothing here to photograph, it only means you aren't looking closely enough.

So next time, we'll explore two more ways the arts can help us say yes to the God who loves us. But first, I get to have some conversation with Wendy.

Wendy VanderWal Martin: Thank you so much, Carolyn. What a rich session. So many thoughts as I've been listening to you. One of the ones right away strikes me about the dualism that some people have in differentiating between sacred art and secular art. I wonder if you could just offer some thoughts about, is there really a distinction between the two? Could secular art also be a companion or part of our apprenticing in the journey of spiritual formation?

Carolyn Arends: Yeah, I'm not gonna give you any fancy theological terms for this, but I think that every one of us is made in the image of the Creator, as we talked about in the first session, and that sometimes long before someone knows that it's the love of God flowing through him or her, the love of God is flowing through him or her. There's a story I love that the Trinitarian theologian, Baxter Kruger, talks about that he's on a plane and

he's sitting next to a botanist who has these incredibly detailed slides that he's working on all the anatomy of the plants. And Baxter, the guy clearly has, they talk a little bit, he's maybe an atheist or agnostic or whatever, and Baxter just can't contain himself. He's like, but don't you see the love between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? It's spilling out into you and your love for God's creation. Like, don't you see? And yeah, I think that there's beauty everywhere and creativity everywhere and I don't tend to have a very strong bifurcation. I have talked to some sacred art scholars who think that I'm wrong about that, but so far I'm unpersuaded. I think that those three transcendentals, goodness and truth and beauty, they just pop up all over the place. My friend Lacey says they're like little radar pings and you never know where they're going to come from, but when they ping, you should pay attention wherever they come from.

What do you think? Do you tend to distinguish in your mind?

Wendy VanderWal Martin: I don't, for similar reasons that you've described. I think God's Spirit permeates anything that is lovely, beautiful, good. All these gifts come from the Father of Lights. And again, as I said, I believe in our first session, Henri Nouwen, my favorite quote of Henri's is fear-filled questions never lead to love-filled answers. And so my hope is that as we come towards the arts with the intention of opening space for communion, that we'll be energized by love. Not a fear of whether the art's appropriate or sacred art, but simply knowing that God is big enough to meet us through any medium that they so choose. And so our heart being ready to meet God, I think is the fertile soil to mix metaphors a little bit.

Carolyn Arends: Yeah, couldn't agree more.

Wendy VanderWal Martin: Now, I have called myself in the past a glutton for beauty. Gluttony, of course, is one of the seven deadly sins, but I think if you're a glutton for beauty, somehow one cancels the other out. But as you talked about beauty, the curious mystery about beauty is that it's not always pretty. It's not always happy. Sometimes what we glimpse to be beautiful or what we're captivated by as beautiful is something very painful. And art, of course, is also the full range of emotion, which then opens up the full range of emotion in the one who is receiving, the one who is open.

So you've talked about all the senses, but I wonder if you could speak to that connection of beauty with the spectrum of emotion and how that becomes part of our spiritual formation.

Carolyn Arends: That's a great question. That's one thing that has really struck me in Henri's writing is how rich his affective life is, his emotional life is, and how much

he seemed to rely on art to access those parts of himself that maybe were suppressed or he was afraid to go there.

So yeah, I think again, it's kind of like the conversation we were just having of like, can you trust beauty and goodness and truth that pops up anywhere? And it's the same, can you trust that there can be a move of God, even in emotion that feels quite unwelcome? Can you trust that God is present in your deepest griefs and in your anger and in the whole spectrum of emotion? And I agree with you, I'm still working on, you know, I mean, philosophers have been debating this for centuries and I'm a total rookie with it, but how we define beauty. Beauty isn't necessarily just that which is pleasant to us or seems nice. And if beauty is divorced from truth or goodness, if something is aesthetically pleasing but telling a lie about the state of the world, which is a very broken place, then it's not, it isn't really beautiful. We need those three things together. So I don't know. I know that the arts can be a can opener that can help us get, you know, maybe that's back to the saying more than we were even saying, feeling more than we were even feeling, can wake us up to some pretty deep parts of ourselves. But again, that trust that it's in God that we live and move and have our being and we have our emotional life. We have our intellectual life, we have our bodily life.

I would, I'm right back to your point about fear, you know? A perfect love casts out fear. And when a strong emotion comes, to have a conversation with the Trinity about it, I'm like, who, what is this? And where did it come from? And how can, will you keep me company in this and help me figure out what it means? I think that may be one of the art's greatest gifts, to help us get at something - those feelings that we might otherwise suppress.

Wendy VanderWal Martin: It seems to me that there's a really important link between beauty and hope. I often say that we can't really control beauty. We can simply receive it or ignore it.

And for many years, one of the teachings I gave in some of the workshops I offered was that there were three important elements of cultivating hopefulness. One was making space for grief and lament. One was really opening our imagination to a positive vision for the future. But then the third was making sure that you had space to be receptive to beauty. Because it's the piece that we don't control, even those of us who create and seek to participate with God in bringing beauty into the world through the arts.

At the end of the day, are we really in control or are we part of what God's releasing into the world? So it seems to me that even as we connect to a full spectrum of emotion, one of the gifts of beauty is that it sparks hope. It sparks something that prevents us from

being locked into that overwhelming sense of the brokenness of the world and reminds us.... Ah, but beauty says there's hope. Beauty reminds us to continue to participate with God in the work of making all things right.

Carolyn Arends: Yeah I love that. I think that's why Dostoevsky said beauty will save the world right. It keeps us keeps us hoping. Yeah I love that and I love your three your three elements of having a capacity for hope. That's really helpful.

Wendy VanderWal Martin: Now you talked about beauty and art awakening longing. And for some Christians, longing can seem like a dangerous thing. That our longings or our desires are going to lead us down a wrong path. And we've spent so much of our life trying to perhaps suppress our longings or numb out to our longings.

Do you want to say something about how is it that longing connects us to that spaciousness for communion with God?

Carolyn Arends: Mmm, that's a great question.

I'm very struck by the kinds of questions that Jesus asks people in the Gospels. He is, I think they've counted like, I forgot the count, but it's several hundred questions that he asks other people, only a hundred and something that other people ask him, and about 10 that he actually answers. So he was very much into asking questions. And the questions are very often questions of desire. What do you want me to do for you? What are you looking for? Sometimes why are you crying? What can I do for you? What do you want? He asks these questions over and over again and I've come to believe he's genuinely interested and it's not because I think it's for a couple of reasons. One is that our desires are kind of driving us under the hood, whether we acknowledge them or not, or even know that they're there. So I think Jesus thought it would be helpful for us to talk over our desires with him so that we could see which ones would lead to life.

So I think that's part of why he asks. And then I think, you know, when we go into conversation with God about something, it's not like we're giving God information. You know, God knows all things. But we're giving God access. And when we can begin to be honest with ourselves in the company of God about the genuine desires of our heart.

I think that's very safe in the sense that for sure we can have some desires that don't lead to life.

But guaranteed beneath those desires is something that will lead to life. And I like the author Ruth Haley Barton. She talks about that if you can go, ooh, you feel that pang

of like, oh, I wanted that. You know, sometimes it's like you don't even know you want something until somebody else gets the job or something else happens and you go, oh, that was a real desire and I didn't even know I had that desire.

She says that that is like kind of a thread that you and Jesus can kind of pull on together and kind of go into those deep places of your heart that Henri's always talking about, that journey into that the deepest places of your heart where you can actually have communion with God and your desires are somehow a thread. My friend Trevor Hudson, he says, a nun told him once, Trevor, your longing is your bus ticket home.

Your longing is your bus ticket home. Follow it. Not foolishly, you know, not in a way that diminishes someone else's life. But... sanely and lovingly with the Lord, pull on that thread and see what's underneath it. I think paying attention to the desires of our heart is critical and it's one of the, you know, the first way we were talking about the Arts Help today is helping us hear the voice of God and see the move of God and desire, I think, in our desires is one of the places where God speaks.

Wendy VanderWal Martin: Last question for this session. What about the person who just says, I listen to teachers like Carolyn and they seem to have this connection with God. And when I get silent, I don't hear anything. I don't hear. What am I listening for? Nothing comes to my mind except my grocery list...

What about the person who just says, I want that conversation with Jesus. I want to talk about the desires of my heart, but it seems like a one-way conversation.

Carolyn Arends: Yeah, that is a painful place to be. And I will say there have been times in my life with God where I could not perceive anybody on the other line, you know, like whatever that is, the dark night of the soul or times. But I know that there I do have friends who say, no, I've never felt I've never felt like there was someone on the other side. And I would just say, just keep trying. You know, Jesus, most of his teaching on prayer in the New Testament is about persistence. And I used to read those parables, you know, like he tells one about this crummy neighbor who won't get up and host a guest and he says, just keep banging on the door and eventually the neighbor will get up. And he tells another story about a capricious judge who won't give justice. And he says, keep bugging the judge. Eventually the judge will give the justice. And I would read these stories and I'd say, what's the lesson here in Jesus? You want us to pester you? Like, what's the deal? But the more I learn about life with God, the more experience life with God, the more I think that Jesus taught about persistence and prayer at a deep empathy for the human condition.

I think he understood on some level what it's like to be on this side of the veil, a little finite

creature trying to be in relationship with an infinite God. And he knows his father is good. He knows his father is listening. But he knows that for us, it can often feel like that is not the case. And I think why he taught about persistence is because he knows nothing kills a relationship faster than the silent treatment.

And so he's saying, don't go silent. Don't go silent. You complain if you need to. I mean, we've got a whole book of the Psalms of complaining to God. Where are you? How long? Why don't I hear you? But don't go silent. And I would say take that longing that I don't hear you. I don't perceive you. I don't see you. Take that into conversation with the Lord. And then maybe be open for the response coming in a way you don't expect, you know? Because we're all wired differently and God seems to connect with us in different ways and so it might be through a piece of art that suddenly floors you and you don't know why or something that happens on your walk through the woods or... something your kid says or something you hear on the radio. I mean, be open to let God be as creative as God is. And yeah, with deep empathy and not wanting to minimize how painful that can be. I wanna say, don't give God the silent treatment. Keep giving God access and see what happens.

Wendy VanderWal Martin: We often say that Henri's deepest truth of all the things that he wrote about, and he wrote about so many things, of what it means to be human, what it means to be in relationship with God, is this core nugget that we are beloved. And I think if we feel like we aren't hearing God's voice, can we say...

I believe this is true, that I am beloved. And to allow the expectations to come down, to be open like you said, and to allow that sense of belovedness become the practice itself. To say when I'm feeling the frustration of what seems like silence or emptiness or no response, no communion, to say how would this be different if I was energized not by that sense of nothingness or emptiness but by the energy of being beloved and to practice that and to practice that and to practice that and that may come through the arts, it may come through nature, it may come through words in our mind, because we're all different. We're all different. But what a beautiful...

Carolyn Arends: And it may need to come through another human being too. Sometimes we just need it incarnated. We just need a person to look us in the eyes and remind us of our belovedness. So be open to God answering in the form of a friend as well. Yeah. Love that.

Wendy VanderWal Martin: Yes, yes.

So Carolyn, you are the beloved of God. And those of you watching and listening, you are the beloved of God. Thank you for watching. We hope that you'll join us next week for session three. And until then, no matter who you are, no matter what you've done, no matter what you failed to do, no matter if you've only tried hard and not trained much, nothing can separate you from the love of God, for you are the beloved.