

Introduction: Welcome to Engage 360, Denver Seminary's podcast. Join us as we explore the redemptive power of the Gospel and the life-changing truth of scripture at work in our culture today.

Dr. Don Payne: Hey friends, this is Engage 360 from Denver Seminary. I'm Don Payne and glad so glad that you are with us. Again, one of my very favorite things about these conversations is getting to interact with people I've just met, who I'm happy for you to meet. People who have really, really interesting stories, stories of faith, stories of ministry, and we get a chance to help them tell you their story and let God use that in your life. So, our guest this week is Vivian Mabuni. Vivian, welcome.

Vivian Mabuni: Thank you so much for having me.

Dr. Don Payne: I am very excited to let you know about Vivian, if you don't already, because Vivian is already pretty nationally known as a speaker and writer. She told me just a little bit earlier today that she is a speaker who writes rather than a writer who speaks

Vivian Mabuni: True. True.

Dr. Don Payne: And I guess those are two different things, but her writing is something that I'll certainly want to draw your attention to. And we're going to get into Vivian's story here in just a little bit, because she's got an amazing story of God's faithfulness and what it means to live by faith in God's faithfulness. Vivian is the author of two books that I know of. One is called Warrior in Pink, a story of cancer community and the God who comforts that was published by discovery house and the other, her second book is called Open Hands, Willing Heart, Discover the Joy of Saying Yes to God. That's published by WaterBrook. And I'm told she's got another book in the, in the makings, but it's basically in the form of sticky notes, stuck all over your closet door.

Vivian Mabuni: That's exactly how I write my talks and my books.

Dr. Don Payne: Vivian also has her own podcast. The title of that is Someday is Here. So want to encourage you to check out her podcast. So Vivian Mabuni is a national speaker and writer, as I mentioned, she's based in California, she has over 30 years of ministry with what is now crew used to be campus crusade for Christ. And at the core of her story is what it means to live by faith in the faithfulness of God, through impossible circumstances. That's the way it comes across to me. As I look at it I look at your stuff, Vivian. So why don't you first give us a little overview of your story and maybe some of the key experiences or themes that have shaped your writing and speaking ministries.

Vivian Mabuni: Well, I grew up here in Colorado in Boulder, Colorado, so did not grow up in a Christian home, culturally Buddhist. And that really meant that I had these different holidays, that we would do certain things like burning incense or

inviting the spirits of ancestors, kind of like the movie Moulin or Cocoa, if you remember those, right? So didn't affect any part of my real life day-to-day living. And then I sat next to a friend in math class in high school, and she had this countenance that was so different. I watched her, she literally looked like she started glowing. I looked her and I said, what happened? Did you become a vegetarian? And she goes, no, I became a Christian and I'm like, well, what does that mean? Do you go to church or something? She goes, no, I have a personal relationship with Jesus. And when I heard that, I was so disappointed because she was smart and funny and I'm like, how can you be duped into believing this mythology and the Bible and all that. But honestly, Dr. Payne, everyday sitting next to her, God was so real in her life and was so intimately involved.

And so that started me on a spiritual journey where I ended up trusting Christ in high school, largely through my youth group, because there were cute boys, but I had, you know, however it works. So long story short the youth pastor there answered my questions, where I realized there was an intellectual basis for the Christian faith. And I placed my trust in Christ. And then my my dad went through midlife crisis and we had lived in Boulder for 17 years and he came home with the news right before my senior year of high school that we were going to move and we weren't moving across town or even to another state. We were moving from Boulder, Colorado to Hong Kong. Oh my is right. So I was so mad at God. And I remember finally ending up in Hong Kong, sitting on the edge of my bed, just having one a very honest and angry conversation with God. And I told him, you know, in my heart of hearts, I want to know you, but I need a church, a youth group, Christian friends.

And if you do that, I will give you my whole life. I'll hold nothing back. Otherwise I'm going to go out and get drunk and do something I'll probably regret, but I'm never talking to you again. And God came through in Hong Kong. And I just was blown away that in the same way that he was so intimate in my friend's life, he was doing the same thing in my life. And I followed through on my part too. And I said, I'm all in. All the poker chips are pushed into the middle. I'll go wherever you want me to go? So that was the beginning of this adventure where it really releasing control of my life, ended up yielding this incredible intimacy with God. And I just have been taken by him ever since. And that's really the beginning really of the adventure for me.

Dr. Don Payne: You know, I think Jesus said something about those who lose their lives will find them or something to that effect, sounds vaguely similar to what you.

Vivian Mabuni: Yeah, it's really, really true.

Dr. Don Payne: Now, you've walked through some pretty dark waters, some tough times. How's that been a part of your journey?

Vivian Mabuni: Well, I would say obviously for those who are listening, who are in any kind of ministry, there are just good times, but there are a lot of hard times a lot of wilderness wandering times, but I would say one of the biggest things that has

really marked my life was being diagnosed with stage three breast cancer. Still three young kids at home and completely unexpected. It was really one of those times where I felt like as a young mom, you know, the youngest was finally at a stage where, you know, she was in school full-time, which would open up all sorts of opportunities. So I started my seminary degree and I joined a national executive team in ministry and felt like everything was lining up and then got this diagnosis that took me out. And that I'm looking back now realizing that that detour was exactly what God was using to prepare my heart and open up other doors of ministry opportunities.

Dr. Don Payne: How so?

Vivian Mabuni: So, I would say that one of the unexpected things was writing. So my best friend, we had so many people wanting to get updates, you know, about the cancer treatment and everything. So she started a medical blog for me and I would just write there and it was, it honestly felt like holy ground, I didn't edit anything. It was just sharing what was going on, what God was teaching. I didn't feel like I needed to make God look good. It was just very honest wrestling of what was going on, what I was going through. And so people were being encouraged by my writing and they were sharing these posts with others. They're like, you know, is it okay? I have a friend who's not going through cancer, but is going through a hard time. But I think these words are really minister. So it just started going. So God used cancer to pull out the writing the writer in me. And that ended up being very unexpected where an editor reached out to me and asked if I had a book proposal. And that introduced me to the publishing world.

Dr. Don Payne: Did that become then your first book, Warrior in Pink?

Vivian Mabuni: Yes, it did.

Dr. Don Payne: I'd be curious to know maybe a few of the nuggets from what you presented in that book?

Vivian Mabuni: Yes. So the subtitle is cancer community and the God who comforts, and for me being first born, being in ministry where I'm accustomed to helping others I found it very difficult to let people into what was really going on in my life. And so one of the stories that really marked my cancer journey was that months before my call that no one ever wants to get from the doctor. I had been leading a women's Bible study of moms whose kids had come to our church and who become the kids had become Christians. And so they really want to know how to grow in their understanding of who God was, some weren't even believers yet. So it was really as wonderful as teaching the difference with the two dots meant between the chapters and the verses like that kind of beginning, right? So we started having these really meaningful conversations. And as women's Bible studies go, our lives started, really intersecting deeply. One of the women from that Bible study shared about this woman that they called in the neighborhood, the Asian Martha Stewart. And she was this woman who always

looked so put together and her home was always spotless and her kids were so well-behaved and the food she made was Martha Stewarts, everything about her life was flawless.

And then this woman was diagnosed with breast cancer, and she was not a believer, but she had this diagnosis and people wanted to help her, like people wanted in the neighborhood and that the school wanted to help her. And she just said, no, no, no, no, no, I'll be fine. I'll be fine. And then she went through her treatment and as her body went through all the changes, she could not hold her perfect world together. And then tragically, this woman took her own life. She left behind her husband and two kids. And the story was shared with me in a food court. And I remember it was almost like in the movies where everything just freezes and God had my full attention. He's like, Viv, you do not know this Asian, Martha Stewart, but you are just like her. You like to be the strong one. You don't want to put anybody out, you don't let people in. And I sat there and nodded and, and just very honestly said, God, I purpose right here right now, if anything like this happens, I will let people in. And God used that story to prepare me for the call three days before Christmas, that I had breast cancer.

Dr. Don Payne: That is amazing. I wonder whether all your years of ministry experience with crew, and I'm wondering this maybe on behalf of lots of people who are involved in in some kind of all in vocational form of ministry, whether we become so accustomed to being the givers, the, the leaders, the ones who other people look to for service, that we kind of lose the capacity to receive. And to be open to that. I mean, did you find that at all?

Vivian Mabuni: Absolutely. I think that there, you know, I think that some of it was my own pride, to be honest, if I think about that, there's just a I don't know. It's I think in leadership often the higher up in leadership, the more lonely it can get, because there's a sense of not wanting to maybe burden people who are looking to us for direction or whatever. But I think what this cancer journey taught me was that the kingdom is really an upside down kingdom and to learn to be a gracious receiver really does take down the pride where it really levels the playing field, where we are all human, where we are all at the cross, all the same. And I think I needed for me in my journey to really be in a place where I learned to be a gracious receiver.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. It probably takes as much grace to receive as it does to give, who knows maybe more?

Vivian Mabuni: I think in some cases it really does. It does. And for me, as an Asian American culturally you know, I'm taught in my culture, not the, the nail that sticks up gets pushed down or don't rock the boat. Like those are very deeply embedded cultural values that being a receiver and being okay with people helping was very counter-cultural as well. So there was that layer in addition to my faith that also played into that. So, my book really does talk about that and what it looked like and what it looked like even with my husband as like my primary caretaker that I, I knew that he, as strong as he is, couldn't carry all of it. And so bringing in

my other three friends who might deem the awesome threesome, but I kind of pictured that, that story in the gospels where, you know, the lame man had four friends, drop him down through the roof to Jesus. And it really is something where we need to, I think we need to be open to having more than just our immediate family be part of it. That's where the community piece is so important, whether it's our church community, we go to a small Asian American, mostly Asian American church. I think that entire church had our garage code memorized. It was unbelievable how well they loved me and my family. It was really beautiful.

Dr. Don Payne: Now I know you've devoted in your second book, especially open hands, willing heart. You've devoted a lot of attention to simply what it means to live by faith. What is a life lived by faith, faith in God's faithfulness? What does that really look like? And you tell some great, great stories in there, and I'd love for you to unpack for us a little bit about what you've discovered, maybe about the difference between God being faithful and God being predictable.

Vivian Mabuni: Yes. I think that we like to know how the story goes. I think, especially in north America, I think we, we have a hard time embracing pain or challenges or difficulties. I think our brothers and sisters around the world who are in other settings, understand intuitively what it looks like to persevere. And I think often those of us in north America, our faith is such that we get very mad at God when things don't go as planned. So learning about predictability versus God's faithfulness, I think we want to, I think we even pray this way. A lot of times I find my prayers very bossy and direct. I'm like, God, this is the problem. And you need to fix it this way and you need to do it in this timeframe. And I've learned in these years of not only ministry, but just life realizing that sometimes the most honest prayer is one where we literally open our hands and we just kind of hand it over without even any words. And I've been a part of a 12 step program before as well. And the 11th step is knowledge of God's will and the power to carry that out. So it's not even God, you need to fix it this way, but here's the situation that I will be done. And that surrendered posture, I think really changes everything. Giving them God freedom to move in ways that we may not know this side of the situation.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. It's often occurred to me that we only really see the shape of God's faithfulness in the rear view mirror. And if we try to project out in, you know, through the windshield, so to speak, that's where we begin to establish rules for God's behavior. Right. And then when God doesn't behave, according to these rules we make and we can pretty ticked off. Yes. And that's certainly been a growth curve for me. I think it has for lots and lots of us and learning to separate out what it means for God to be faithful, but to be faithful on his own terms. And then see what that looks like in the rear view mirror.

Vivian Mabuni: Yeah. And he is faithful and I think more than anything, he wants us to rely on him. And when I read the Old Testament, no two battles were the same. When I read the New Testament, Jesus healed differently every single time. And I think the reason why is that we like to put things into formulas. We want a certain,

use this spit mud, and that will bring about from blindness to sight. Like we want something to hold onto rather than relying on the Lord. And I think he mixes it up on purpose that we would have fresh faith. He's not going to do it the same way. And so whether it's you know, trusting God for finances, like he may provide in one way, but that's not how he's always going to provide. And I think that's on purpose.

Dr. Don Payne: Gosh, I hate that. I just want a script.

Vivian Mabuni: I know. I just want a formula. I want to just be able to plug and play.

Dr. Don Payne: So how have you learned too, how has that, I can't say this correctly. How does that not turn into a formula?

Vivian Mabuni: I think being mindful that it's going to be mixed up is what we need to kind of renew our minds in that it's not that there's something wrong. So we had a situation where we were going to do ministry in Japan, which is less than 1% Christian. And you know, having been on staff with crew, we had raised support for missions in the past. And so I had this whole system worked out where you send out the letter and you have the return address and all of these things. And we had moved to mission Viejo. My parents were still living in Hong Kong and this move happened unexpectedly. And we were tasked to lead a brand new team into Japan. There hadn't been a team in years. So I had sent out the letters, we went to Hong Kong to visit my parents. We came back and we were literally 10 days from leaving to go to Japan on missions and needed to raise probably at the time 10,000 plus dollars. Which to me felt like a million, it was just so much because the yen and the dollar, you know, all of that.

Anyway, long story short is that when we came back, I was looking through the mail and we only had like maybe a hundred or 200 of the 10,000. And we had received a letter from one of our donors who said that they were going to discontinue their 500 a month donation. So we had just purchased a home, we could lose it. I was freaking out. My husband has a gift of faith. He's like solid, no problem. I'm running around, pulling my hair out. And I'm just thinking, what do we do? We can't. You know? And so I started to fast and pray faster the entire weekend prayed. And I told the Lord, if you could just bring in a thousand of the 10,000, I will trust you to go, we'll get on the airplane. I just need that much. So fast through the whole weekend, Monday, knock at the door. I look at the people and it's our postal man. And he opened the door and he's like, are you the lady of the house? And I'm like, yes. And he goes, well, this whole box of mail has been waiting for you at the post office.

And since you're on my route, I thought I'd bring it to you today. And so we had been getting our mail back, you know, we had put our mail on hold because of Hong Kong, but apparently there was all this other mail. And I sat there with the big box of mail and I just like slid to the ground. And tears started pouring out of my eyes. I opened up all of these notes from people who were praying for us and we had more than a thousand come in. And it was like, the Lord said, Viv,

you think you know how to do this missions stuff. You are going to a country that's less than 1% Christian. You can't just go on your own past experience or your own strength. You need to rely on me. And so I think that's the message. I think he mixes up our circumstances even all the time that we would trust him.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. Maybe in a sense, kind of keeps us off balance.

Vivian Mabuni: Yes. In a very loving, it is very uncomfortable.

Dr. Don Payne: Very loving way, which I still hate. But yeah. At the, at the end of it all, I think we wouldn't have it any other way. Yeah. Right. Yeah. You know, in your book, *Open Hands, Willing Heart*. I love the way you talk about relating to God's attributes, particularly God's omniscience, which we theologians love to say God, you know, the all knowing God, but you have a way of talking about how God's omniscience is perceived differently from an Eastern perspective and a Western perspective. And I think, as I recall, the way you said it was you posed the question from a Western perspective, what can I tell an all knowing God, well, nothing, but from an Eastern perspective, what can I tell an all knowing God, anything. And I'd love for you to say more about that and maybe how that how that difference has marked a transition in your relationship with God.

Vivian Mabuni: Yes. You know, one of the things that I've been definitely trying to unearth and sort through is the different ways that God reveals himself through people and cultures and through time and as an Asian American, I have values that are obviously Western and our school system in the US is Western. So we have a very linear way of reasoning and logic and $A + B = C$. And it's a very linear way of thinking. That's what we are. We are taught in the classroom and Eastern, which is more like Hebrew, the circular, the idea that we can read a Psalm and there can be both praise and lament happening in the same song that we hold intention a lot more nuanced. And it's a circular thinking and that's what I'm starting to discover, even in how I view my faith. And even in an area like prayer, like what can you tell an all-knowing God, if God knows everything, then I can't tell him anything if I'm thinking in a Western linear way.

Dr. Don Payne: Or it's why tell him anything?

Vivian Mabuni: Yeah, because he already knows everything. Whereas in an Eastern perspective, it's like he already knows everything. Then, I don't need to hide anything and I can tell him anything. And there's just this beautiful freedom. And so that's why I think it's so important to study the scriptures in a with a wide range of viewpoints. When I am studying the scriptures with women, walking through infertility, I'm reading Samuel differently because of what they walk through. I think having the perspective of different cultures and even different life stages, it just enriches the entire experience because we bring different parts of who we are as we study the word of God.

Dr. Don Payne: Well, one of the reasons I love that remark you made in your book was because my discipline is systematic theology. And so we talk a lot about the attributes of God, but from a Western perspective, I find that many of us read about those attributes, those classical attributes, the Omni's, and they come across quite often as abstractions that are maybe kind of difficult to relate to. But your way of putting that really made a connection between the classical attributes of God and practical living by faith, like our prayer life, it made omniscience so much more relational, which I really, really appreciated.

Vivian Mabuni: I'm to hear that.

Dr. Don Payne: One more question for you, Vivian. Let's talking about forgiveness. I think that has been a theme you've given some attention to, and that really is a common and difficult sticking point, even for lots of believers. So particularly when wounds go really deep or the effects of a wound linger throughout a person's life, what does it look like to live a life of forgiveness or to move down that lane of forgiveness in a real practical way? When what were called on to forgive, if we're the one who needs to do the forgiving, is not an easy thing? There's not, you know, the easy button,

Vivian Mabuni: Right. I think it is really significant to process that through in a practical way, because in all these years of ministry, I've seen so many different men and women who are stuck in the same place because they can't move past the hurt and the harm. I mean, in a lot of cases, very understandably there's reason to not forgive. Oh, you know, but in that same sense of reason to not forgive, there's also a, what I would say a to that moment or the sin committed against us, we remain kind of stuck in that place unless we exercise forgiveness so that we're set free. It's really, I think I've heard, it said that, you know forgiveness is like drinking, poison, hoping the other person will die.

Where it really is like a lot of times in the story that I share in my book, it was about my long hair when I was nine years old and my aunt lying to me and then cutting it above my ears. And this, I had forgotten that it happened. I don't think my aunt even remembers that it happened, but I was still stuck in a place where I, as the memory was brought up, I needed to, I had a decision to make whether I was going to forgive her, but I realized that from that point on whenever she would enter the room, I would leave. And I never, I stopped looking at her in the eye and really my heart was hardened toward her. And I don't think, and she just went on her life and I don't think ever thought about it again. I think that that happens oftentimes the one that was harmed lives with the consequences. And so forgiveness is choosing to release that, that those consequences are no longer mine to live out. It's like I'm releasing that person from the consequences of their sin. And then I am set free and it changes everything. And so when that happens, I think we understand our own forgiveness, that God grants to us in a fresh way that is beyond just head knowledge, we're experientially, understanding what it looks like to walk in forgiveness. We don't have to make it up to God. We don't have to earn brownie points because of our failures that we really are forgiven and set free. I think that in that same way yeah, I think it's

a moment in time, but it's also a continuous decision to choose, to stay in a place of granting that forgiveness.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. That continuous decision makes a lot of sense to me because I've had lots of conversations and, you know, in my own journey as well, where you try to forgive and it's best you do, but it recycles. And it startles us sometimes when we have to keep on forgiving the same thing when we thought we forgave it, what do you make of that?

Vivian Mabuni: Well, I just heard this I haven't read it myself, but I heard a friend share about Corrie Tenboom, talking about this cord and this big bell tower, church, bell tower, and how you can stop ringing the bell, but it's still going to have these, the gonging will still.

Dr. Don Payne: Still take the reverberations.

Vivian Mabuni: So that sense that it does, there is a time factor that comes with, and the deeper the hurt. I think the more that jarring happens, where we do need to continue to make the decision. It's almost like coming to faith in Christ, but like we keep coming to faith in Christ. You know, it's like we keep, because we keep learning. God keeps revealing more of who he is and more of who we are and our circumstances keep changing. And so I think we have choices and decisions in those moments, but I do think there is often a point in time when we choose to say, I forgive my aunt for lying to me and cutting my hair above my ears, where I look like a boy. And I was mortified. And I'm choosing right here right now to release her of that.

Dr. Don Payne: That's the choice to stop ringing the bell.

Vivian Mabuni: Yes. And I think that when I wrote that out, it was a moment in time and I can look back at that moment and notice the change that took place because God did in fact, do something supernatural where I could, again care about her for her, want to be with her, look at her in the eyes again, be in the same room. And I think that's such a beautiful picture of the gospel. What was once hurtful and harmful could be redeemed and God gives us the tools through forgiveness, through how even Jesus model like father forgive them. They do not know what they're doing. That's a very generous, generous posture.

Dr. Don Payne: The generosity of forgiveness now, as the Lord has been generous, so deeply generous with us. Vivian, this has been a great, let me let me plug your books again. Warrior in Pink and Open Hands, Willing Heart. You need to get one or both of these. Can you tell us anything about what you're working on right now?

Vivian Mabuni: Well, it's all in posted stage, but I really am excited about, it's practical. So we'll see if this actually happens or not, but if it all works out, I would like to present a book that's practical, involving like consumerism and how we end up trying to fill emptiness by getting more things. And how to live more simply, but also

knowing who we are and what we offer and what it looks like to live in the sense that it's like the Hebrew word of Shalom and the Hawaiian word of Pono. Our dog's name Pono. Right. It means harmony, righteousness and hope. So there's a righteousness and harmony and hope with the land and with one another and with God, and it's kind of like how Shalom is more than just a greeting, but there's that wholeness. And what does that look like for us to live out of knowing who we are and using what we have?

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. I feel something of that even to hear you describe it. You need to keep that base.

Vivian Mabuni: Oh good, so maybe I'll take the post-its and put it to page.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. You need to do this and let me, let me assure your friends, these are well-written books. So, you'll enjoy the read a little bit about your speaking ministry and you have a website, Vivian?

Vivian Mabuni: Vivianmabuni.com. Yes. And I love speaking at events and women's events and churches and retreats. And that's my greatest passion is, and to actually be in person is I hope we never take that ever for granted again, but just being able to teach and open God's word is my greatest joy.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. Here, here. Friends, thanks for joining us again for Engage 360, for this conversation with Vivian Mabuni. We're so honored to have her as our guest. I don't say this probably as often as I should, but it really does help us. If you take a minute to get on your favorite podcast platform somewhere and write a review for us, if any of our episodes has been meaningful for you, we'd really appreciate it. If you do that for this one or any of our other episodes. And let me remind you again, that you can get full transcripts. For written transcripts of all of our episodes on our seminary website. If you simply go to Denverseminary.edu/podcast, you'll find all of our episodes there. You can click on any one and find a transcript that you can download. If you'd like to go back and review anything. I want to thank Andrea Weyand and Rochelle Smith in our communications department who make this thing happen. Grateful for them. Grateful for you, grateful for your prayers for us at Denver Seminary. And we will look forward to talking to you again soon. Take care friends.