

# Affirming:

## *A Memoir of Faith, Sexuality, and Staying in the Church*

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*Lunch and Stretch Discussion Guide*

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### **I. Make Us More Free (Prologue)**

A. **“Surely This Can’t Be Me”** - in her prologue, Sally describes a gut-wrenching journey, which culminated for her in 2019 — an answer to prayer from God when she heard her home congregation singing the Dennis Jernigan song “Make Me More Free”. As Sara came to know more and more about who she was, she struggled against a seeming contradiction. How could something that she had been taught was so wrong be so much a part of who she was? She even prayed that God would take away anything that kept her from being who he wanted ... and yet she continued to find herself attracted to other women.

1. Before we dig into the details of this journey in the later chapters, let’s spend some time thinking about our own journeys in the Churches of Christ. Have you experienced yourself or watched others experience Sally’s perplexing and heart-breaking question. How could God make me so fundamentally wrong? Are there areas beyond sexuality where this has presented itself in your life or in the lives of those you know?
2. What aspects of the Church of Christ heritage and traditional Church of Christ theology are at play here? And which of those aspects remain for Sara even as she works her way through the different stages of her journey? Which aspects remain for you?

**B. Loves God; Likes Girls** - At the mid-point on her journey, Sally decided that she would go the path of Dennis Jernigan (i.e., accept that she is attracted to women, but, as Sally put it, God did not intend for her “to live out that expression in a sexual relationship with another woman”).

1. In what ways is this an incomplete answer to the question, how could God make me so fundamentally wrong?
2. What do these steps along the way (to becoming “affirming”) show us about Sally’s faith and, in particular, the type of faith that is part-and-parcel with her Church of Christ upbringing?
3. Sally could not be more different than our prior author, Sara Miles. What are some ways that stand out to you? In what ways is Sally unique for sticking with the Churches of Christ this long and how many souls do you suppose have left along the way in their own journeys?

**C. More Free** - When Sally finally reaches the end point (or at least the point at which she decided to write this book), she harkens back to the Jernigan song “Make Me More Free”. She points out that her transformation to becoming “affirming” was a long arduous process over many years — and not simply giving in to a more moderate perspective in pursuit of her own desires.

1. Where do you sit on this? Would you have been one of those folks shaking your head in disappointment?
2. What does that last paragraph tell us about Sally? What does it tell us about the Churches of Christ (at least in the region in which Sally lives)?
 

*“Some of you will stop reading at this point, shaking your heads in disappointment, believing I simply gave in to accepting a different perspective in pursuit of my own desires. This is precisely why I wanted to write this book, to explain how I became affirming of same-sex relationships. It was an extensive process that took years, one that I never undertook with the intentional goal of becoming affirming. If anything, I set out determined to follow a traditional Christian sexual ethic. But in the end God showed me a different way. It wasn’t merely a different interpretation of the key passages of Scripture regarding homosexuality. It wasn’t a single book I read. It wasn’t one conversation. It wasn’t simply my own experience. Changing my mind about the morality of same-sex relationships was the culmination of all these things over a lifetime. How I came to be affirming, it turns out, started a long time ago, when the seeds of faith were first being planted in me.”*
3. In what ways do you think the Churches of Christ (and even Sally) are still struggling to be more free?

## II. Faith Roots (Chapter 1)

**A. Faith and Family** - Sally spends a good chunk of the first chapter of her book talking about her family and her deep and abiding love for it... what it taught her about life, about other people, and about her faith. For Sally, family seems to be almost inextricably connected to her faith. The Church of Christ had a significant impact on Sally on both of those fronts. At the same time, she seems to have somewhat of an amalgam of church traditions that were formative, given the differing backgrounds of her parents and grandparents.

1. As you think about Sally’s journey, in what ways do you suppose her connection to her family, as well as her family’s connection to church, are what kept her in the Churches of Christ?
2. As you recall, at the time of her mother’s baptism in the Church of Christ, the Baptist Church she had previously attended with her family removed her name from their membership list. As a result, her grandparents left the Baptist Church, never to return. In what ways (if any) do you see the Baptist Church’s decision as being problematic? Could it have handled it better? What about the Church of Christ that insisted she be baptized into it? How did you react to Sally’s grandparents’ willingness to go along with her mother’s decision regarding her baptism?
3. As you think about your own faith background, in what ways has your family played a roll and in what ways have the habits and traditions of the church community in which you were raised shaped both you and your family?

**B. Everyone Needs a “Hater”** - Sally’s dad wasn’t quite as willing to simply accept the doctrines and values being taught in the Church of Christ they attended. He even went as far as to suggest that you didn’t need to be baptized to be saved (yikes!). And yet, for Sally, in some ways her father’s faith story seems even more moving to Sally than her own.

1. Thinking about Sally’s dad and his unwillingness to blindly accept the faith of Sally’s mother, and harkening back to her grandfather’s decision regarding the Baptist Church,

in what ways did these “haters” empower Sally along her journey? In what ways have “haters” helped you in your own faith journey?

2. Do you think Sally may have felt pressure within her own family structure to be a part of a faith community? Do you think that pressure may have been balanced a bit by the process that her father and grandfather had gone through?
3. Why do you think her father’s conversion story was so moving to Sally?

**C. Faith and the Importance of Scripture** - As Sally points out, the Churches of Christ have a strong tradition of relying on scripture. “Speak only where the Bible speaks; and be silent where the Bible is silent.” She also talks about how she was taught the importance of using “proof texts” to explain why they did things the way they did. As Sally points out, “having the right answers provided a sense of certainty that was comforting to [her] as a child.

1. In what ways is this seemingly obsessive need to read and find the “right” answers in scripture at the core of Sally’s struggle during her journey? In what ways is it the very thing that kept her in the church, and drew her into an even more meaningful and powerful relationship with God?
2. Have you had similar struggles and do you find yourself needing to explain your faith and faith practices through “proof texts” in order to find a sense of comfort in your relationship to God and to church? In what ways have the scriptures been meaningful and helpful in your own faith journey? In what ways has it been harmful?

### III. Welcoming the Stranger (Chapter 2)

**A. Hospitality and the Cross** - “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’” (Matt 25:35-40)

1. Let’s go back to this idea of a paradigm shift in how we think about sin and salvation for a minute. As you about Jesus and the Cross, what words and concepts come to mind? Sacrifice? Savior? Atonement?
2. Has the word “hospitality” ever come to mind as you think about the cross? Is it possible that the Cross is more about hospitality than it is about atonement or sacrifice? Is it possible that the concepts of “atonement” and “sacrifice” are the lens through which we need to see the Cross in order to fully understand the destructive nature of sin and the need to avoid it?
3. In what ways have the concepts of sin, sacrifice and atonement been used to control and manipulate people by religious leaders? In what ways was it used to control and manipulate Sally?

**B. “Radical” Hospitality** - Now we’re starting to look and sound a little more like Sara Miles and Ron Rolheiser! For those of us who grew up in the Churches of Christ, we each likely encountered a “Carrye Smith” while growing up... the cackling, the perfume, the insistence on highlighting how young we looked. Sally dreaded picking her up on the way to Church every Sunday night. She seemed to appreciate a bit more those afternoons with Brother Hardin - the elderly man from Church, who cooked lunches for Sally’s family in what seemed to be more of a mutual hospitality. And Ethel Shubert and her children, who had

been abandoned by their husband/father, was a particularly important marker for Sally. Or the Price family, who lost their divorcee mother at an early age.

1. Sally points out that ACU professor, Richard Beck, wrote that “[i]t could be argued that hospitality - welcoming the stranger - is the quintessential Christian practice. Welcoming sinners to table fellowship was a central, distinctive, and perhaps the most inflammatory aspect of Jesus’ ministry and teaching.” What is “radical” about that? In what ways are we as Christians still trying to learn this lesson?
2. In what ways is Sally’s family’s form of hospitality radical? Thinking about the Shuberts (for whom Sally and her family provided Christmas one year), the Price family (the three children, a girl and two boys, who had lost their mom), and others, what stands out to you about the way her family provided hospitality in those situations?
3. Have you had similar experiences, either providing or receiving hospitality? How did it come to shape your understanding of the Cross then? Looking back at those experiences, how have they shaped your understanding of the Cross today?

**C. Jesus and Radical Hospitality; the “Cup of Water” Initiative** - When you look at the life of Jesus, the overwhelming majority of his interactions were with those in need of hospitality... mostly because they didn’t fit the mold of the religious leaders of his day, and were thus shunned by much of society. Sally points to the examples of her parents and grandparents as core events in her life that showed her “how to live out the radical love and hospitality that Jesus displayed while he lived on this earth.

1. Have you ever witnessed “Christian hospitality” that feels more like covert evangelism? What are some examples? In what ways can it be more harmful to non-Christians than leaving them hungry... or thirsty?
2. Sally talks a bit about self-centeredness and hospitality. In what ways is evangelism masked as hospitality also a sign of self-centeredness? Where do you think Sally’s and her family’s form of hospitality falls on this spectrum? What kinds of conditions did Jesus place on his acts of hospitality throughout his ministry? As you read the passage from Matthew’s Gospel above, what kinds of conditions does Jesus place on acts of hospitality before they will be done for the King?
3. How would Christianity look today if the emphasis, when thinking about and discussing Jesus and the Cross, had always been more about hospitality, rather than placing so much emphasis on sin and atonement? How would it look if “Christian” hospitality was always provided without regard to conversion or evangelism... or other conditions?

NY Times Article:

**Can the Meritocracy Find God?**

*The secularization of America probably won’t reverse unless the intelligentsia gets religion.*

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/10/opinion/sunday/religion-meritocracy-god.html>

## **IV. Looking in the Mirror and Seeing the Stranger (Chapter 3)**

**A. Knowing who We are in the Context of Christian Community** - Sally spends quite a bit of time talking about the dearth of experiences and encounters with friends who felt similarly to the way she felt. As she spent more time getting to know others, and how they about their sexuality, Sally began to feel that something was wrong with her. This was particularly true within her church community, where those feelings were not only expected to be kept private, but overtly ridiculed and condemned. She says she “had never heard anyone specifically talk about same-sex relationships from a Christian perspective.”

1. Thinking about the church community in which Sally grew up, in what ways do you think the lack of a church-based forum, in which the feelings she was experiencing could be discussed and understood, impacted Sally’s faith development? What about her emotional development
2. Do you think other kids with similar feelings to Sally may have been impacted differently than Sally? What about kids whose parents were less committed to church attendance? What about kids whose parents were committed to church attendance but grew angry with the idea of being rejected by it?
3. What does this say about the idea of hospitality that we discussed in the prior chapter?

**B. Mork & Mindy and “Shame”** - Recall that Sally had a dream about being kissed by a beautiful woman and then suddenly remembered who it was as she was watching a television show in the dorm lounge at ACU. Sally was horrified at the idea of anyone finding out.

1. It’s one thing to be rejected by your church community. How do you suppose it must have felt to have similar reactions from her friends? What about from the college community in general?
2. What about Sally’s feelings of “shame” as she read more and more about homosexuality? What about others who connection to church and their sexual identity created this same conflict and feelings of shame?

**C. “Choosing” to be Gay?** - Sally prayed for fifteen years for God to take away her feelings for women. But those feelings never faded. It’s hard to imagine a more stark example of someone not choosing to be this way. And yet, for so long and even today, Sally says that the myth that homosexuals “chose” to be that way persists and is cruel.

1. What have you been taught or understood on this topic of “choosing” to be gay? What do you believe today?
2. What about the more nuanced idea that one doesn’t choose whether to be attracted to members of the same sex, but that they can choose not to act on those feelings?

**D. Welcoming the “Homosexual”** - Sally asked God what God wanted he to do with the feelings she was having, finally admitting to God and herself that she was “homosexual”. This ultimately led her to David... literally, an answer to prayer for her.

1. What can we learn from how Sally’s counselor, David, reacted to her telling him she was gay? He didn’t change the expression on his face. He didn’t get out his Bible and read all of the relevant passages on the topic. How is this an example of hospitality? In what ways is this response more the way Jesus would have responded?
2. Thinking about Sally’s experience in telling her family, in what ways was her mama’s response exactly what you would expect, given her long tradition of hospitality? In what ways are those families who reacted differently to hearing this truth about their children

reflective of this older “sin and atonement” paradigm as compared to the “hospitality” paradigm? And in what ways are those families victims of that mentality?

3. It’s hard to recreate, in these notes and questions, the moment in which Sally told her mama about her sexuality (in particular if you have listened to it as told by Sally). What were your reactions to it? Why was it so important for Sally to tell her family about her sexuality? Why was it so important that her mama react exactly the way she did? Have you ever been the “stranger” in your own family? How did it go when you discussed it with them? How meaningful was it that Sally herself was the “greatest recipient” of her parents’ hospitality?

## **VI. The Spirit of the Law (Chapter 5)**

**A. What’s the Congressional Record and Why is it Relevant?** - Sally opens the first chapter in this new section about interpreting scripture by telling a story about her college professor, who pointed out that the way his students viewed scripture would be much different in twenty-five years than it was then. Within the context of that story, Sally goes on to talk about the steps she had to go through in order to be in that class in the first place. As the first woman to take Mike Lewis’ preaching class at ACU, she had to testify to her classmates that she had no intention of preaching or being in ministry.

1. Let’s pick that story apart a bit. As lawyers, we are often times called upon to examine the “Congressional Record” (or legislative history) in order to discern legislative intent when trying to apply statutes to cases. Why do you suppose legislative intent is important? Do laws or rules generally need to have a purpose? Or do they exist simply for the sake of the law itself?

2. Consider for a moment the “laws” or “rules” that Sally was referring to when she talked about why she had to confirm that she was not planning on going into ministry. To the extent that you could read them as generally applicable rules for churches, what are some reasons that Paul could have imposed gender-based distinctions in churches? Based on what you know about the gifts and abilities of the men and women you have known in your life, do you think it could have stemmed from the fact that men are simply more equipped to serve in leadership roles than women? What about the societal norms of Paul’s day? Do you suppose those could have had an impact on his approach?

3. Sally spoke about inductive vs deductive reasoning? How would you describe the reasoning that would lead one to conclude that women should not have leadership roles in churches? Is it possible to verify that claim based on what is written in scripture as well as the legislative record on the topic?

**B. A Living, Breathing “Constitution”** - Constitutional interpretation is drawn on ideological lines between strict constructionists and those who view it as a living and breathing document that is subject to re-interpretation as societal norms shift.

1. Where do you fall on that ideological line? Is it possible that a document like the U.S. Constitution should be read “strictly” on some topics and “liberally” on others? What are some examples?
2. What about the Bible? In what ways is it different than the U.S. Constitution? In what ways is it different than statutory law? In what ways have many churches tried to make them the same?
3. Thinking back on legislative intent, do we sometimes read rules into the Bible that were never meant to be rules in the first place, regardless of whether they should be read strictly or liberally? Did Paul say in any of his letters that he was creating a generally applicable law for all churches for all times? Does Paul purport to speaking for Jesus or for God when he talks about what he does and doesn’t do in the churches that he attends? How should we read that passage and similar passages and why do we tend to defer to reading it as a generally applicable rule?

**C. Deep Love for Scripture** - As we think about the scriptural underpinnings of the Church of Christ tradition, it’s interesting that it trended in a different direction than even Alexander Campbell may have hoped. As Sally points out, the practices around communion in particular and worship services more generally had become (and may still be) more about our own traditions and expectations than they are about scripture, given the dearth of examples in the Bible that point to the way we always do things.

1. What do you think about the idea of “speaking only where the Bible speaks and being silent where the Bible is silent”? Assuming you agree with it, do you think churches are authentic in the way that they practice it?
2. What are some of your thoughts about Sally’s communion experience growing up, as compared to Sara Miles experience at St. Gregory’s? What have been your experiences? Have you ever assumed that certain practices regarding communion and/or worship more generally were mandated and/or prohibited by scripture? Have you ever found out that you may have been wrong about that assumption (in the same way that Sally had experienced with communion and female leadership)?
3. In what ways did societal norms dictate the ways in which Sally’s church did communion? In what ways did societal norms dictate the way your church has done communion? What do you suppose Paul would say to Sally’s church (or yours) if he was writing another letter to your church (similar to the letters he wrote that formed a part of the New Testament)?
4. Are the decisions churches make about their worship practices examples of inductive reasoning or deductive reasoning? What fallacies persist as a result of that reasoning? In what ways is “being silent where the Bible silent” an example of an inductive reasoning-based fallacy?

**D. Cultural Anthropology** - Sally talks about Dr. Gurganus and his experience working with a tribe on the island of New Guinea. They had to find other emblems of communion because of a lack of supplies (i.e., grapes and wheat). The “bread” was sweet potatoes and the “wine” was apple juice.

1. How is Dr. Gurganus’ approach a better example of inductive reasoning when reading the scriptural passages about communion? What do you think about it?
2. What do you think about Sally’s statement that “if something wasn’t accessible, a substitute had to be permissible”? Does this mean that “all things are permissible”? Is that even really the issue? Or do we need to get a little beyond the idea of deciding everything is either permissible or not permissible?
3. What are some others ways to frame the question of how to order our spiritual lives in a way that is consistent with what we read in scripture?



## VII. What's in a Translation (Chapter 6)

**A. Information Transformation** - Sally talks about the transformation of libraries, research and learning, given the significant changes that occurred in the time between when she was a student to when she came back as a professor at ACU. The smell of the books and card catalogue as compared to the smell of Starbucks. Stone cold silence as compared to open free-flowing conversations. Using the internet for research as opposed to the "Reader's Guide".

1. What recollections do you have of those old libraries (whether at ACU or other colleges)? Do you remember that smell?
2. In what ways has access to information changed with the explosion of the internet? What are the positives of that? In what ways has it been negative?
3. In what ways does access to information change the way we view scripture, harkening back to Sally's story about Professor Lewis? Does the fact that our view of scripture may change mean that the scriptures themselves are necessarily changing? What is the difference?
4. Do you find yourself generally open to seeing scripture differently as you grow in wisdom and knowledge about the world, about God and about the scriptures? Or do you have a tendency to be fearful of things changing... especially when it comes to scripture? How has that impacted your walk with God?

**B. The Importance of a Translation** - The Wycliffe, the King James, the New Living Translation, the English Standard Version, the New Revised Standard Version, the New International Version and, of course, the TRV (or Tom Robinson Version). We have been blessed (some would say inundated) with so many different versions of the Bible over the century and a half or so that it has been in existence. And yet subtle nuances and variations in translations can have significant impacts on the "way we view scripture" so to speak.

1. Why do you suppose God, if God is truly all powerful, has allowed for there to be so much variation in this most critical of documents? What does it tell us about God that there are so many different translations of God's Word and so many possible different interpretations of what those differing words say? Is it possible that there is something more important to God than getting everything perfectly right in our reading and understanding of scripture?
2. What did you learn (if anything) from Sally's story about coffee with her colleague who taught her about the many different translations of the Greek words "arsen" and "koite" or "male-bedder"? Has it changed your view of the scriptures from 1 Corinthians (6:9) and 1 Timothy (1:10)?
3. Is it possible that these differing translations tell us something about those who wrote the translations (or those who were in charge of overseeing those translations)? Do you think there may have been cultural factors that influenced how those words were translated?
4. What about other words in scripture? Imagine for a moment that just 20 words in all of scripture had 10 different translations. That could easily yield well over 200 different possible interpretations of what God was trying to communicate through them. How can this be? How does it make you feel knowing there could be hundreds, if not thousands, of variations of biblical text just based on differing translations?

**C. The Devil is in the Details** - Sally says that she has always believed that “whatever God wanted [her] to know from Scripture, [she] could know.” “Only an unfair God would require something of me, and then have the only source from which I could learn that requirement be distorted. And [Sally] didn’t believe in an unfair God.” Yet Sally experienced a “tectonic crack”, her world was “turned upside down”, everything she had believed to be “true and unshakable” had just had “the guts shaken out of it”.

1. What do we do with this? How can we be certain of anything we read in Scripture? How do we figure out what God’s will is for our lives?
2. Is it possible that God isn’t quite as concerned about the details as we think? How do we decide what matters most to God? What resources are available (the Scriptures and the many translations, the Holy Spirit, nature, humanity, history, others)?
3. Recall the questions above about access to information and how much greater our access is today than it was when Sally was in college. How does our access to information help us to understand what matters to God? And how do our assumptions about God come to shape our interpretation and understanding in this regard?

**D. Closer to God** - Sally talks about her anger at God once she had come to realize how imperfect her understanding of Scripture really was. She felt “hurt and embarrassed” as though she had been “duped”. And yet through all of it, she felt closer to God because of it. “Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” (John 6:68)

1. Why do you think Sally felt closer to God through her struggles? What is different about a God who walks with you (living and breathing along side with you), as compared to a God who writes in everything in stone and then leaves you alone to figure it all out? In what ways is this model more consistent with your experiences in life as a living and breathing human being? In your family relationships, in your friend relationships, church relationships, work relationships?
2. What does it say about God that God is willing to let us live with this uncertainty? What does it say about God that God is willing to walk along side with us while we try to figure it all out?
3. What do you think of the way that Sally closed out the chapter, noting that she lived in a world that breathed Scripture, and yet her colleagues walked through this process with her, so that she didn’t have to process what was happening alone? What does that say about our role... as a discussion group, as friends, as members of the Manhattan Church of Christ, as members of the greater New York metropolitan area? What about our families? How does this model equip all of us for a life on that path, together, and with God, learning about each other and about God?

## VIII. Embracing Mystery (Chapter 7)

**A. Surprised by a Drum Kit** - As part of grappling with her new understanding of scripture, Sally coped by acquiring a new drum kit and learning to play the drums (something she had wanted to do since she was a kid). Ultimately, it led her to Freedom Fellowship and to be a part of the worship team there. It was a “rag-tag” group as Sally describes it... both the praise band and the members who regularly attended services there.

1. Why do you suppose Sally grew spiritually in ways that she had not before? What aspects of her time there exhibited her historical roots of extending hospitality?
2. In what ways do social mores, even in places where hospitality in a traditional sense is an overt goal, often times act in a way that is antithetical to “hospitality” in the way that Sally thinks about it?
3. Understanding the people that Sally came to know at Freedom Fellowship, in what ways is “hospitality” in the way that Sally thinks about it more important than reading, interpreting and understanding scripture? What does her experience teach us about how we should lead when expressing our faith experiences with others?

**B. Embracing Anthony’s Story** - Recall the story of Anthony, the man with cognitive challenges (likely the result of years of drug use) who told Sally that he believed it was him sitting next to Jesus in a picture in his Bible.

1. Without pre-judging Anthony’s story, what truths do we see in it? In what ways can we see ourselves in it? In what ways is God revealed in it?
2. What about Sally’s reaction to Anthony? Why do you suppose she was wiping tears from her cheeks as she sat with Anthony?
3. Why do you suppose God chooses to be shrouded so much in mystery? And why is it that just when our ideas and understanding of God seem so concrete, so tangible and so solid, they seemingly slip through our fingers like sand?

**C. The Latent Power of Cynicism** - At first, Sally was cynical of the folks at Freedom. She attributes that to a certain extent to attitudes embedded within the larger society about social outcasts - freeloaders, people looking for a handout, etc. But let’s assume for a moment that it also came from Sally herself. And let’s assume that we all have our own moments of unwarranted cynicism... whatever the cause.

1. What is behind the cynicism? Why do we doubt people’s motives, or their integrity, or their work ethic, or their understanding of scripture?
2. In what ways does fear come into play in our cynicism? What about control? In what ways are these concepts of fear and control at the core of how Western society is organized?
3. In what ways are fear and control used at times by those who have been oppressed and in what ways is this cycle harmful... to families, to churches, to communities?
4. What does Jesus’ example teach us about cynicism, about fear, about control?

**D. Sincere Worship and Finally Meeting God** - Sally says that during her time at Freedom, drumming from the stage, she witnessed the most sincere worship she had ever seen. Tiaras, tambourines, ragamuffins, hands stretched to the rafters. A cry to God “with thanksgiving — in the place where joy and sorrow meet”. She also talked about her upbringing and her wealth in the midst of poverty, material and intellectual, that permeated Freedom.

1. How did you react to these passages? Why do you suppose Sally linked poverty and wealth with reading and understanding scripture? Was that “arrogant” as she alludes to?

2. What does it say about God that God is revealed even to the people at Freedom, who don't have the same educational tools that Sally does and who have much less reason to praise God in light of their material wealth? God says "I will have mercy on those on whom I will have mercy"; not "I will have mercy on those who understand".
3. What did you think about the way that Sally tied all of this back to the way in which we read and understand Scripture? God "is certainly in the pages of Scripture" but God "is so far beyond the parameters of a book". "It's your heart [God] is most concerned with, and your heart can meet [God] anywhere."
4. What about those who do have education and wealth and become so twisted around the axel in Scripture? Can they meet God? How should we think about that? Is it possible that sometimes they are meeting someone or something other than God?

## **IX. Overcoming Fear to Find Truth (Chapter 8)**

**A. Things We Learn from the Young** - In a recent tweet that came up in my feed, a young woman lamented the fact that American Millennials and Gen Z'ers are able to worry so much about being "woke" because they live in a country where they don't have to deal with real issues - like poverty, war, violence, etc. Sally talks at the beginning of Chapter 8 about how much she learned about being Christian and being gay from the kids in the student group she hosted.

1. What is your reaction to this idea that kids these days in the U.S. don't have to worry about the same kinds of things kids in Pakistan, for example, have to worry about?
2. What was your reaction to Sally's question to some of those kids in her group about why sexual orientation has to be mentioned when discussing one's faith background?
3. In what ways does being freed from having to worry about war and poverty allow us to think about the things that really matter? In what ways do we learn from younger generations who aren't yet burdened by those worries and fears that Sally speaks of? In what ways does their lack of the cynicism that we spoke of in the prior chapter allow them to see things that folks from earlier generations might miss?

**B. Justin Lee, John Stott and Gary Mabry** - It was Sally's introduction to Justin Lee (by her students) that first opened her to the view that romantic same-sex relationships might actually be ok in the eyes of God. And it was reading John Scott's "Basic Christianity" that first opened Sally to the idea that reading anything about faith by someone from outside the Church of Christ might actually be ok. And it was her experience with Gary Mabry, the song leader who "went off the deep end" and left the Church of Christ, who put the fear of God in Sally from any kind of heresy.

1. What do you think is behind this fear of anything outside of our own tradition or practices? Is it something you've experienced in a faith context? What about other contexts?
2. Have you ever felt "unwelcome" by a faith community because of a "non-conforming" belief, practice or behavior? Have you ever made others feel that way, or sat by silently while others were made to feel that way?
3. How does "studying both sides of an issue", as Sally describes it, help us grow in our faith? In what ways is it potentially harmful? Is it something you do? Does it more likely than not lead to "truth" as Sally describes it?

**C. Shifting Societal Norms** - "You don't really still believe that it's wrong to be in a same-sex relationship, do you, Sally?"

1. What was your reaction to Sally's conversation with "Allen" (her colleague who asked the question above)? Recall that she spent a fair amount of time explaining her analysis to Allen and had concluded that she hadn't "come across anything that [she found] persuasive".
2. What about the fact that Sally was afraid to read anything that didn't go along with what she already believed? Given all of her training and experience on debating both sides of an issue, why do you suppose she hesitated to look at both sides of this one?
3. Sally talks about the possibility of being "turned gay" as one possible reason. What was your reaction to that? In what ways does our answer to this question send us back to the first section in this chapter about learning what matters from our youngsters, who aren't burdened with worry and cynicism?

**D. The Power of Fear** - Fear has the power to make us do things we would never imagine ourselves doing in a moment of quiet contemplation. Whether it's yelling at our kids, screaming at another driver who has cut us off, arguing with a close friend over a political issue that seems critical, or deciding to dis-fellowship another Christian who has "gone off the deep end".

1. In what ways has fear impacted your walk with God? In what ways has it impacted your relationships... with your friends, with coworkers, with your children (or children you mentor), with your fellow Christians?
2. How do we move past fear? In what ways have you been successful in this regard and in what ways are you still working on it?
3. What was it that finally got Sally over the hump? In what ways did her true concern about others (especially her students who she saw going through the same struggles as she did) provide that motivation?
4. Sally talks quite a bit about "winning the debate" over whether same-sex relationships could be aligned with her faith walk. How did this idea hit you? Is it a debate to be won? In what ways do we all "lose" by characterizing it that way? In what ways are the people who are the subject of the debate lost in the middle of it?
5. Can you move outside of the "debate" and still not be "dismissive" of scripture, as Sally describes Brownson as being? And in what ways is the "debate" a necessary part of the process? What about Sally's comment that scripture needs to be viewed as a "whole"? What is your reaction to Sally's willingness and courage in moving forward with her exploration of this issue, despite the potential consequences in her faith community, which was her world and her family?

## **X. What Healing Looks Like for Me (Chapter 9)**

**A. The Power of Shame and the “Ex-Gay Movement”** - When Sally started counseling in 1996, what she refers to as the “ex-gay movement” was prominent in Christian communities’ attempts to respond to same-sex attraction. That movement was premised on the idea that same sex relationships were shameful and that through reparative therapy one could be “freed” from same sex attraction.

1. What is your reaction to the idea of reparative therapy as a “cure” for same sex attraction? In what ways is/was shame a core element of the “ex-gay movement” and in what ways is/was it used as a means to control people?
2. Assuming that it is a question to be explored (i.e., whether same sex relationships are acceptable in the eyes of God), in what ways is the idea of “reparative therapy” approaching the issue in reverse? In other words, is it more appropriate to explore first the conditions in which we find ourselves (i.e., in a world in which same sex attraction) and then look to the scriptures as a tool to help contextualize and understand that reality?
3. Or is it more appropriate to start with the conclusion that same sex relationships are shameful and then look at that same human condition (i.e., a world in which same sex attraction exists) and use scripture and other tools as means to confirm it and/or to try to change it?
4. In what ways is each of these approaches a form of inductive reasoning and in what ways are they a form of deductive reasoning? What are the fallacies that arise as a result of each of these logic-based approaches? Recall that deductive reasoning starts with a general statement or theory and then moves to the specific; whereas inductive reasoning starts with specific observations and makes broad generalizations from there.

**B. Trying to Make Feelings “Go Away”;** Repairing Relationships in the Process - Sally didn’t want to have feelings of attraction toward other women. She hadn’t asked for them. And she believed she had to make them go away. And yet, they didn’t go away. She believed her issues with same sex attraction stemmed her views of men and women that came out of her broken relationship with her father. So she tried (successfully) to repair that relationship as part of her “healing” process.

1. Let’s think for a moment about Jesus’s example, as opposed to Paul’s words, for a moment. In what ways would Jesus have approached the two dynamics involved in this process (i.e., the need to be healed from same sex attraction, on the one hand, and the need to repair her broken relationship with her father, on the other)?
2. Stepping forward to Paul’s words on the topic, in what ways does understanding what Jesus would prioritize in that situation help us to understand and contextualize Paul’s words? And in what ways does it help us to understand which aspects of the scriptures may be more important than others?
3. How would each “debate” over behavioral issues change if the most important issue in that process was restoration and reconciliation of relationship? In what ways is this model more in line with the Jesus model? In what ways can this help us in our own relationships?
4. Have you spent much time considering the ideas of “relational theology” and “behavioral theology”? Assuming these were paradigms to consider in how we view and understand scripture, how would you describe them? And how would each be different from the other? Which do you most relate to?

**C. Gender-based Expectations** - Sally spends a fair amount of time talking about her struggles with societal expectations for women - what they wear, how they behave, what they like to do, how they behaved in social settings, etc. And she also laments the aspects of her therapy that seemed oriented around helping her to accept her femininity as a basis for ridding her of same sex attraction.

1. How do you see the two of these things as being linked? And in what ways are these types of gender-based expectations a byproduct of a “behavioral theology” model?
2. In what ways has society suffered as a result of so many women giving up their assertiveness and leadership skills over the years? In what ways has this idea led to the types of broken relationships that Sally’s therapy was attempting to heal?

**D. Healing... for Sally and for the Rest of Us** - In speaking about the reparative therapy that Sally worked through as part of her journey, she says that although she was healed in the areas that were its focus (e.g., in her relationship with her dad), alas, she is still gay. Instead of making her “straight”, however, counseling helped her in countless other ways.

1. In what ways is Sally’s story of healing the same type of healing that we all need? She talks about being more open and trusting with others, being unafraid of being vulnerable with others, of being capable of real intimacy.
2. In what ways is the “behavioral theological” model that we talked about above at the route of Sally’s struggles... and our own? In what ways does this behavioral model deprive us of the very thing that Jesus came to establish?
3. Thinking about all of the ways that the healing process for Sally led to better relationships with other people, in what ways can this healing open us up to a closer relationship to God? Do you imagine that our ability to be close to God is impaired by the same kinds of issues that make it difficult for us to be close to others?
4. At the end of the day, in what ways is all of this really about us being willing to accepting of ourselves... as opposed to trying to force ourselves into the molds that society (and not God) has made for us?



## **XI. “It’s Not Good for Man [or Woman] to be Alone” (Chapter 10)**

**A. Does this mean I have to spend the rest of my life by-myself?** - When Sally was having a conversation with Jordan seemingly about the openness of Christian Universities, he jolted her with the question that is at the core of the issue we have been discussing. Does this mean I need to spend the rest of my life alone?

1. What would your answer to Jordan have been before you knew Sally’s story? What would it be today?
2. How does Sally’s vision and framing of this kind of loneliness help us to reshape, re-imagine and reassess the question of same-sex relationships?
3. Why do you suppose when framing the question Sally felt she had to point out that Jordan wasn’t talking about sex? In what ways, if any, should churches be responding to that part of the question ... assuming it eventually came to that? In what ways should churches leave that part of the question to the individuals making them?
4. Do you imagine that concerns over what couples might be doing in bed has caused communities of Christians to ignore the more divine and Christ-like issues of loneliness and relationship?

**B. The Language of Kinship; “Bone of my Bones and Flesh of my Flesh”** - Sally compares and contrasts having lots of friends and a broad-ranging social life as over-and-against a life “sacredly intertwined with the life of another”... a life-long companion with whom to form a family unit and to share life’s ups and downs... someone to come home to at the end of a long day.

1. What grabbed you as Sally talked about the difference, for her, between friendship and marriage? Do you agree with her vision of marriage as compared to friendship? If not, how do you view them as being distinct/similar?
2. Do we have to agree on the differences between the two in order for it to make a difference in how we approach same-sex relationships? What about the idea that “you’re going to have to live the rest of your life by yourself if you want to have a place with your church family”? What harm is done to the church by putting the issue in this context? What harm is done to the people who are forced to make that choice? [Praise God that Sally didn’t take the bait!]

**C. The Problem of Secrecy and the Corresponding Lack of Diversity of Perspective** - Sally talks about the the problem of secrecy and the need to have open and honest conversations about faith and sexuality in our churches. She does so in the context of a story about leading a group of 20 heterosexual male elders in a discussion of same-sex relationships, and goes on to say that LGBTQ concerns are causing our young people to leave the Church.

1. Let’s start by discussing the picture of 20 heterosexual married men sitting in a room deciding the fate of the men and women who identify as LGBTQ in their church? What problems do you see with the lack of diversity in that group answering and deciding questions about issues to which none of them could relate? How do we reconcile this with Paul’s descriptions of church leaders? In what ways does this lack of diversity lead to our emphasizing one aspect of scripture over the other?
2. In what ways is a life of secrecy problematic? In what ways is it the opposite of how Jesus would approach the difficult issues of loneliness and human relationships?
3. Why do you suppose some of the men in that group of elders were so quick to conclude that people who were single and living a life of celibacy weren’t hurting

- and that a gay person shouldn't be any different? How does secrecy play into this? Even assuming he was correct in part (i.e., that maybe some weren't necessarily hurting because of it), in what ways should there be room for people with different experiences in those circumstances?
4. In what ways did this idea of secrecy sabotage Sally's relationship with Jill? Have you seen similar problems in hereto-relationships?

**D. Picking and Choosing the Parts of Scripture to Emphasize; Flawed Logic** - One of Sally's Bible professor friends once told her that there was one passage of scripture that he felt was "controlling" on the issue of same-sex marriage. That passage was Genesis 1-3, which talks about a lot of things, including the fact that Adam and Eve were married and they were opposite genders.

1. Let's start by thinking through the reasoning that led this professor to conclude that Genesis tells us same sex marriages are not permissible in the eyes of God. Is it inductive or deductive? Assuming it's inductive, in what ways is it inherently flawed? Why would we assume that because the Bible says one particular thing is good, that another thing that is different necessarily is inherently bad?
2. Now let's think through the issue of favoring one part over the other, which is Sally's real point. We talked above about how a lack of diversity of thought and perspectives can lead one to emphasizing one aspect of scripture over the other (namely the parts that affirm one's own bias). How did you react to the fact that, after considering that other parts of that passage in Genesis may be equally or more important, she and her professor friend spent the rest of the afternoon talking about the human need for companionship? Where do you fall in this discussion? Where would Jesus have been?
3. Thinking about the story of "Wilson", and Sally's gut-wrenching comparison of the moment Tom Hanks lost his volleyball in "Castaway" to the point at which Jill walked out of her life, in what ways does it become critical for us to continually re-assess our thinking about scripture, from multiple perspectives, in order to avoid sending others out onto a similar raft? Harkening back to our discussion from Chapter 9, in what ways does a "relational" theology help us to do that?

## **XII. “Covenant” (Chapter 11)**

**A. An “Impossible Relationship”** - Sally and Karen began as friends, helping each other to hone their crafts. As they learned more about each other, each became more interested in the possibility of a relationship - something Sally had been told wasn't possible. “[A]nyone attracted to the same sex couldn't possibly be a Christ follower or capable of lifelong commitment.”

1. In 2019, when Sally met Karen in person for the first time, would you have thought it was possible for them to have a romantic relationship? What about now? What about much earlier in your faith walk?
2. What changed in Sally's understanding and approach that made her relationship with Karen so much different than her relationship with Jill? In what ways does being open to the possibility of same-sex Christ-centered relationships, open people up to experience the kind of healthy committed relationships contemplated in Genesis (harkening back to Chapter 10)?
3. What was your reaction to the picture painted for Sally of gay people in romantic relationships — promiscuity, debauchery, lasciviousness, licentiousness? In what ways does a closed perspective on same-sex relationships lead to this very condition for many people trapped in that frame of reference?

**B. Speaking to Friends about it** - When Sally first considered dating Karen, she was very intentional about sharing it with her friends (both affirming and non-affirming). For Sally it was important that, even if they didn't agree on the issue, they knew where she stood and agreed on loving her anyway

1. Why is it important that relationships like Sally and Karen's not be kept in secret?
2. What did you think about Sally's dad's reaction to hearing about Karen? What about his response that he never really understood how hard it was for Sally to be alone? And what about, that after hearing about that, how he told her he just didn't want her to be alone anymore?
3. In what ways was Sally's dad able to relate better to her because of his own struggles with loneliness after his wife's passing? In what ways was being open about her need for a relationship another step in healing the brokenness in her relationship with her dad?

**C. The Importance of Dating; the Importance of Covenant** - Sally talks about how difficult it can be for many LGBTQ people if they have to forego dating as adolescents. Relational maturity can be stunted, Sally says, if people aren't allowed to experience healthy dating when they are young. She also describes getting to know Karen in ways she wouldn't be able to anyone else, other than in a romantic “covenant” relationship.

1. Sally posits that the lack of hope that follows from this stunted relational growth can lead to negative outcomes, like promiscuity, substance abuse, etc. Do you agree?
2. Are there other aspects of dating and related societal expectations that can lead to a stunted relational maturity? What about the other side effects?
3. What aspects of Sally's views regarding the covenant of marriage (commitment, selflessness, submission, sharing, etc) are “God-breathed”? And what can hetero couples learn from her example?

### XIII. “Loving the Samaritan” (Chapter 12)

**A. Pat Boone** - This is our first official reference in the book! Pat Boone leading worship at Manhattan Church of Christ. That must have been the cause of his shift toward “Pentecostalism”??? But, on a more serious note, he and his wife were eventually disfellowshipped from the Inglewood Church of Christ in California because of it.

1. Have you ever heard of someone being disfellowshipped? Have you known anyone personally who has been disfellowshipped?
2. What do you suppose would form the basis for this extreme act? In what ways is it antithetical to the way Jesus made his way through communities? Was Jesus a part of a church and did he ever talk about who should be in and who should be out?
3. What about 1 Corinthians 5? How do you contextualize a passage like that in light of all we know about sexual morality and Sally’s story? Is Paul dealing with sexual morality and church association more generally in that passage? Or is he dealing with something else? Is it possible that everything Paul says in Chapter 5 is just plain wrong in our present day? Is that ever the case?
4. What about 2 Thessalonians 3? What is going on there?

**B. Purging Contaminants** - Sally talks about her “humanness” and her inability to know a person’s heart fully or “to decide when removal from community might actually be beneficial both to them and to the church”. And she goes on to talk about how “removal” has been used in her experience and its attendant consequences.

1. Let’s talk for a minute on a broader societal level. As we think about all that we have covered this year and a half or so, in what ways is the idea of “removal” and deciding when it is and isn’t appropriate at the core of the criminal and social justice issues we have been discussing since the death of George Floyd?
2. In what ways are the same distortions at play in Pat Boone’s removal from the Inglewood Church, as well as the attitude that drives police officers (and the broader criminal justice system) to abuse their power in policing?
3. In what ways is all of this about power and control and in what ways is it evidence of the very sin we should be trying to expel from our churches and our society in general?
4. Let’s read the following passage by Sally as we think about our answers to the questions above: “The response of disgust can be helpful when applied to contaminants in a food source, for instance. But when this socially conditioned response is applied to people, it becomes problematic. We end up making moral judgments based on feelings instead of reason. The phenomenon of “moral dumbfounding” is when we feel something is morally wrong, but when asked why, we have difficulty explaining a rationale. We then conjure up reasons to justify the feelings of disgust rather than recognizing that the reaction can come from a place of bias. But there is a better way: “Embrace [of others] must be deep. Further, it must be prior to any judgements, moral or otherwise, we make of persons. Only then will the fundamental humanity of the person be protected from the psychology of disgust and dehumanization ... the will to embrace must be the communal starting point. No discussion of hospitality or church discipline can commence until the will to embrace the dignity of others is firmly in place.”” Sally is quoting one of her favorite college professors, Richard Beck, in “Unclean: Meditations on Purity, Hospitality and Mortality” in the latter part of this passage.

**C. The Parable of the Good Samaritan** - Sally says that her understanding of the parable of the Good Samaritan through the years has been mostly about the need to help others who are in need... and she says that it's not necessarily an incorrect understanding. But she says that when we look a little deeper at the story, we see another, and potentially more important, layer to the story.

1. What did you think about Don McLaughlin's point about the Jew who was willing (or left with no choice but) to accept the aid of the Samaritan? Sally says that the discomfort and controversy in the story is that we are asked to accept that someone who might possibly disgust us can actually be the hero?
2. In what ways is the hero in the story of the Good Samaritan also the one who is willing to receive help from someone despised by those in his social circle? What does this teach us about what Jesus would have said to Pat Boone... or to Sally? What does it teach us about how Pat Boone or Sally should react to someone who is willing to help them despite their having different views on seemingly critical social issues (I'm thinking of Richard Beck, in Sally's case, and the Van Nuys Church, in Pat Boone's case)?
3. "WWJD" ... my kids love these simple bracelets ... in what ways would taking this as the first step in asking and answering questions like the ones we are asking in Sally's book help us to find the best answers? In what ways would this question have helped us along the way in each of the books we've read this past 1.5 years or so?

**D. Richard and Tony** - ... maybe "Unclean" should be our next book??? The news that there was someone on campus at ACU who was supportive of same sex relationships startled Sally. And her conversations with Richard Beck would eventually change her... as did her experience talking to Tony Campolo (in a car on the way to a hotel after hearing him speak).

1. Why do you suppose Sally's judgment "melted away" as she talked to Richard? Why do you suppose, that after having had a conversation and coffee with him, it didn't seem important any more for Sally to talk about Richard's views on same sex relationships?
2. What did you think about Richard's teaching of Jesus' way of "radical hospitality"? What is about Richard that grabbed Sally... that grabs each of us?
3. In what ways does he seem to be "post-doctrinal" ... if that's a phrase? And in what ways does he model "relational theology" as compared to "behavioral theology"?
4. What did you think of Tony's approach to Sally's story? What did he do that was different than so many others... even Sally? What about Tony's prayer... for courage, peace, receptive hearts, and understanding? What about the way that Tony remembered his interactions with Sally when they met again a year later?

## **XIV. “Saving the Next Generation” (Chapter 13)**

**A. Recognition and Root Cause** - Sally discusses statistics and projections showing young people leaving Christianity over the coming years (35 million by 2050). And about Mark, a boy who had died at a very young age of AIDS, a subject about which his family was unable or unwilling to discuss even after his death. And about Toby, a young woman who was struggling with same sex attraction and came from a very similar background to Sally. It seemed remarkable to Sally that after 30 years, Mark and Toby (and their families) were experiencing the same challenges in their faith and their churches that she had faced in her faith and in similar churches.

1. First of all, do you agree and are you concerned about the possibility that our churches will lose so many young people?
2. Assuming you agree, what do you suppose is the root cause of the exodus? Is it as simple as being more welcoming to LGBTQ people? Or is there something bigger that is at play here? What about cognitive dissonance and in what ways does this play out in a bigger sphere than just same sex relationships?
3. Even assuming there are varying and complicated causes, and without regard to impacts on church growth among our youth, what is your reaction to the stories of Toby and of Mark? What should churches be doing to address the sense of loss that each of them and their families must have felt? Do you suppose a more attuned response to the needs of people like Mark and Toby might have a positive impact on church growth?

**B. Equipping Young People for Relationships (of all shapes and sizes)** - In Sally's story about Cori, we see the same thing playing out in Cori's life that had played out in Sally's life. How could a young woman so committed to pleasing God and developing her faith be attracted to other women? Just like Sally, Cori had prayed fervently that her attractions would go away... but they didn't.

1. As you think about Cori's story, and how she wound up in a hospital suffering from depression and suicidal thoughts, in what ways did her church community fail her? What about the countless others (of all sexual orientations) who have wound up in painful relationships for entirely wrong reasons (driven largely by assumptions about marriage that have been propagated by churches)? In what ways should churches be re-thinking how we equip our young people for relationships with life-long partners
2. In what ways are we failing kids, by making them “claim” a sexual identity in the first place? Or is that something churches should be advocating? In any event, in what ways are we failing them even further by not being a part of the dialogue as they struggle through that process?
3. What do you think about Sally's question... what would have happened if Cori no longer had a church community? Sally writes: “At a time when their hearts are so open and shapeable, we sabotage any desire they may have to do kingdom work, by continuing to believe lies that drive them away.”
4. At a couple of points in this chapter, Sally alludes to the fact that the songs we sing in our churches can help us to navigate difficult situations in our lives? Assuming this is true, and I believe it is, how important is that we think critically about the songs we choose and the messages they convey? In other words, do those same songs or hymns sometimes lead us down a darker path of spiritual isolation and confusion?

**C. The Need for Christian Fellowship** - Sally started a dinner at her home with four or five LGBTQ friends... anyone was welcome. They have had as many as 40 in attendance... no “six months you’re good and then the hammer drops”.

1. In what ways is Sally’s story about Jen, the vet tech, a story about Christian fellowship? In what ways is this model of fellowship critical as a core component of Christian faith?
2. As you read the story about Jen, in what ways was her presence in that first dinner just as important to the other Christians in attendance as it was to Jen?
3. How can “caring community” be healing, as Sally suggests? In what ways does inviting each person to share their own gifts contribute to the healing process?
4. To Sally’s point, “what if LGBTQ people never had to worry about not being wanted by their families or their churches”? Let’s close out today by reading Sally’s prayer at the end of Chapter 13:

*“May we pass down to the next generation a picture of God that looks like Jesus, a God who is loving above all and compassionate, so that young people will become so intrigued with the life of Christ that they give themselves over to him in every way. May we pass down Scripture as a love letter, full of stories of how God relates to us and guides us. May the songs we sing—songs that teach us the gospel, long before we know what the words mean—be engraved into the hearts of LGBTQ people, so that in those most discouraging moments of life they might remember and draw comfort from what we believe. I hope that future generations return to our pews and fill our worship services with voices that raise the rafters, making it hard to find a seat again on a Sunday morning.”*