

# “The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times”

by Dean Brackley

*Reading Notes and Discussion Questions*  
*Matt Henegar, January 2022-January 2023*

## I. A Surprising Conversion (Forward)

**A. Getting to Know Dean... and Ellen** - Ellen Calmus, who met Dean Brackley as a student in El Salvador and was an avowed atheist at the time she read the book, wrote the forward for Dean’s book. Her background reminds me of Sara Miles... journalistic interests, time spent in Central America during a time of war, atheist parents, etc. Her experiences in El Salvador, in particular around the assassination of the six Jesuit priests transformed her.

1. Do you find it surprising that Dean choose a non-believer to edit his book about the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises? Why or why not?

2. What do you know about the exercises? Have you worked through any of them and, if not, do you have any interest in doing so?

3. What did you think about the response of the people of Jayaque when they found Ellen at the vigil? What about Dean’s response to Ellen in her time of need? In what ways did these experiences lay the ground work for Ellen’s conversation?

4. What do you think ultimately led Ellen to the point of becoming a believer, after the logical leaps, defining “God” as “X” and coming to know Ignatius through his intuitive sense of human psychology? Ellen says “it seemed to me that Ignatius had been centuries ahead of our modern psychologists in his awareness of the difficulties we encounter in life due to the essential ways in which we fail to understand ourselves, making decisions that run counter to who we are and setting forth in the most self-sabotaging directions.”

**B. A Working Definition of “Faith”** - Ellen says she came to think of faith as “something akin to the notion, so dear to us postmoderns, of self-esteem, the belief in our ability to act effectively in the world, the sense of our worthiness to be loved which so many of us seem to be lacking”. This was in the context of her negative reactions to the faith she had been taught as a child... more of an authoritarian “believe because I told you so” type of faith.

1. Have you had similar struggles with the concept of faith? How does it look for you? How would you define “Faith”?

2. What do you think Dean and Ignatius did to bring Ellen so far along in her understanding? Who are some of the people that have helped bring you along in our understanding?

3. What did you think of Ellen's Christmas Eve story and her experience of "getting in the mind" of both Brackley and Ignatius? Did you relate to her comment that some deeper intelligence or awareness within her was starting to awaken and engage as you worked through the book and the exercises? Have you had similar experiences?

**C. A Ringing Endorsement** - Ellen was so moved by Dean's book that she converted and joined the Catholic Church despite her reservations as a feminist, among others. She says that joining the Catholic Church for her was akin to an immigrant coming to the U.S. even if they may not agree with the foreign policy positions of the current administration.

1. While she admits that others may not have quite the experience she did in reading this book, she does believe that anyone who spends the time on the book will experience change as a result. As Ellen says, the exercises can equip one to make decisions that will lead to living a better and more fulfilled life. What do you think she means?

2. What are your hopes and expectations (if any) for this book?

## II. Spirituality for Solidarity (Chapter 1)

**A. “Getting Free”** - Dean opens his book with this: “These turbulent times disclose our need for a discipline of the spirit. To respond to our world we must get free to love. That involves personal transformation, which includes coming to terms with evil in the world and in ourselves, accepting forgiveness and changing.” We are actually going to divert quickly starting next week into the final three chapters of this book, on prayer, as the rest of the book really sort of depends on having worked through those pieces, but I wanted to spend just a bit of time in Chapter 1 before doing so. We may circle back again to Chapter 1 after reading the chapters on prayer.

1. How would you react to Dean’s words above? What does he mean by getting “free to love”? Do you find it interesting that he talks about coming to terms with the evil in ourselves and in the world? How has the idea of evil in ourselves been handled in faith traditions that you’ve been a part of in the past?

2. What does he mean by accepting forgiveness? What about changing? What does this tell us about Dean’s view as to which of the two evils (that in the world and that in ourselves) is likely more in need of being addressed?

**B. Becoming Acquainted with the Poor** - In lamenting the condition of our world, Dean notes that no amount of money or strategy or planning or politics is going to make the world a more livable place unless a critical mass of people rise up who are willing to “will respond to suffering, who are ready for long-term commitment, and who will make wise choices along the way”.

1. What was significant about Dean’s experience with the at-risk youth in lower Manhattan? Why do you suppose it opened him more to the movement of Jesus and the Holy Spirit and a deeper understanding of his faith? As Dean says, the “crucified people of today lead us to the center of things”.

2. Do you have a sense as to why Ignatian Spirituality was so helpful to Dean along the way? If not, are you curious to find out?

**C. A Little About Ignatius** - Not initially a priest or pastor... led to it through an epiphany while convalescing from an injury sustained in battle. A benefactor of the Renaissance, the printing press, modern science, etc. all coalesced to create an environment in which he flourished. Focused on stewarding the flame lit in each of us by God.

1. What do you know about Ignatius and the spiritual exercises? Do you find yourself at times needing to rekindle the flame? What is it that keeps you going on your faith journey?

2. Even if you haven’t done the spiritual exercises, do you have formal practices like them? What have they looked like? Have you found that they last? Are they effective? Do you find yourself wanting a more regular practice? And, if so, what would it look like?

3. What did you think of Dean's description of the exercises as introducing or re-introducing one to Christianity as an experience more than a set of doctrines?

**D. An Outline** - As we head off into the book, here is Dean's basic outline... "The First Week of the Exercises (corresponding to Part 1 of this book) deals with sin and forgiveness; the Second, with following Christ and making major life choices (Parts 2 and 3); the Third Week considers the passion and death of Christ (Part 4); and the Fourth Week, the risen Christ (Part 5). Although prayer is discussed throughout the book, its final three chapters treat prayer systematically (Part 6)." As I noted, we will start on Part 6 next week. Dean seems to even contemplate that we might.

And finally, as we head off into the book, a few bits of advice from Dean...

1. "As the progression of "weeks" suggests, Ignatius recognized a typical pattern in God's dealings with us, that is, a typical pattern in our growth in freedom and love. Not that people pass lockstep through stages, never to return to them. Rather, as in a symphony of four movements, the themes of the four weeks recur in different ways throughout the life of the maturing person. At the same time, Ignatius stressed that each individual is unique and that God deals freely with each one. He always tailored his counsel to each one's needs, sternly warning others against steering everybody along the same road. In these matters, one size does not fit all. Nor is every truth always timely. We need different types of nourishment at different points of our journey."

2. "Most often, I take human experience, rather than revelation, as the starting point for each theme. At the same time, our lives are too rich for precise scientific explanation, ordinary common-sense discourse, or both, to encompass. If the holy Mystery called God pervades our lives, as I believe it does, then we need religious symbols to point to reality as it actually is. Without that language, we sell our experience short."

### III. Prayer (Chapters 24, 25 and 26)

**A. Introducing Prayer (Chapter 24)** - Dean says that while love is the one thing necessary, it needs the right conditions to thrive and that among those conditions are contemplation and prayer. Dean says “prayer, then, is a normal part of a life of discerning [or contemplating] and doing the most loving thing.”

1. Contemplation. Dean talks about his experiences in new places and how things in new places are often more complex than they appear on the surface at first. He also points out that much of our lives are spent on the surface and that “on any given day we only grasp a fraction of what goes on.” In order to dig deeper into reality, in order to be able to grasp those large chunks of life that pass us by each day, Dean believes contemplation is key (“watch and stay awake”). In this regard, he suggests there are three key requirements: (a) first, letting reality get to us, especially the reality of suffering; (b) second, we need to undergo personal transformation and discern internal movements; and (c) third, we need the challenge and support of a wisdom-bearing community.

- Wow! How to unpack that??? Let’s start with the last part first; what do you think he means by the “challenge and support” of a “wisdom-bearing community”? What are your own experiences in this regard (both positive and negative)? Have you felt challenged and supported in this way in your church communities? What about friend or other groups? And in what ways can groups like this (our Mid-Day Stretch group) act as that type of vehicle?

- Second, in what ways is the notion of “personal transformation” and the “discern[ment] [of] internal movements” similar to the idea of coming to terms with the evil in ourselves, accepting forgiveness and changing, which we talked about in Chapter 1? In what ways is it different? Can you think of examples from your own life where you have done this type of work?

- Finally, what about this idea of letting reality (and suffering) get to us? What have been your experiences in this regard? In what ways do the ideas of judgment (of others) and feelings of shame (about ourselves) act as barriers in our ability to discern reality? What about the priorities we set for ourselves in terms of our day to day? Other thoughts?

Dean writes “contemplation is not simply passive and receptive; it also assumes active forms... When it becomes a habit, it seeps into action. Action then becomes more contemplative.” Or as Jason Isbell might say, “high-action; low prep” may not be the best approach to life’s most complicated issues.

2. Prayer. I could not frame the idea of prayer better than Dean: “[Prayer] engages the Holy Mystery at the *heart of reality*, a personal Mystery that *addresses us and invites a response*.” He goes on to say “simply contemplating the world around us is often insufficient for discovering, and always insufficient for really knowing, the *personal Heart-of-Reality* that *gently closes in on us from without and from within*.”

- I had not thought of prayer in these terms before; have you? What do you think he means by “Heart-of-Reality” and what feelings/thoughts/emotions does that phrase stir in you? What about the idea of that the heart of reality is continually addressing us and inviting a response? How is this model different from prayer models that you have grown up with?

- Dean talks about the “treasuries of wisdom” helping us to “connect the empirical dots” and extending “the reach of our cognitive powers”. What is he talking about? Did these phrases and words resonate with you and are they concepts you had thought about in the past?

-Dean goes on to say “besides reality itself, we also contemplate words of wisdom, especially the scripture, which purifies, orients, supplements, and extends our knowledge...” In what ways is this similar to what we were discussing in Chapter 1 when we talked about the idea of faith, in particular as it relates to the idea of faith in God and God’s love for us, as over against our faith in scripture, religious systems/doctrines, etc.? Other thoughts?

3. Taking God Seriously; Knowing God. Dean says that in order to have an honest conversation about prayer, we first need to ask ourselves if we take God seriously. And, in order to God seriously, we have to approach prayer and our relationship with God from the perspective that God is someone we can know, and know intimately, through the world (every leaf and sunset), through other human beings and through scripture.

- How have you experienced this in your prayer life? Do you take God seriously? Do you believe that God is someone you can know intimately? In what ways and through what vehicles has God communicated to you in the past?

- How did you react to Dean’s notion of a relationship with God, and a life of prayer and contemplation, being one of collaborative action? Do you ever sit down at some point in the day and talk with God about how it’s going? Have you experienced this sort of “dancing with God” that Dean describes? How was that?

- Do you agree with Dean that without these components of prayer and contemplation (or daily relationship and interactions with God) that it becomes difficult to love your neighbor? In what ways do you see that reality playing out in the world around you (both in terms of your own relationships and those of the world at large)?

4. The Lord’s Prayer. Dean spends some time unpacking the prayer that Jesus instructed us to say.

- What has “our father” meant to you in the past? How does Dean’s understanding of it grab you... that it means we have “access to God in boldness and confidence” and that God’s caring and life-giving nature is practically maternal? In what ways have historically patriarchal views and understandings of God affected our ability to get to know God in the way that Dean describes? How would seeing the more maternal aspects of God’s nature make it easier to come to know God intimately?

- What about Dean's story of Etty Hillesum's coming to feel compelled to get on her knees in deep gratitude? What do you think he means when he says that she had come to know the "consolation that comes when we discover part of our true self"?

- Prayers of petition have always been a struggle for me for all of the reasons that Dean describes... because they often seem to go unanswered, and also seem selfish or a "beginner's way" of praying. What has been your experience in this regard? Do you agree that prayers of petition make us more dependent on God and thus more free and more mature? What about the idea that prayers of petition ask that God intensify God's own activity within us ("May God's kingdom come... *in us* and among us!")? What about the idea that the intensifying of God's activity within us can actually explain miracles that seem inconsistent with the laws of nature?

- Dean writes "Faith can only respond that, while the visible results of prayer may disappoint us, God's faithful love invites us to trust that, whenever genuine faith is present, God works real change in and among us, even if we cannot perceive this clearly.

**B. School of Prayer (Chapter 25)** - Dean says that Ignatian prayer meshes with daily life. "It focuses on discernment with God: evaluating past events, present situations, and future possibilities."

1. Prayer Basics. Dean's larger point here, and that of Ignatius, is that prayer is a very individual process and there aren't formulas that work for everyone. As Dean notes, Ignatius was no fan of imposing one's way of praying on others. But he does lay out some basics about (1) the purpose of prayer (or the "ends") and (2) the idea of "consolation" (or noticing what helps us to find and follow God).

- What are some methods of prayer that you have practiced in the past ... from the most routine to the most intensive? In what places and in what postures do you most often find "consolation", as Brackley puts it?

- Are you struggling with Dean's vocabulary here? Do you know the term "consolation" and have you experienced prayer in the way that Dean describes it ... as a means of coming to know and follow God?

- What about the means and ends part? Have you thought of prayer as a means to come to know God? What other means have you thought of when contemplating prayer?

2. Prayer Methods. Dean talks about methods of prayer ... did you know that you could pray while you smoke, but that you can never smoke while you pray? What does he mean by that? He then goes to some ideas of how to engage in prayer.

- Have you ever gone through a sort of prayer training exercise like this? What are your thoughts about it? What about the idea of asking God's help to pray? Are there examples of that in scripture?

- Did you try any of these methods out in prayer this week? If so, how did it go?

- Have you thought of the heart of prayer being a conversation... in the way that Dean describes it? In what ways can viewing it that way help if our “ends and means” as Dean describes it as “coming to know God”?

- Dean says “it sometimes takes patience to discover the riches hidden under layers of poverty, including our own, and the scars left by life’s hard knocks”. Have you found prayer to be difficult at times? How did you react to the image of there being inside each person “a giant scratching to get out”? What does he mean by that?

3. Discursive and Imaginative Contemplation. As I alluded to above, much of Dean’s vocabulary is like a foreign language to me. I assume it is for all of us who grew up in non-denominational protestant churches. But I think we can liken his distinction between “discursive” and “imaginative” contemplation to what I was trying to describe to each of you when we were first considering this book. I talked about it as the difference between the “head” part of knowing God and the “heart” part of knowing God. Discursive contemplation allows us to sit on the surface and analyze how the world should be. Imaginative contemplation requires us to jump in, despite our fears, and participate in it. I think it’s the same with God.

- How would you describe the distinctions between these two types of prayer and contemplation? Do they resonate with you?

- Which part would you say you are more naturally drawn to in your prayer and spiritual life? Which part would your faith traditions have emphasized? Do you think a more balanced approach on these could be helpful for you?

- What did you think of Dean’s “Helps to Pray”? Were you able to read any of the materials that Tom shared, which had been prepared for a retreat in 2010 by Alexandra and Julie?

**C. Worldly Prayer (Chapter 26)** - Dean says that “[w]hen we strive to love and serve as God desires, all of life becomes a prayer and an offering, and we learn, in the midst of our daily activity, to find God in all things.”

1. Monastic Prayer. As Dean points out, Christians have tended to measure their prayer life against a sort of monastic ideal. The model provided by Mary as opposed to that provided by Martha, in the well-known parable. This meant that prayer needed to be deeply contemplative, separate and apart from worldly concerns or issues. “I can’t worry about brushing my teeth, when I’m at God’s business.”

- Ignatius tried to dispel this myth. For him, solitude and lengthy prayer are not the chief standards by which to evaluate prayer and, for Ignatius, prayer may not always be the preferred means to union with God. How has this played out in your life? Do you resonate with the Martha model or the Mary model of devotion to and union with God?



- Has the assumption that the monastic is the only model of prayer inhibited your prayer life? In what ways? Do you agree that imposing the monastic model can serve as an excuse not to pray?

2. Being “United” with God in Love. “A Jesuit told Ignatius that he found God primarily in solitude and by meditating or praying privately. Ignatius responded ‘What do you mean? Do you draw no profit from helping your neighbor? For this is our practice?’”

- How would you describe “contemplatives in action”? Does the concept of being “united to God seeking and doing God’s will” help you to define it? What would that look like for you?

- What does it mean for everything we do to become a “kind of prayer”? Is that even possible? If so, what does it look like?

- Do you agree with Burghardt that if you “make work your only prayer”, you risk becoming a spiritual shipwreck? How do we translate all of this ... looking backward in our spiritual lives up to now ... and looking forward as work through to a better understanding of the spiritual exercises?

- Dean thinks the answer is found in the “practice of love”. As Dean puts it, “if prayer, or any other religious act, is not grounded in that, it is an offense to God”? What does he mean?

3. Distractions and Recollection. Dean says that while putting distractions aside can aid in prayer and even give us better perspective when going back to consider problems, they can also be invitations to “make our prayer more real”.

- Let’s talk about the idea of “praying into our distractions”. Have you done that before? What did it look like? Did it make your prayer more real? What about more turbulent or real?

- Had you heard of the term “recollection” in the context in which Brackley describes it (i.e., being able to focus our hearts and minds on the subject of prayer)? What has/ can helped you to develop the habitual recollection that Dean describes?

- What is the difference that Dean is describing between “recollection” as solitude and quiet contemplation, as compared to “recollection” as engagement in the troubles of the world (truth-telling, defending the weak, challenging injustice)? Do you agree with Dean that “a brief prayer in which we struggle to discover the more loving thing to do is far preferable to a serene and lengthy prayer that shields us from the harsh demands of love”?

- Dean says the “best preparation for prayer is to let the world’s crosses break our hearts, and then respond. That can lead us into the noisiest neighborhoods and the most upsetting situations — but also into the deepest prayer.”

4. Quality and Quantity. While it's tempting to ask the question first, it seems to me that the question of quality vs quantity should be asked last... if at all. Certainly, quality is more important than quantity... as Ignatius points out, a prayer of 15 minutes can at times be more effective than a prayer lasting 2 hours. But this is a very individual question and one that can only be answered with practice.

- In what ways have these questions been hinderances to your prayer life in the past? Have you been able to establish a sweet spot in term of quantity/quality? Where did you land? Is it always the same for you? Or does it vary depending on the day?

5. The Indispensable Prayer. The Examen is the relationship prayer... as Dean points out, friends, colleagues and lovers communicate in many different ways and many different times. The Examen is intended to replicate that type of dialogue. And it can be the foundation of all prayer. It means reviewing the day, to better understand ourselves and to better understand God. Dean describes it as a "necessary minimum" in terms of formal prayer. It begins with praise and thanksgiving, then we ask for enlightenment, then we express contrition and ask for help for the future.

- Have you done the Examen? How has it worked for you? If you haven't done, what do you know about it?

- What do you think Dean means when he says "Examen flows out of practice and back into it"? How did you react to the types of questions that Dean suggests in the Examen (i.e. where did I slip up, where was I in danger, how was it for you)? What about the idea of "dancing with God" in the Examen?

- What about the idea of looking for where God was present in events, where God was nudging and where we cooperated or resisted?

## IV. Free to Love (Chapter 2)

**A. The Foundation** - Ignatius of Loyola believed that “human beings are created to love God with their whole heart and soul, essentially by loving and serving their neighbors.” He goes on to say that everything else on earth (other people) is designed to help people to fulfill their primary purpose (i.e., to love God by loving their neighbors) and that we should use things to the extent that they help us along that way and that we should free ourselves of them to the extent that they don’t. Dean points out that what love requires is not always obvious but that above all it requires sacrifice and that we are slow to sign up for that.

1. What does love mean to you in this context? Had you thought about it in these terms... i.e., using things in the world that help us in that endeavor and freeing ourselves of the things that stand in the way? What are some examples of both that you have experienced in your own life?

2. Loyola describes this as “freedom”... internal freedom to chose habitually the most loving thing. Do you resonate with that? Are there things in your life that lead you to feel the opposite... trapped? Loyola and Brackley call it “indifference”? What does that look like for you? Brackley is clear about what it doesn’t mean... it doesn’t mean that we are not concerned with others; quite the opposite. As Dean says, it is “the capacity to sense and then embrace what is best, even when that goes against our inclinations.”

3. Dean changes Loyola’s phrase when he says that love is the “means to save our souls”. Dean says love helps us “attain our ultimate fulfillment”. How do you see it? Does Dean’s change have a substantive difference?

**B. Order and Disorder** - Dean says that the goal of indifference is to live without being determined by any *disordered* inclinations. “Inclinations are likes and dislikes, ‘habits of the heart,’ that direct the will toward food, possessions, sexual gratification, or sleep...” He goes on to say that disorder can take “crude forms of compulsion” or, importantly, more refined and socially acceptable forms, like “legalism, racism, elitism, or conformity to convention.”

1. When you think of sin, how does it compare to what Dean describes as “disorder”? Do you agree that the indifference that Dean that describes frees us to love? What does that mean?

2. In what ways does this idea of indifference empower us to be free from sin? In what ways are the two different?

3. What did you think of Dean’s point that disorder can take on more socially acceptable forms such as legalism, racism, elitism, or conformity to convention?

**C. Covenant, Fear and Faith... and Freedom** - Dean describes the Exodus as the central story of the Hebrew Bible. God freed Israel from slavery and then made a covenant with them. In exchange for “shalom” they would have no other gods but God and would love God with all their heart, soul and might.

1. Do you agree with Dean that exclusive love is love and trust all in one? And what does he mean by that? What about the idea that having super-loyalty to one god means not “tyrannized”?

2. As you think about the concept of exclusive love, and the covenant relationship with God, do you have a sense of what Dean is describing when he says that fear is the disordered inclination the Bible is taking aim at in establishing that relationship?

3. What about the idea having “nothing left to lose”? In what ways does the indifference that Dean is talking about drive us to that reality? How does the story of Israel’s freedom from slavery help us understand all of this? In what ways is the fear of death... or the fear of losing any of the things we love... akin to slavery?

4. What does Dean mean when he says “happiness goes deeper than pleasure”? What are some other words you would use to describe that concept?

**D. Grasping for Idols; Living by Faith.** Dean says that there are only two ways to respond to the insecurities that besiege us: grasping for idols or living by faith. He says that when we grasp for idols “they turn on us and dominate our lives”. But, “to live by faith is to abandon ourselves the Ultimate Reality which surrounds and penetrates us and which alone satisfies us.”

1. How does getting free to love, of becoming indifferent to our inclinations (or to becoming more aware of when they are becoming disordered, help us to see the “Ultimate Reality which surrounds and penetrates us”? What does that look like for you?

## IV. The Reality of Evil (Chapter 3)

**A. Face to Face with Evil** - Brackley tells the story of running into a homeless man on a cold night in New York City, an experience many of us have likely shared. “I had come face to face with homelessness in the richest place on earth, and I didn’t know what to do. After that, I would think about people in the street as I took hot showers on cold mornings. I will never forget the frostman. He brought me up against evil — the horrible injustice of homelessness — and up against myself.”

1. Brackley goes on to say that he believes it is necessary for us to face evil “and the part we play in it” in order to be able to live our lives in a way that honors our own “dignity”. What do you suppose he means by that? Have you experienced that kind of integration between your faith walk and your day-to-day?

2. What has your reaction been to coming face-to-face with homelessness? What about other evils in the world? What has been your reaction to the situation in Ukraine?

3. Had you considered before the idea that the best place to begin is by seeing the evil of homelessness through the lens of the evil within yourself? What does that mean?

**B. Getting Serious about Injustice** - Dean says that “Today, if we want a hearing when discussing moral evil and reform, we must avoid scare tactics and the guilt-peddling and cheap moralizing that stress the bad news of sin at the expense of the good news of deliverance.” He goes on to point out that this type of self-examination of sin is usually more about control than it is about human development.

1. In what ways has this played out in your own faith walk? Have you ever found yourself at times unable to deal with the larger problems of evil as a result of the moralizing that Brackley is talking about? What about the church as a whole?

2. What does Brackley mean when he talks about the good news of deliverance and in what ways can internalizing this “free” us to love better and to tackle the larger problems of evil?

3. What did you think of Brackley’s description of Jesus’ statement that the truth will set us free (i.e., the truth being the bad news of sin and the good news of divine love)?

**C. Liberal Society** - While the conservatives have taken ownership of the moralizing and control aspects of sin, Brackley points out that liberals have practically eliminated it from their lexicon - recognizing that I’m taking some liberties on this point. However, it is pretty clear that neither approach seems capable of adequately addressing the problem of evil. One is a method of control; the other a sort of “cover-up”.

1. As you think about the broader societal evils and our response to them, in what ways is a lack of “interior knowledge and contemplation” at the root of our inability to solve them? Have you ever done this type hard work in the area of sin and evil... or even really thought about it?

2. Dean says “sitting with reality, allowing it to work in us, working through the feelings and the thoughts it stirs is what we mean by contemplation.” Have you considered the fact that the point of sin and evil might not be the external outcomes, but the internal healing that comes by working through this process that Dean is describing? Dean says “Contemplation arises naturally out of our need to be in touch with reality in its rich complexity”. He says it is also communion and communication with the “Ultimate Reality” or God. What do you suppose he means by that?

**D. How do we Crack this Nut.** Dean writes “neither demonizing the enemy, nor threats of punishment, nor obsessive guilt discloses the truth about evil. Understanding this truth comes from contemplating the real world, its sin, and our part in it.” But he goes to great lengths for the rest of the chapter describing a world economic system that is seemingly designed to perpetuate this sin of evil, homelessness and poverty.

1. What did you think of Dean’s description of “feeling and savoring” evil internally as a means of attaining internal knowledge?
2. What about the idea of trivializing sin if we don’t put it center stage when dealing with these types of problems?
3. What other ideas do these concepts stir in you?

## V. Forgiveness (Chapter 4)

**A. Let's Talk About Truth ... and Discernment** - In the prior chapter, Dean mentions the word "truth" quite often. He talks about the truth about evil; about our need to be in touch with reality; about how the practice of contemplation is really about allowing sitting with reality and allowing it to stir in us; about how coming to terms with evil and the part we play it actually allows us to live in a way that honors our own dignity.

1. Let's close our eyes for a moment. Now imagine yourself in a dark room sitting at a table with several objects on it. You're asked to figure out what each of the objects are... some could be dangerous (like a sharp knife or razor blade), some could be harmless (like a soft pillow), some could be empowering (like a good book), and some could be nourishing but could hurt you if not handled properly (like a hot bowl of soup). Your job is to figure out what they are and then describe them to someone else in the room. What do you do?

2. At dinner with a friend this past week we talked about how frustrated his wife gets with his tendency at times not to respond to (or "ignore") her texts. We talked about how it often escalates quickly into fights over whether it was reasonable and how disrespected she felt when it happened. Naturally, as he shared, he was also looking for me to confirm it was reasonable for him not to respond from time to time and that she shouldn't feel disrespected. I didn't take the bait... realizing this is a seemingly silly example, in what ways do you see this idea of contemplation (or "sitting with reality, allowing it to work in us, working through the feelings and the thoughts it stirs") at play here? In what ways is our inability at times to manage conflict effectively the result of our unwillingness at times to sit with reality, "feeling and savoring" it?

3. What about the "truth" or "reality" of forgiveness? When is it offered ... before or after we seek it? Dean says "[b]etter to feel our solidarity in sin and our need for forgiveness than to cling to a phony righteousness". What does he mean?

**B. What about Guilt** - Thinking about the horrifying story of Kitty Genovese, Dean says that many have attributed the horrifying feelings of those who have heard the story to be more about the deep-seated fear that had they been there, they would have done the same thing. He also talks about how the most pressing demands and the suffering in our world can dishearten rather than moving us to act.

1. In what ways can guilt hinder us in our task of contemplation and make it difficult to see truth? In what ways does it paralyze us in the process of discernment?

2. How does knowing that forgiveness is offered BEFORE we seek it help us to move past feelings of guilt? Have you ever found yourself reluctant to ask for forgiveness? "For what frees us is knowing that we are acceptable and accepted, not as a prize for being good, but in spite of being not so good". What do you think Dean is trying to say? What would you say about this?

3. Do you agree with Dean that without knowing we are “acceptable and accepted” it is “well-nigh impossible” to come to terms with our sinfulness ... let alone solve the problem of poverty?

**C. Humanizing Shame and Confusion** - When talking about the feelings of shame and confusion that Dorothy Day described while handing out bread in lower Manhattan on cold mornings in the 1930's, Brackley describes it as “a humanizing shame and confusion, that arises out of a sorrow for trampled dignity and sense of oneness with the victims.” He also talks about the ways in which modern society produces “fragile egos” (how we look, what cars we drive, where we live).

1. How do these paradigms of shame differ? What do you think Dean means when he describes a type of shame that can “humanize”? Had you thought about there being constructive and destructive types of shame?

2. What do you think about the idea that we can't strike out in rebellion to feelings of shame and guilt and, at the same time, we can't simply strive to placate the authorities that impose them? Dean says both are dead-end strategies. Do you agree? What does he mean when he says that “humanizing shame and confusion” arising out of sorrow for “trampled dignity” can move us “forward, toward reconciliation”?

**D. A Permanent Offer to be Accepted .... or not.** “What the gospel says about our situation is that the holy Mystery (God) presses upon us from without and within with a permanent offer of forgiveness... Believing that and accepting the offer leaves us at peace with God and with ourselves.”

1. How is it for you? Do you have difficulty believing or fully comprehending that? What makes it difficult? What kinds of things stand in the way of our accepting forgiveness? Dean says “few seem able to self-administer this medicine in the dosage required”.

2. How do you think the “grace-full acceptance by Marta and others like of her of people like [Dean]” point us to a grace that is even more radical than that offered by them? How are they “ambassadors of grace”?

3. A quick story about a church on the island of Morea...

“As the humanity of the poor crashes through the visitors' defenses [visitors to impoverished nations like El Salvador], they glimpse their reflection in the eyes of their hosts. (‘These people are just like us!’) They feel gently invited to lay down the burden of superiority of which they were scarcely aware. They are brushed with light shame and confusion, and feel they are losing their grip. Actually, it is the world that is losing its grip on them. I mean the world consisting of important people like themselves and unimportant poor people. That world starts to unhinge. The experience threatens to sweep them out of control like a stream in spring. It is like the disorientation of falling in love. In fact, that is what is happening, a kind of falling in love. The earth trembles. The horizon opens. They are entering a richer world. .... [Those who are suffering] show us that the world is a much crueler place than we supposed, but also that there is



something going on that is far more wonderful than we dare to imagine. When the poor insist on celebrating life no matter how bad things are, and on sharing what little they have, they communicate hope. .... There is more here than meets the eye. Sin abounds, *but grace abounds even more!*"

## VI. Reform of Life (Chapter 5)

**A. Our False Identities** - Brackley talks about Willy Loman from “Death of Salesman” and how he had constructed a false identity “to shield himself from past failures”. He goes on to point out that there is a part of Willy that lives in all of us, likely pointing to Arthur Miller’s brilliance as much as anything else. Even if we don’t have any major skeletons in the closet, our shadows “can darken” our lives when those “wounds are still raw”.

1. Are there any false identities any of you would like to talk about today? Even if you don’t want to get into specifics, in what ways have you seen shadows from your past darken your present? What about current shadows and the ways in which they lead us down paths of untruth (or darkness)?

2. In what ways do those shadows (when we haven’t come to terms with them and they remain raw and untreated) affect how we treat others in our lives? What about our spouses... close friends... work colleagues... children?

3. In what ways can all of this steal our dignity and/or the dignity of others?

**B. Stirring up Sorrow, Shame, Confusion and Repugnance** - Yikes! This is where it gets serious, right? We are now getting more specifically into the exercises and one of those is the examination of our present faults and our past failures. Ugh! But, all is not lost. As Dean points out, this kind of redemptive sorrow and holy confusion can lead to “new freedom and inner peace”.

1. Have you engaged in this type of process in the past? As an example, Dean points out that we can set aside time each day for several days, logging in a journal or other source answers to questions like “Where am I going?” Do I have an overall goal AND is that goal worthy? How coherent are my choices? Is this who I want to be and is it who I am called to be?

2. It is critically important, in my view, that as part of this process, we each find our own answers to questions like “is it worthy” and “is it who I am called to be”. Have you ever experienced a form of bullying in this regard in the past? Have you ever acted like a bully in this regard to others? What about in a broader church context? What about in a broader political context?

3. What did you think of Ignatius suggestion that we imagine Christ on the Cross and ask ourselves what we have done/are doing/should do for him? What about Ellacuria’s suggestion that we place ourselves in the position of the crucified victims of today and ask if we have helped to crucify them? And what I can I do to remove them from their crosses and lift them up again? Other questions or thoughts on this exercise?

4. Does Dean’s list of questions that follow feel like the kind of “moralizing” that plagued Sally Gary and folks in similar situations in the Churches of Christ? Or do they feel somehow different? If so, why?

**C. Seeking Truth/Light** - Dean writes “[i]n these exercises, we ask for a deep sense (interior knowledge) of the disorder in our lives; for appropriate sorrow, shame and confusion; for repugnance toward evil; for profound gratitude toward God who forgives us no matter what we have done, and for the many blessings we have received.”

1. What do you think Dean means by “deep sense” or “interior knowledge”? What about “appropriate sorrow, shame and confusion”? Dean calls them “graces” that can lead to reform and conversion and that they part of a collaboration with God who heals and frees us. Do you agree? How do you imagine that would play out in your own faith walk?

2. How is all of that different, if at all, from what you have been taught in the past about sin and forgiveness? Or from how you have come to think of it on your own?

**D. Transformation... Turning from Selfishness to Love.** “The crucial change in life is the turn from selfishness to love. For some this takes place early in life, for others later; still others avoid it to the end. ... Though there may be no visions or flashes of insight, our horizon expands; we see the world with new eyes.”

1. How would you define this process in your own life? What is selfishness for you? Have you seen this kind of change that Dean talks about in your own walk? Has it been dramatic or barely perceptible... or some combination of the two?

2. What is Dean talking about when he describes the transition from “being turned in upon ourselves” and opening up to our neighbor? And had you thought about this process being more God’s work than our own and how it “comes from beyond us” and that the results are “disproportionate to our efforts”?

3. Have you seen the world with the new eyes that Brackely describes?

4. What about this idea of looking down the two potential paths for our lives... one that leads to light and truth and life; and the other that leads to darkness and deceit and death? Have you engaged in this exercise of imagining what it would feel like to experience the bitter tragedy of morel and spiritual death? Do you think that happens more often than people realize? What does this say about the human condition?

5. As you think about all of this now, are you experiencing the discouragement and dismay that Dean describes or the hope and enthusiasm? As he points out, that is a natural part of the process... and the exercises (or “Rules for Discernment”), which we will dig into more deeply next week, are designed to help us understand and respond to them.

## VII. Rules for Discernment (Chapter 6)

**A. Interior Movements** - Brackley describes as “interior movements” the thoughts and emotions that are stirred up when we begin the process of self-examination and awareness and that of transformation. These can stir up sadness and fear, but also enthusiasm for the future. He goes on to ask whether we can “trust them as a reliable guide for making decisions”.

1. Why do you suppose Dean chose those words “interior” and “movements” and what do they mean to you? As you look back on your journey to this stage, can you see examples of where those feelings or movements were a reliable guide for making good decisions? What about the opposite?

2. Do you relate to the idea that often times experiences that seemingly make us feel closer to God may not be the most reliable guides for action (e.g., the feelings of empathy for a homeless person, the emotions stirred by a rousing sermon, feelings of guilt for past actions, etc.)?

3. Is that something you have struggled with in the past?

**B. The First Set of Rules** - Brackley says in response to the notion that the ancients personified evil that it “is far more dangerous to miss what the ancients understood: that our minds and moral resources are no match for the “mystery of inequity” (2 Thess. 2:7). ... ‘The best and the brightest’ have ever marched down history’s blind allies with disastrous consequences, in the name of law and order, the fatherland, freedom, the true religion, the revolution, and countless noble causes.” I might throw in some other seemingly noble causes where the results have been less than stellar, like the environment, criminal justice reform, racial and gender equality, poverty, etc. Dean goes on to point out that the rules for discernment can help us recognize “these subtle tendencies, toward life and toward death, in daily life and in ourselves” and how to respond to them.

1. Let’s reflect for a moment on the seemingly endless line of noble failures in human history. What are your thoughts and why do you suppose we’ve become almost pre-destined to fail in this way? Coming down to more of a micro level, have you had or witnessed similar tragedies in your life and/or your own communities?

2. What about the first four rules? 1- the delights of self-seeking (and the sting of remorse); 2- sowing discouragement and desolation (as compared to God’s spirit of encouragement and consolation); 3- the abiding peace and joy of consolation (as compared to the temporary and fleeting experience of pleasure); 4- the inner turmoil and sadness of desolation. And what do you think about the idea of an “enemy” that is standing in the way during all of this? Ignatius calls it “the enemy of human nature” and Jesus describes the enemy as a “murderer”.

3. Focussing on the idea of consolation, Brackley says that “[I]n consolation, the subterranean river within us overflows into conscious life, endowing ordinary feelings with a heightened tone and fullness.” He says that in consolation, we feel God attracting us and

touching us... we feel drawn to prayer and revealed truth, generous sacrifice becomes easy. What are your lived experiences in this regard? Desolation, on the other hand, drains us of energy, points us to the “gospel of self-satisfaction” and causes us to fall in on ourselves. Same question as above.

4. Other thoughts on the concepts of consolation and desolation?

**C. More Rules** - After helping us to get a handle on the concepts of consolation and desolation, Dean delves a little further into the rules.

1. The first few deal with how to respond in periods of desolation. First, once you are able to recognize a period of desolation, don't make any important changes. Second, we shouldn't just go with the flow in times of desolation, since the flow of desolation is dehumanizing. What are some other thoughts that this stirred in you? Any other areas that you might decide not to act on in these times? Examples where you have seen this work and not work?

2. We have much to learn in periods of desolation and it helps to know that consolation is around the corner. And in consolation, desolation is moving closer (so be ready). He also points out that when in desolation or moving that direction, it can be essential to have a wise confidant in whom to confide. And finally notes that attacks from the enemy can be highly personalized. What are your thoughts on all of this? What about the idea that desolation can be contagious and spread in groups?

**D. Cracking the Nut.** Dean points out that the concepts of consolation and desolation are not mere psychology but that at the same time are definitely affected by them.

1. What do you think he means?

2. Have you started any of the techniques that Dean suggests (e.g., journaling, meditation, etc)? What about prayer?

## VIII. The Call (Chapter 7)

**A. Our Current Situation** - As we think about the ideas of “calling” or “true vocation” or “partnering with God”, I’m reminded of the reality in which I was raised and now live. When I was a kid, my entire existence revolved around two things primarily: First, what I wanted to do in the moment (and how best to be able to it, both in terms of justifying it morally and in terms of finding the means to accomplish it). Second, what I wanted to be when I grew up (hoping that I would find the path morally and financially to be able to do mostly whatever I wanted and to enable my family to be able to do the same). All of that has changed considerably for me over the course of the past three years or so, but those pressures are still very much present... and I still haven’t found my vocation.

1. What have your experiences been in this regard? Have you spent more time thinking about your life’s work as a “vocation” (as Dean defines) or as a “means to an end”? Why do you suppose that is?

2. How do you find a “true vocation” in a world that is so fixated on material wealth and comfort? In what ways does our culture’s fixation with figuring out and then advocating for our “opinion” on important issues exacerbate this problem? Dean says that this paradigm “robs us of our dignity”. What does he mean? Have you experienced feelings like that in your own journey?

**B. Our Vocation** - Brackley describes vocation as something we discover and that more than something we do, it is something we are or might become. He says that when we find our vocation, something clicks and we find what we were born for. He also says that our deepest vocation as human beings is that we were all made to love and to help others.

1. Have you found your own true vocation? What is it? Dean says, the “call” comes in the “form of consolation, drawing us to a freer, more generous life.” Here I am Lord, use me!

2. What would you do if your vocation led you into danger, or life-threatening situations? Is it something you would risk your life for? In what ways do questions and situations like that prevent us from finding our true vocation? What about other inconveniences (like financial freedom or protecting and raising our children)?

3. What about the fact that a rising tide raises all boats?

**C. The Perspective of Time** - Brackley seems particularly focused on serving the poor (or the “crucified peoples”, as he describes them) in coming to our true vocation. This is a continuing theme for him. He writes “The crucified people are a privileged place for hearing the call to service. They provoke the crucial questions: What will we do to take them down from their crosses?”

1. What are your thoughts about this? Do you agree? What has been your experience in this regard? What would happen in our world if everyone made this their vocation? And is that even what Dean is really saying?

2. To what extent do you think vocation is more a posture or a state of being than it is a specific job or life's work? Is that what Dean is getting at? In what ways, does that posture put us in a position to live a life that honors our true vocation? Do you think that's what happened to Martin Luther King? What about Martha (Tessie's grandmother)?

She said "I'm not the one to tell you that you should go, because here I am, and I'll be watching television and eating or cleaning things up while you're walking by those folks. But I'll tell you, you're doing them a great favor; you're doing them a service, a big service.... You see, my child, you to help the good Lord with His world! He puts us here—and He calls us to help Him out... You belong in that McDonough School, and there will be a day when everyone knows that, even those poor folks—Lord, I pray for them!—those poor, poor folks who are out there shouting their heads off at you. You're one of the Lord's people; He's put His hand on you. He's given a call to you, a call to service—in His name!"

**D. The Corruption of our Supreme Value** - Brackley points out that a vocation that partners with God in the world is one that comprises a life-long commitment that is fleshed out in concrete commitments over time and into the future. And he believes that liberal society's corruption of the idea of freedom causes us to instead live for a sort "open-door" life-style that provides us with the ability to decide what we want and then obtain it. He goes on to say that this leads to an inability to make long-term commitments because who knows what the world will look like down the road.

1. What did you think about Dean's example from marriage (recall Gladys and James had been married for 40-plus years)? Does the idea of closing doors behind you cause anxiety? Why is that? What type of model is Dean offering as an alternative? Brackley says that their marriage "shows us how the 'open-door' caricature misconstrues freedom as the private property of isolated individuals. I can only undo tomorrow what I decide on today because I am alone in my decision, because I'm not engaged in any common effort."

2. What happens when we're engaged alone, but thinking we are trying to help others in that process (I'm thinking of "2's" on the Enneagram)? Dean says "liberal individualism fails to appreciate the drama of *interior* freedom by which we mature." He goes on to say "If the chosen path turns out not to be our vocation, that will become clear in practice without having to afflict ourselves with a hundred doubts and a divided heart". We have to climb aboard that train that is pulling out of the station, or get left behind.

## IX. The Reign of God (Chapter 8)

**A. Justice, Truth and Peace** - The “Contemplation on the Incarnation” is the portion of the exercises that follows the “Call” (which we were discussing the past couple of weeks). It asks us to contemplate how Jesus received his own mission and is premised on the fact that in seeing the world in that way, we can better understand our own call. “The Trinity sees that everyone is being lost, and, in merciful response to this tragedy, sends the Son to become human and save us all.” And Brackley points out that we are invited to share in this mission with Him.

1. What does this mean in your own life? What about what you have seen in the history of churches that you have been a part of? What about your own family’s faith paradigm?

2. As you contemplate “the whole expanse of the earth, with multitude of peoples and races, in their diversity of dress and customs”, what do you see? How did and how does Jesus respond? What do you think that means about how you are called to respond? How does all of that translate in our current social and political paradigms?

3. In what ways do our ideas and beliefs about how to respond to the suffering we see all around us impact our ability to actually act as a partner with Jesus in responding to them?

**B. Blessed are You Who Are Poor** - “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the reign of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.” (Luke 6: 20-21)

1. Had you ever thought about God’s treatment of the poor in the way that Brackley describes (i.e., as a mother who comes to the defense of one of her children who is being abused by the other)? What about the idea that God is on the side of the poor not because they are good, but because God is good ... that the beatitudes are not about the virtues of the poor, but about the virtuous dispositions of God?

2. What about societal inclinations to divide the righteous from the sinners... both as those structures existed in Jesus’ day and as they exist now? Have you considered the fact that maybe we spend too much time yelling at each other and not enough time being kind to each other? What does partnering with God and Jesus in the “Reign of God” look like in that regard?

**C. Ignoring the Timeline** - Brackley says that “In Jesus’ ministry, God gathers the poor, the outcast sinners, women, the sick and lepers, the children, Samaritans and eventually the gentiles ... into a new community where they will serve one another and no one will dominate.” (Mark 10: 42-45) He goes on to point out that the Reign of God is banquet that are all invited to join.

1. As you envision this banquet, what comes to mind? Do you imagine it is something that will happen at some future point... maybe when we all get to heaven? Or is it something that you imagine can happen in your lifetime?



2. As you think about the people of Jesus' day who were invited to this banquet, do you imagine it has already happened for them (whether in heaven or on earth)? Or do you think it will happen with you and them together when everyone gets to heaven?

3. What are some metaphorical ways of looking at the banquet? Is it possible that it is happening right now, regardless of whether we can see it? Is it possible that it is more a description of how humans beings can and should live in order to become most fulfilled?

**D. What are We to Do** - Brackley talks about a gathering each year at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, which celebrates the idea that a world from mass poverty and environmental degradation is possible.

1. Do you think, as Brackley asks, they are just delusional? What about his question as to whether a live serving "unproductive" people is worthwhile? How does this fit with the Christian call? How does it fit with your call?

2. What is your experience with the God of Christians that Dean describes... i.e., a "judge disposed to forgive sins and grant salvation in the afterlife? And in what ways do you suppose that has hindered Christians in their efforts to bring about the kind of change sought at places like the World Social Forum?

3. Do you think that paradigm was necessary as a sort of motivating force to draw people into the faith? Do you think there are Christian faith communities for whom that is not the primary paradigm?

4. What about Dean's question in light of what history has shown us in this regard? Do you believe that love is possible beyond the intimate concern for the few that live inside our own bubble? What can Martha teach us about this?

5. Do you agree with Dean that faith shows us that life is worth the trouble, despite the egoism, suffering and death?

6. Do you find hope, as Dean seems to, in the "experience of [the] quiet assurance" that we find in the easy smile of the poor and the severely handicapped as well as their readiness to celebrate? How would you describe your own hope in the midst of all that is going on around us?

7. Do you sense God pressing in on you, from all sides, in the events of daily life in the way that Dean describes? Have you accepted the offer to participate with God in making love, justice and peace real? In what ways?

## X. Contemplation of Christ (Chapter 9)

**A. Re-creating the Story** - Brackley writes that “a great story draws us into itself and discloses the deeper drama of life.” In particular, he is focused on the story of Jesus of Nazareth and the ways in which we are both moved by that story and participate in it. He suggests a method of imagining oneself in the story, of sitting with the reality of it, of “allowing it to penetrate us, and working through its impact on us.”

1. Have you engaged in this practice in the past or did you do it connection with reading this chapter? How did that go for you? What challenges did it present?

2. As you contemplated the people in the story, what they did and what they said (i.e., the practice that Dean is describing), what moved you? Did you feel the fruits of the spirit as Brackley describes? How did that work?

3. What do you think of Brackley’s method of prayer as part of this process... first, pausing in silence and recalling God’s love... second, asking that the entirety of the prayer be directed toward the serving of the fulfilling God’s ultimate purpose on earth... and, third, to make your request (i.e., to know Jesus and the stories about his life, to love him more deeply, and to follow him more closely)?

4. Were you able to connect the dots? How did or would that look? What about the idea of the “Gospel According to [fill in the blank]”? How does empathy come into play as part of this exercise... or does it?

**B. Living, Breathing Jesus** - Brackley describes a process by which we become companions of Jesus and, in doing so, Jesus is revealed to us in ways that are new and potentially even different from what is revealed in the Gospels. In particular, Brackley points out that some may struggle with the fact Jesus was male, or a Jew, or that he lived in a particular culture and in a particular time. But that those factors are definitely limiters on who Jesus really is.

1. How did this grab you? Do you agree? Have you had experiences in this regard? What is your “Gospel” story and what does Jesus look like, act like or say in it? As Brackley says, Jesus is no longer confined to the categories that defined him while he lived on earth.

2. Brackley says that if Jesus were female that his ideas would not have been seen as revolutionary as they were? I wonder if Jesus would have been seen at all if he wasn’t a male in that particular culture and in that particular time?

## XI. The Two Standards (Chapter 10)

**A. Who do you say that I am** - Brackley opens chapter 10 by pointing us back to the exchange between Jesus and his disciples in which Jesus asks them first who to other people say he is. And then Jesus asks who each of the disciples say that Jesus is. Then of course, after becoming the rock on which Jesus will build the church, Peter stumbles almost immediately and then at the end as well.

1. What does it mean to deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Jesus? Do you think Peter was doing that when he tried to protect Jesus from the Cross? What about when he denied Jesus at the Cross? Had you previously thought about the irony of this series of events?

2. What does Jesus teach through all of these events about compassion? What does it demonstrate to us about who God is? And why do you suppose so many Christians live life through the lens of condemnation, as opposed to living through the lens of compassion (both for themselves and for others)?

**B. Making our Lives Count** - Brackley talks about the struggle each of us faces in making the decision to lay down our crosses. Life gets in the way; we lose our focus; we become burned out... sooner or later, we find ourselves unable to continue. "It will be a bumpy ride."

1. Brackley says that the central meditation of the exercises is the "Two Standards", which Brackley believes is arguably Ignatius's most insightful contribution to our understanding of reality. What did you think of his views of reality in this regard... in particular the notion that "the powers of egoism pull us backward to slavery unto death, while the divine Spirit draws us forward to freedom and life"? (Notice the difference in the usage of the words "pulls" and "draws").

2. How did you react to the notion of this super-natural Star-Trek type of battle? Do you sense that happening in your life? Or is it something that is happening internally within each of us.... Or both?

3. What are some of the social implications of the two mindsets... i.e., that there is an external battle being waged for my soul, as opposed to an internal one? Think back on the idea of the lens of condemnation as compared to the lens of compassion.

**C. Wokeness; Countermeasures** - Brackley says that the purpose of the meditation on the two standards is to "learn the deceits of the enemy and learn effective countermeasures to use against them."

1. What are some logical reasons to reject the notion of a literal cosmic battle? And what about some logical reasons to support it? What are some reasons the allegory of a cosmic battle might have been used in describing what happens within each of us as we make the choice to take up our crosses and follow Jesus?

2. How do the temptations of Jesus help us to answer these questions? What about Brackley's explanation of the "Apocalyptic Vision" and the ways in which it was used as a sort of support system for groups of people who were suffering persecution?

**D. The Root of all Evils** - For Ignatius and for Paul, the love of money or "Mammon" is the root of all evil... i.e., the dark side of the two standards. But as Brackley points out, it is the love of money that ultimately leads to "swollen pride" or "hubris before God". He says that there is nothing wrong with healthy self-esteem, but that by bestowing honors on us, society says that

we are important... and not just that we are important, but that we are *more important than others*.

1. What are some other aspects of life in our current culture that can lead to a similar sense of feeling that we are more important than others? In fact, isn't that the entire thrust of our current culture?

2. Brackley points out that "just recognizing this dynamic doesn't protect us against it", instead we must "counterattack in practice". What do you suppose he means by this? Is it as simple as seeking poverty, contempt and humility over riches, honors and pride? How does the idea of indifference come back into play here?

3. Brackley defines humility not simply as subordination or a grounding of all other virtues, but as a recognition that I am no more worthy of dignity than anybody else? This humility, according to Brackley, is the chief weapon against the enemy. How has that played out in your life? What are some not so obvious ways in which we as Christians have a tendency to assume dignity is more deserved by some than others?

**E. The Triple Colloquy** - Brackley notes that the fulcrum of the exercises is this prayer, which is repeated three times in each day in the last five days of the second week (first with Mary, then with Jesus and then with God): "I ask that I may be received under [Christ's] standard, first, in the most perfect spiritual poverty and also, if ... [God] should choose me for it, to no less a degree of actual poverty; and second, in bearing reproaches and insults, that through them I might imitate him more."

1. What your thoughts first about praying to Mary? What about the notion that this prayer can lead us to indifference about poverty and rejection as an initial matter but that it is ultimately about love?

2. What were your thoughts on the three types of persons? Which one are you... the procrastinator; the one with conditions; or the one who strives to become indifferent? What does it mean to put our wealth in "escrow" while we seek to discern God's will for our lives and for our riches?

3. Do you agree with Brackley that the notions of riches and poverty should not be read metaphorically to include anything that meets the need for human identity, esteem and love? Brackley says that the "'pride' of the Two Standards is precisely 'patriarchal' arrogance, contempt, and ambition. Riches-honors-pride does describe how our patriarchal capitalist world operates. The enemy strategy translates into the individualistic upward mobility which traps so many of our contemporaries, women and men alike, social losers as well as winners." What does he mean? How does all of this play out in a modern world with such a vast middle class?

## XII. Downward Mobility (Chapter 11)

**A. “Babylon” vs. “Jerusalem”** - “The tempting logic of riches-prestige-arrogance stalls personal transformation, or even turns it around. Poverty-contempt-humility deepens the process and leads to abundant fruit.” Brackley uses the term “downward mobility” to describe the process that happens as we are transformed from the worldly pursuits, whose aims primarily are to stave off fear and anxiety - about poverty, about crime, about war... and ultimately about death.

1. What are some examples you have observed in which riches-prestige-arrogance, as you have seen them in your life and in the lives of those you love, led to stalled transformation or even turned it around?

2. What about the other side of the coin? Have you experienced abundant fruit in times of poverty-contempt-humility or witnessed that in others? What are some examples of what that looks like?

3. What do you think Brackley means when he says we fear the “collapse of meaning”? In what ways do you suppose that is more at the core of our desire for upward mobility than our fear of death?

**B. Making it on Our Own** - Brackley makes the compelling point that Capitalism has weakened traditional bonds and disconnected us from our identities. This is because in the pursuit of upward mobility, we no longer identify with traditional roles or occupations. Instead we focus primarily on the ebbs and flows of our financial success and, in particular, how we compare in that regard to others.

1. Do you agree? Or have you been able to create an identity for yourself that exists separate and apart from your financial success?

2. What about the prestige quotient? For many, their careers are as much about the currency of “prestige” or “fame” or “notoriety” as they are about financial success? Do these aspirations have a similar impact on us?

3. Do you agree with Brackley that the net effect is that it takes us longer to figure out who we are and what we believe? Do you think it has impact on theology? What about the evangelical movement? In what ways do you see this at play there?

4. What about our criminal justice system? In what ways has our dislocation from our centers impacted that aspect of our culture? Father Greg Boyle talks about the idea of young gang members being “returned to themselves”? What do you think he means? Brackley talks the poor escaping from themselves?

**C. Characteristics of “Babylon”** - “Covetousness” ... the most straightforward path to security in our culture is the pursuit of wealth. “Status symbols” ... which satiate our deep need to belong and feel that we are valuable and valued. “The social ladder” ... the hierarchy of our

society that says some people are more important than others, and by gosh I want to be one of the important people (more human). “Arrogant pride” ... or looking down on others who are lower than us on that social ladder. “The outcast and the paragon” ... the measure of inhumanity (the homeless, the mentally ill, the LGBTQ, the prostitute). “Upward mobility” ... the goal of “success”. “Competition” ... undermines trust and community. “The Pyramid” ... institutional and societal. “Fear, mistrust, and coercion” ... the byproduct.

1. What are your thoughts on all of this? Is it possible to retain our current economic and political system in a way that reverses all of this?

2. Are there benefits of the democratic capitalistic system? What are some examples?

3. How did you react to the idea that the “unimportant people” in our system become nameless and two-dimensional... no obligation owed to them; no “golden rule” bestowed upon them?

**D. Institutionalizing Inequality** - Brackley describes the irony of the expanding upper middle class in the United States... i.e., that in a system in which only a select few have expansive wealth and influence, they have limited political capacity to extract too much from the bottom. But that in societies expansive upper classes, the political power to extract more and more from those on the bottom expands, “indeed more is required to feed the needs of those at the top.”

1. This concept is so obvious and yet so foreign to me... to the point of being shocking... how did it hit you? Do you see how a society such as ours can be the most oppressive for those at the bottom, and yet at the same time the most stable?

2. What about the idea of a society that is half slave, half free? Do you agree? If so, what do you think we should do about it? If not, why? As Brackley says, there has to be a better way.

3. What are some other examples of institutionalized inequality?

**E. Walk On!** - So as I was getting ready for this back half of Chapter 11, the lyrics from a song written by the greatest Contemporary Christian Band of our generation (and, arguably, the greatest all-around band of our generation), U2, came to mind. Mostly because I love U2 with a passion and will always look for a reason to use their songs in coming to a deeper understanding of life’s dilemmas, but also because Bono seems to be saying something very similar to Brackley here...

And love is not the easy thing  
The only baggage that you can bring...  
And love is not the easy thing  
The only baggage you can[’t] bring  
Is all that you can’t leave behind

And if the darkness is to keep us apart

And if the daylight feels like it's a long way off  
And if your glass heart should crack  
And for a second you turn back  
Oh no, be strong

Walk on, walk on  
What you got they can't steal it  
No, they can't even feel it  
Walk on, walk on  
Stay safe tonight

You're packing a suitcase for a place none of us has been  
A place that has to be believed to be seen  
You could have flown away  
A singing bird in an open cage  
Who will only fly, only fly for freedom

Walk on, walk on  
What you've got they can't deny it  
Can't sell it, or buy it  
Walk on, walk on  
Stay safe tonight

And I know it aches  
And your heart it breaks  
And you can only take so much

Walk on; walk on

Home, hard to know what it is if you've never had one  
Home, I can't say where it is but I know I'm going home  
That's where the hurt is

And I know it aches  
And your heart it breaks  
And you can only take so much

Walk on  
Leave it behind  
You've got to leave it behind

All that you fashion  
All that you make  
All that you build  
All that you break  
All that you measure

All that you feel  
All that you can't leave behind  
All that you reason  
All that you care (It's only time)  
And I'll never fill up all my mind  
All that you sense  
All that you speak  
All you dress up  
And all that you scheme  
All you create  
All that you wreck  
All that you hate

1. Did you know these lyrics? What lines stand out to you? What about this one: "You're packing a suitcase for a place, none of has been... a place that has to be believed to be seen"? What about the opening lines?

2. What are some examples where God has been revealed to you in seemingly secular contexts? In what ways is that what Brackley has talking about when he talks about downward mobility and the great cover-up?

3. What do you suppose Bono meant when he wrote "Home, hard to know what it is if you've never had one... Home, I can't say where it is but I know I'm going home... That's where the hurt is"?

**F. Solidarity in Humility, Suffering, Oppression and Poverty** - Brackley writes that "[t]o seek security through control of our surroundings dehumanizes us and destroys our environment." And to do so at the expense of others (or at the expense of our ability to live in solidarity with others) detaches us from who we really are as human beings. As Brackley puts it, "human dignity depends simply on being human, not on social status." And talks about how "a sense of being accepted ourselves enables us to recognize the humanity of our neighbor, especially the outcast."

1. What did you think of the notion that attachment to the poor and those who lack basic necessities detaches from our material possessions? And the opposite... that attachment to our material possessions detaches us from the poor... or really from anyone? How many people do you know who are so concerned about their possessions or their status that they don't really have any close human relationships or connections? Are you one of them? Or have you been one of them at some point in your life?

2. What about the way Brackley characterizes the threshold question not as "how much should we have" but rather ... "Do we feel at home among the poor?" "Do they feel comfortable in our homes?" "Or do our furnishings and possessions make them feel like unimportant people?"



**G. But is Communism Really the Answer?** - Dean thinks that the “solution to our global social crisis” is for the rich to become more like the poor and that “while some economic differences are legitimate, discrimination and misery are not”. He goes on to talk about students in a school in Peru who he thought were cheating until the teacher told him that were simply working together to find answers and that rising from poverty would require them to work together.

1. What is Dean getting at here? Do you think the Century of Solidarity that he posits is possible? What are some examples that you’ve seen? Do you see signs of hope? What do they look and how do you want to get involved?

2. Brackley thinks the answer can be found in humility: “To be genuine and avoid condescension, solidarity must be humility-in-practice. Like the gospel, Ignatius assigns humility a central role in our lives. For only in its soil can love take root, grow and bear fruit.” Do you agree? How would you characterize it?

### **XIII. Humility & Magnanimity (Chapters 12 and 13)**

**A. Humility and Other Virtues** - Ignatius believed that from humility, the Spirit leads us to all other virtues. And Brackley points out that humility flowers into solidarity with others to the point of sharing in their suffering.

1. In your experience, do you think this is true? What about empathy? Is that a virtue and does it flow from humility or is it the other way around?

2. What did you think of the stories of those who would not accept privileges, like Archbishop Romero, because they weren't offered to the poor? Do you agree that sharing the hardship and suffering of the poor can free us from fear? How does that look?

**B. Three Kinds of Humility** - Ignatius describes three types of humility. The first is a recognition that we are in need of salvation and its primary role in shaping our life decisions. The second is the kind of indifference (or detachment from material possessions and worldly successes and accolades) that we have discussed earlier in the book. These first two are described as "degrees of friendship with God" or of recognizing who we are relative and relation to God. The third type goes a step further and actually desires poverty or shame or suffering if that path leads one into the "mind of Christ and to walk with him."

1. What is your reaction to this? We talked last week about the need, in order to save our world, for "the rich to become poor"... the theory being that there just aren't enough resources for everyone to be rich. How would you integrate that concept into the third type of humility?

2. In your own words, how would you differentiate that third type of humility from the first two? In what ways does each type of humility have real world impacts?

3. Brackley says that "since serving God and our neighbor brings hardship and rejection, we must be free to embrace them" and that in doing so we can "escape the gravitational field of narcissism". What do you think he means and what has been your experience in this regard? How are humility, empathy and narcissism connected?

4. As you think about what is going on in the world today, (e.g., the climate emergency, the scourge of police brutality, the dysfunction of our politics, the plague of homelessness, etc.) in what ways do you see those problems connected to humility, empathy and narcissism? In what ways could an orientation of the "rich becoming poor" help solve them?

**C. The Election** - If you recall in Chapter 10 we talked a bit about the election as part of the spiritual exercises, although it was referred to there as "The Two Standards". This is where we choose God or no God, good or evil, etc. Dean brings us back to this idea to wrap up Chapter 12, but ties the idea of election into the idea of seeking poverty. As he says, "only someone who is ready for privation and persecution can 'hear' such a call and respond generously." The first two types of humility (i.e., recognition of one's reality relative to God and indifference to worldly "riches") are believed by Ignatius to be pre-requisites for proceeding to the election, while the third kind of humility is the ideal disposition.

1. Stepping back a bit into the process of the spiritual exercises, assuming Ignatius is correct, in what ways would you feel inhibited in starting the exercises because of it? In what ways do you feel free to jump in?

2. Thinking about these ideas of humility being a precursor to spiritual and religious development and realization, in what ways has our predominantly Protestant Christian ethic skewed our politics in a way that has been the direct cause of many of the problems we talked about in Question 4 in Part B above?

**D. Underdeveloped Selves** - We read about Valerie Saiving's belief that the primary nemesis of women is the "underdevelopment or negation of the self"; whereas the primary temptation of men is pride. While recognizing the problem, Brackley seems to take issue with the idea that this is primarily gender-specific. Rather, Brackley believes that the underdeveloped self is a problem that persists among all who are oppressed or humiliated. He goes on to say that many men also "clip their wings" and allow others to claim their mantle for change. "Weakness leads us to resent, and disparage, the values of the strong, to carp against authorities rather than engaging with them constructively."

1. What are your observations in this regard? Have you struggled to speak up against those who appear strong or in positions of authority over you?

2. Do you agree with Brackley that the issue isn't necessarily gender-specific and that it is more driven by social pecking order or even psychological predisposition?

3. What are the implications of the resentment that he talks about and the inability to engage constructively? In what ways do our current political and religious paradigms reflect this? How does magnanimity help us here?

**E. Loving vs. Fearful Humility** - Brackley talks about a type of humility that follows from "a fixation on [one's] moral poverty that they feel abandoned by God."

1. What were your reactions to this idea? Do you resonate with the idea of an "enemy" sowing seeds of desolation, or tempting you with "vain glory", or confusing you into believing that it would be presumptuous to assume that your good works are the result of God working in you?

2. In what ways is this a "fear with the appearance of humility" as Brackley describes it? Do you agree that it can lead us down a path of believing that God has abandoned us? Have you experienced the kind of undermining of your trust in God and/or your self-esteem in the way that Brackley describes?

3. Brackley says that in these times, fear-based humility is the last thing we need and that we should instead "lift ourselves up, recalling the good that God has worked in us." Do you agree? "The enemy tries to make some people see defects where there are none, in order to harass them and even drive them to desperation."

**G. Resentment** - “[Resentment] is the typical temptation of the underdog, the vanquished, and the political left.” Brackley describes a hypothetical involving an opera fan and a hunter (I’m assuming most of us relate to the opera fan) ... in which the opera fan is resentful of a party full of hunters, NASCAR fans and NFL buffs; whereas the hunter is resentful of the “cultured” fans of opera. “How could anyone genuinely like this stuff???” Brackley describes resentment as “the masked and muted desire to prevail over one’s stronger rival.”

1. What were your thoughts here? Brackley writes: “The nightly news confirms that greed, prestige, and arrogant pride has lost none of its destructive power today. But that is not the only threat to a generous life. False humility and excess caution foster sins of omission and block creative action. Tragically, the children of light pursue their goals with less zeal than the children of this age (cf. Luke 16:8).”

2. Have you experienced the kind of jealousy that Brackley is describing... “the sublimated spirit of revenge, the masked and muted desire to prevail over [your] stronger rival”? Can that be a good thing? What happens to your own soul and well-being when, as Brackley notes, it denigrates the values of our rivals and the exaltation of their opposites? What are some other areas in which you have found you or those in your social circles idealizing some and devaluing others?

3. Brackley writes: “Ressentiment is different: it denigrates genuine values, distorting moral perception and judgment. The frustrated desire for revenge recoils on the resentful, poisoning their moral life.”

**H. Nietzsche’s Take** - He believed that “*ressentiment*” had given birth to Christianity - according to Brackley, he saw it as a “celebration of defeat, weakness, failure and death; while disparaging strength, life, creativity and success” or “slave morality”.

1. Do you agree? If not, what do you suppose caused Nietzsche to develop this framework? What do you see as potentially legitimate aspects of his perspective?

2. Do you agree with Brackley that Nietzsche failed to appreciate the awakening of dignity? How does that play in our understanding of his views... and, more importantly, in the role that humility, dignity and resentment or *ressentiment* play in our lives?

3. How is the example of Jesus informative in understanding where Nietzsche was right... and wrong? How to go forward from here??? As Brackley says: “The force of evil is like water cascading down a hillside. If we successfully block the torrent in the major downhill channel of riches-honors-pride, it will seek alternative routes, especially the underground channels that are harder to detect.”

**I. Magnanimity** - Brackley believes that, while in Ignatius time the primary temptation was honor and status, that our primary temptation in modern times is acceptance or a fear of rejection. In response, he believes the antidote is magnanimity. “The magnanimous person is, literally, a great-souled individual, an expansive spirit.”

1. “With appropriate self-esteem and a realistic sense of their talents, great-hearted individuals think big. They refuse to bog down in trivia. Unperturbed by minor grievances, indifferent to the “trinkets” of wealth and status, they are spontaneously generous, even prodigal, the opposite of the stingy, shrunken soul.” What are your thoughts here? Are you inspired to think big?

2. What do you think Brackley means when he says “without humility, we elbow others aside[, but] without magnanimity, we bury our talent in a napkin”? “Magnanimity” means “generosity” or “someone who shows an over-sized spirit through acts of nobility or bravery”.

## XIV. Life in the Spirit (Chapter 14)

**A. Decision Making** - According to Ignatius's foundation, "all our thoughts, words and actions should be directed toward the single goal of God's Reign." Discernment and decision-making, as Brackley puts it, is a matter of "character and sensitivity, of becoming the person we should be." Brackley also points out the difference between decision-making and discerning right from wrong.

1. Thinking about the circumstances that have surrounded Darren's and now John's firings by the Long Beach Church of Christ, in what ways do you see elders confusing the process of discerning right from wrong and decision-making? Do you think it has been affected by the prevalent faith paradigm of Protestant churches in America (i.e., the Church's primary role is make us all aware that we are sinners in need of salvation, that Jesus is the only path to salvation, and that the job of the Church is to make people understand and follow the path), as over against what Brackley is describing as a paradigm of discernment (i.e., being facilitators on a journey of self-awareness where we "come to terms" with the evil in the world and in ourselves, empty ourselves of pride and self-interest, and from there make decisions about the best way to bring about the goal of God's reign)?

2. In what ways have the norms and moral traditions of the churches you have been a part of helped you in the process of discerning right from wrong? In what ways has that been helpful in your faith walk? In what ways has that been harmful? What about the process of decision-making, or "becoming the person [you] should be"? In what ways have churches helped you in that process?

3. In what ways do the decisions we make as institutions have long term affects on the congregations they are imposed upon? In what ways is institutional over-simplification of moral decisions of right and wrong problematic? What about on an individual level?

Brackley writes, "[a]ccording to the Foundation, our vocation is to choose 'that which is more conducive to the goal for which we are created'. When love becomes the measure of morality, the sky opens above us, a wide-open space of possible actions. But beyond the moral minimum, a curious thing happens. The demands of love grow boundless as we awaken to concentric circles of human need, environmental crisis, and death-dealing policies—especially today, when we are exposed to suffering and cruelty on a global scale by the communications revolution and burgeoning travel. ... In the end, beyond techniques and criteria, discernment is a matter of character and sensitivity, of becoming the person we should be."

**B. Re-orientation** - As noted above, historically, churches have been places oriented around the primary goal of telling believers first that they are sinful and condemned to eternal damnation, but that the church will show them a path to eternal salvation. That was not Jesus' model, however. He instead asked what do his followers need, offered it to them, then showed them how to be returned to themselves in receiving it in His name.

1. Have you seen or felt (or even been aware of) this paradigm in your own faith walk? How has it impacted you? How has it impacted others? Have you seen hearts hardened as a result of this?

2. Have you been taught or considered the paradigm that Brackley is talking about? That is, a paradigm in which we “awaken to concentric circles of human need” and then discern how best to meet those needs? How do you think we should go about the process of deciding which needs to meet? And in what ways has our historical practice of “church” been antithetical to that?

Brackley writes: “To stagnate in pure obedience to laws, authorities, or abstract ideals and fail to assume responsible freedom is a form of self-indulgent narcissism (see Hebrews 6:1-2).”

3. What role should the Church play in making the moral decisions that Brackley talks about regarding right and wrong? And what should the Church be teaching about the consequences of acting in a way that is inconsistent with the moral law? What should be the Church’s role in teaching how to discern the areas of need that we should be focused on (i.e., going beyond moral minimum so to speak)?

**C. The Importance of the Spirit** - Brackley says that the Gospel “turns the wide-open space behind moral minimums into the space of freedom and gratuity, where we follow neither flesh nor abstract ideals, but the Spirit.”

1. What does he mean by this? In your experience, in what ways do churches encourage and/or discourage a spiritual practice? What do you think they should do in that regard?

2. What would you suspect are some reasons for not encouraging a spiritual practice? And what are some of the negative labels that we often ascribe to it?

3. Have you developed a spiritual practice? What does it look like? What are some of the benefits you have experienced it? What is the nexus that Brackley is making here relative to the process of discernment?

## XV. More Rules for Discernment (Chapter 15)

**A. Consolation** - Brackley begins by reminding us that for Ignatius, consolation is “inner peace, spiritual joy, hope, faith, love, tears, and elevation of mind, all of which are gifts of the Holy Spirit”. I would add that in my own experience, consolation also requires a recognition of our own reality and the truth of the world around us (Brackley points this out in one of the first chapters of his book). “God guides people day by day through the consolation of the Spirit - provided they are internally free, that is, provided that, despite their weakness, they want to live by compassion, no matter what the cost.”

1. What did you think of Brackley’s description of “indiscreet zeal” (or actions taken in what appears to periods of consolation that are actually dangerous and misleading) and “misplaced inhibition” (or times where sincere action toward consolation peters out due to false humility)? Have you had experiences like this or witnessed them in others?

2. Brackley says that being guided by God day by day through the consolation of the Spirit requires that we are internally free... that, despite our weakness, we want to live by compassion. What do you think he means by this? What kind of harm can be done when people are not internally free? Do you see that playing out in the Long Beach Church situation? What about in other similar situations in other Churches?

**B. All that Glitters is not Gold** - Brackley points out that God gives consolation (or “true joy and spiritual delight”) and permits desolation (which presumably is carried out by the enemy... “to work against it ... false reasons, subtleties, and persistent fallacies”). He also says that the enemy also induces consolation and manipulates it.

1. What do you think Brackley means when he says “it is the proper for the Creator’ alone — as proprietor — to touch the soul directly” and that only God can produce “consolation without prior cause”? Brackley says that “without cause” means “joy and peace unprovoked by any creature or any activities on our part” so it just sort of comes to us I suppose. It is not to be read literally, just that it “appears suddenly and without apparent antecedents.” What are your experiences in this regard?

2. Consolation with prior cause is a bit more tricky, however, it is the type of consolation we engage in most frequently (through prayer, meditation, contemplation, other spiritual exercises, etc.) and those types of actions are designed to occasion consolation. Do you remember the exercise we did by closing our eyes and imagining being in a dark room with objects on a table in front of us? In what ways was that like the “prior cause” tapping “into that subterranean river and causes it to overflow into consciousness”?

3. What do you think of the enemy using the same actions and experiences to induce consolation to cause harm? How do we distinguish between the two? What about this idea of needing to study but being drawn to needs that someone else should respond to? Does that kind of example help?



4. Do you find that you have a tendency to over-extend at times, as Brackley describes? What role should wisdom or discretion play in “prioritizing values and virtues and how to apply principles under complex circumstances”? What are some real world examples of things you have been dealing with recently on this front?

**C. How to Decide** - As I read Brackley, I’m confused as to how we distinguish between consolation that is from the divine Spirit or the enemy. He says that the way to distinguish is if the “beginning, middle, and end of our thought-progression is sound and leads toward what is good”, then it is from the divine Spirit. But if our thoughts lead us to do something that is evil or distracting or less good than what we had previously set out to do, then it is from the enemy.

1. Is it really that simple? Isn’t the whole point of discernment to determine what is good and what is evil... and even maybe what is best in any situation? Is there more here that we are missing? What about the ideas of inner peace vs inner turmoil and anxiety? Can’t good decisions ultimately lead us to anxiety and don’t some of them create turmoil... like selling everything I have and giving to the poor, for example?

2. Brackley seems to be saying, and I’ve heard some therapists say this about things like narcissistic abuse, that you know it in your gut... or you know it when you see it... a vague feeling that a stranger is in our house. The Holy Spirit “touches persons sweetly, lightly, and gently”. What are your thoughts on this? Even here, isn’t it possible that the Holy Spirit sometimes tries to jolt us out of our senses? What kinds of things has Brackley said about spiritual experiences and meditation that might be able to help here? We will also delve a little more deeply into them in the next chapter.

3. In addition to the individual, the impacts of consolation and desolation (both from the Spirit and the Enemy) can impact organizations as well. Brackley points to a church where the founder was clearly divinely inspired, but the movement itself can be turned to be complacent or even demonic. What are some examples of this in your own experience at the church community level and/or the national/state level?

## XVI. Three Ways to Make Decisions (Chapter 16)

**A. Spirit as Guide... and Some Outside Help** - Brackley writes “in the open field of creative generosity, beyond moral minimums, the Spirit is our principal guide, and discernment is a kind of dancing with God.” He also says that unless we have reached the third type of humility (i.e., actually desiring poverty or shame, which we talked about in Chapters 12 and 13), that we run the risk that fear of privation and rejection will hinder our ability to discern and properly understand God’s communication with us. Finally, he points out that it is a good idea to share the process of discernment with an experienced guide.

1. How many of you have worked with a spiritual director or a spirit-oriented therapist? What are some benefits that you have experienced from that? Do you have someone that you rely upon to know when your inner thoughts are truly from God and when they aren’t?

2. Do you think it’s something you are interested in? Have you found it difficult recently to find resources like this?

**B. Three “Times” for Making Decisions** - Brackley points out that the three ways in which God guides us are (i) first, by directly moving our will, (ii) second, by moving our feelings and (iii) third, by directing our reason. Each is appropriate depending on the state of our soul or “time”. He goes on to say that for Ignatius, the process of discernment is about “seeking and finding the will of God”.

1. What do you think of when you think of “God’s will”? Brackley says that, rightly understood, God’s will refers principally to God’s purpose of abundant life (rather than to norms or practical details). Do you agree? What has been your experience in this regard?

2. Had you considered, as Brackley point out, that it’s more important for us simply to be “guided by the life-giving Spirit” than it is to discern this thing or that thing and then do it? How does that inform the process of discernment? What about the idea of God’s purpose being our freedom?

3. What about the three “times” or processes for discernment? Have you experienced having your will moved the way Malia did (the high school senior who chose a religious life while at a retreat)?

4. What about the second time or the movement of your feelings? Have you experienced that? How would you describe the experiences of consolation and desolation that Brackley is talking about (the movement of feelings/will as opposed to thoughts and images themselves)? How does repetition play into this? How does having an experienced guide help?

5. Finally, what about discernment through reason? Why do you suppose it’s the most appropriate form for communal discernment? Do you think you can properly experience this third type of discernment without having experienced the first two? How would you say your church experiences have mirrored this?

**C. Reason-based Methods** - Brackley points out that discernment through reason is especially appropriate for communal based decision making. He says the best way to go about it is to list pros and cons, with the overarching theme that all decisions should be directed toward the service of God's reign. We then enter prayer, asking God to move our will toward the best option, weigh pros and cons, and then ask God for confirmation.

1. What were your reactions to this? What did you think of Ignatius' 10 criteria? How do these synch with Rolheiser's idea about "going upstream"?

2. Have you employed this method in the past... or other methods in communal decision-making? How have you found them to work? What do we do when no clear answer presents itself... either communally or individually?

3. What did you think of Rahner and Egan's observations that the second (or spirit-based) method is more reliable than reason-based methods? Do you agree that reason-based methods are really just means of confirming the spirit-based methods? Had you thought about the fact that, as Brackley puts it, "chronically undervalued in Western Christianity"? Do you think it's possible that the process of discernment *always* involves *all three* approaches?

**E. Thought Experiments** - Dean says that the three mental "cold showers" contemplated by the alternative method of decision-making ensure that our motives will be pure (i.e., the love that "descends from above").

1. What did you think of these (imagining giving a person you've never met before advice on what to do, imagining yourself on your death bed, imagining meeting Jesus and explaining your decision)? Have you done that before? Are there potential hazards that overlay that approach?

2. Have you had success in the past in offering these kinds of decisions up to God and seeking confirmation? How did that look? What do you think of Brackley's suggestion here? Is it realistic?

3. What is your reaction to Ignatius' view that we can know God's will simply by the fact that God desires our attention to the process and that we do our best? Does that bring you comfort? Does that tie in to the point we discussed last week that the most important part of discernment is the process of engagement with God through all of these methods than it is to get the perfect answer?

4. Given that we are seeking moral certainty as opposed to absolute certainty, how important is it that we maintain a spirit of humility and being open to other perspectives? What about the idea that we are seeking God's will "for now" and that it may change or evolve over time?

5. Brackley writes "personal discernment only discovers that *I* should do (or try to do) — not what Maria or Joe should do ... This frees me the need to coerce others in the name of my crusade..." In what ways have you found this concept lacking in Churches in the United States?

In what ways has the lack of this concept led to great harm? As Brackley points out, we need to “overcome lack of awareness and bias, and to foster ongoing growth in moral sensitivity and practical wisdom.”

## XVII. The Way of Truth and Life (Chapter 17)

**A. The Baseline** - Brackley seems to think that cultural and familial biases get in the way of our ability to truly understand truth and discern the best responses to it. He notes as well that good discernment requires more than retreats and discussions and points out three poles of experience that inform our decisions... (1) the world around us, (2) our inner life, and (3) our cultural word about the world.

1. Brackley talks about bias and a lack of awareness pose challenges in the process of discernment. He laments that so many decent people are simply unaware of the impacts of structural poverty, patriarchy, environmental crises, racism, child abuse, etc. How did you react to this? What about the idea that even Jesus struggled with it, at first not realizing that faith might exist outside of Israel? What about the idea that “intelligence is guided by interest”?

2. Do you agree that we need more than retreats, workshops and book groups in order to open our hearts and minds to the kinds of truths that could reconfigure our world? What are some ideas you can think of that would be helpful in that objective?

**B. Ten Touchstones for Discernment** - Brackley says sound discernment depends first, on facing reality (especially that of victims), second, on personal transformation and ability to recognize interior movements and, third, on identifying a community that can sustain an alternative vision. The ten touchstones are (1) reason and science, (2) personal transformation, (3) experience and praxis, (4) love and discipleship, (5) discerning interior movements, (6) “conscientization” which I think means developing our conscience, (7) utopian imagination, (8) community, (9) tradition, and (10) authority.

1. Looking back on the books we’ve been through in this group, what are some examples of the “reason and science” touchstone in our book group’s dynamic and culture? Brackley says we must “observe, read, remember, question, interpret, think and dialogue.

2. What do you think Brackley means when he says that we need personal transformation in order to attain “cognitive liberation”? Brackley says since life is a moral drama, understanding it requires “moral empathy”. Have you experienced that?

3. Brackley says that what we see depends on where we stand and that action affects understanding in a way that simply analyzing a situation can’t. We don’t so much think ourselves into a new way of acting as we need to act our way into a new way of thinking (to quote AA). What is your take on this? Do you have direct experience you can talk about here? Is it possible to act our way into a wrong way of being?

4. What does it mean to love one another? In what ways does immersing ourselves into the lives who are different than us help in this regard?

5. How would you describe the difference between the heart and the head in the discernment process? Have you found yourself becoming more aware of interior movements as we have made our way through this book? What did you think of the notion that storms of

emotions come and go and being able to witness them from a distance helps to understand them better the next time they appear?

6. What in the world does Brackley mean by “conscientization”? In what ways can it expose and eliminate bias? What do you think Brackley means by “anti-intellectual bias and short-sighted pragmatism”? Brackley says that awareness in this regard makes us uncomfortable (with what we own, with the industries we support, governments who perpetuate injustice, etc.).

7. What is your “utopia” (both in terms of the world you see and the world you hope for)? In other words, in the midst of all of the darkness, what are the lights that you see? Despite how bad things appear, what is your dream for how they can become? How to come up with dreams or visions that are “rooted in suffering and liberating action”?

8. Brackley believes good discernment depends on community that our “individualistic culture generates a climate of mortal relativism and naive sense of our self-sufficiency”. What are your thoughts and experiences in this regard? Can community have the opposite effect? How do we discern which communities are right for us?

9. What do you think of wisdom traditions? In what ways are they positive and in what ways are they negative? How do you go about discerning which ones to follow?

10. How do you view authority in the context in which Brackley is raising it? What are your experiences in this regard?

11. What did you think of Lonergan’s spin on the ten touchstones (i.e., attentiveness to reality, be intelligent, be reasonable, and be responsible)?

## XVIII. The Grace of Compassion (Chapter 18)

**A. The Cross-Bronx** - We are now moving into the penultimate week in the Exercises, during which we focus on shared suffering... with Jesus and with our fellow human beings. In this first chapter of that section, we will be focusing on the shared suffering of humanity. As Brackley writes, “[g]rieve[ing] over the crosses of the world ... gathers our fragmented selves, centers and heals us. ... We were made to share each other’s burdens.”

1. What are your thoughts on Brackley’s experience of meeting with friends on Friday evenings to read the New Testament with the Cross-Bronx Expressway roaring in the background? Notwithstanding the gravity of the events surrounding them, they would leave around midnight feeling renewed.

2. Why do you suppose Brackley was so moved (even driving home to him what is “really important in life and where the center of gravity of the universe lies”) by the murder of an innocent child? Have you had similar experiences? Recall that this happened in the midst of a deep crisis of faith for him.

3. How would you contextualize this in the midst of our current situation... a war in Ukraine, instability in Europe, ongoing racial-, gender- and LGBTQ-based oppression, poverty, political instability, etc? How does sharing in suffering look to you right now?

**B. Humanity Marching through History** - Brackley writes about the last century of human suffering (genocide, the Holocaust, nuclear bombs, war, poverty, racial injustice, etc): “This is all part of the long procession of humanity marching through history, trailing blood in the dust.” He says that while none of us can (or should) grasp its full dimensions, “we grow into our humanity by entering fully into it and allowing it to fashion us”.

1. Do you agree? What is your experience in this regard? If it is true, why do you suppose God made things this way?

2. What did you think of the example of Etty Hillesum, the woman killed at Auschwitz at age 29? She noted that it would be great danger to simply avoid seeing, feeling and remembering the human suffering that was playing out in front of them in the death camps. What do you think she meant when she wrote “most of us in the West don’t understand the art of suffering and experience a thousand fears instead”? “We cease to be alive, being full of fear, bitterness, hatred, and despair.”

3. What did Etty mean when she wrote “your sorrow must become an integral part of yourself, part of your body and your soul”? Do you find it noteworthy that a twenty-something could come to understand truth at this level? What does that teach us about the power of human experience as over and against theory and academics?

4. Etty writes “if you do not clear a decent shelter for your sorrow, and instead reserve most of the space inside you for hatred and thoughts of revenge — from which new sorrows will be born for others — then sorrow will never cease in this world and will multiply.” How does

“perspective” come into play here? And in what ways is a lack of it at the core of our current state of affairs?



## **XIX. Solidarity of God (Chapter 19)**

**A. Contemplating Christ's Passion** - Brackley lays out Ignatius' plan for contemplating Christ's suffering... The first step is to select a section of a story of the passion in the Gospels and focus on (1) the participants, (2) what they are saying, and (3) what they are doing. If the focus is the crucifixion, we also consider (1) what Jesus suffers, (2) how the divine hides itself in the process, and (3) how that suffering is for my sin. Then we reflect on each of these and respond in conversation with God and with Jesus, talking about our thoughts and feelings and asking for help in how to respond. The goal is to create empathy with Jesus.

1. Why don't we give this a try. Let's start with the garden in the Gospel of Mark (14: 32-42). Who are the participants? What are they saying? What are they doing? How do you suppose they are feeling? What words stand out that help you to form your conclusions?

2. What are your thoughts and feelings about the story? In what ways do you see suffering and sorrow and in what ways are you able to share in it?

3. Do you think it's possible to have empathy with Christ? How does that look for you?

**B. Did Jesus Die for Our Sins?** - Brackley seems to be struggling with the notion that God sent Jesus as a scapegoat to "placate the divine anger" primarily because of the fact that if that were the paradigm, it would call God's "glory" into question. He also points out that while human beings bore the weight of sin before Jesus came, they do so after (and right up until now) as well "as the news attests night after night".

1. What do you think of the notion that instead of the PSA model, that in Jesus "God has drawn near and joined humanity's procession, shouldering the consequences of our moral failings like the rest of us"? "The point is God's solidarity and love" ... what does this mean to you?

2. Brackley goes on to say in joining the human race and enduring the consequences of sin, Jesus wasn't paying our debts, but that God preferred to join with sinners and share with them the burden of sin. Had you thought of salvation in this way before?

3. In what ways do you think your inner-child is speaking to you at times as you try to unpack the meaning and import of all of this? In what ways can we train ourselves to be able to discern the different voices that speak to us in times of our greatest vulnerabilities (i.e., that voice of that inner-child, the voices of our ancestors, etc., as opposed to the voice of God)? What happens when you try to quiet the voice of the inner-child, or those inner-critics and demons... and just listen to the voice of God?

**C. Concealed Divinity** - Ignatius suggests that as part of contemplating the crucifixion we consider the fact that Jesus hid his divinity on the Cross. Brackley points out that this reveals greater splendor because it reveals complete solidarity with our weakness and suffering.

1. What are your thoughts on this? Why do you suppose this ignominious death became arguably “the most powerful symbol of all time”? How does the divine reveal its glory by hiding itself?

2. What about the idea that the “strongest obstacle to goodness is not brute force or cinder blocks but hearts that are cold and unmoved”? How is God more powerful by sharing our weakness?

## XX. Blessed are the Persecuted (Chapter 20)

**A. Paying a Price for Doing what's Right** - "They say no good deed goes unpunished." Brackley talks about the many ways that one can find "trouble" in our current times... opening a co-workers eyes to systemic racism, standing up for tenants' rights, etc. And he talks about the ways in which Jesus wanted to make a scene... by healing on the Sabbath as opposed to just asking folks to come back another day.

1. Why do you suppose it is that people in positions of power and privilege have such a hard time accepting that things need to change? Why do you suppose Jesus went about things in the way he did? Do you think he sought out trouble or do you think that it is just the nature of the work he was doing... or a little of both?

2. Have you had similar experiences in your life? What about times where you decided not to try to change things for fear of trouble? What about times when you decided not to try to change things because it was against your own interest to do so?

3. Do you agree with Brackley that persecution comes from spiritual principalities and forces... and not just other human beings? How does that look in your mind?

**B. Spirituality of Persecution** - Brackley advises that our spirituality needs to be grounded in the idea that persecution will always follow our attempts at bringing God's reign on earth. He points out five key elements to a spirituality... (1) that persecution is inevitable, (2) that we will be prepared for persecution, (3) that we rest in God's power, not our own, (4) that it produces consolation, (5) that it inspires boldness, (6) that it will teach us to love our enemies, (7) that it inspires creativity and (8) that it generates solidarity among victims and their allies.

1. Do you agree with these and what is your experience in this regard? What does it mean to suffer, die and be buried with Jesus? What does it mean to be glorified, raised up and live with him?

2. Do you have a tendency to avoid conflict and suffering or seek it out? How do motives play in here?

3. What about the advent season and suffering? Do you find it more important to advocate for justice and human dignity in the midst of the holidays? Is it more challenging for you to maintain a "spirituality of persecution" in times like this?

## XXI. Resurrection and the Spirit (Chapter 21)

**A. The Beginning of a New World** - In Chapter 21, Brackley asks us to envision ourselves in a scene shortly after the resurrection, maybe as Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene before the tomb, in order to grasp how the world has changed now that we have witnessed a risen Christ. How good triumphed over evil and death and how we share in that victory. How an abandoned woman with three small children can smile during one of her worst days; how the poor can have a fiesta; how the suffering smile.

1. Have you worked through and experienced this exercise.. of imagining yourself in that scene? How was it for you? In what ways do you see the “previously hidden divinity of Jesus now manifesting itself [to you] and others who believe”? In what ways does it bring consolation?

2. Do you think you (and others like you) are being deluded? Is it false hope? Are they or are you crazy? Do you agree with Brackley that they are not as crazy as they may seem? Why?

3. What comes to mind as you reflect on this passage from Brackley: “Christian faith affirms that in Jesus’ resurrection good triumphed over evil and death and that we share in that victory even now”?

4. What did you think about the fact that in Jesus’ time and before it, the hope of resurrection wasn’t the “fruit of a generic personal longing for immortality ... but a hunger and thirst for the justice of God on behalf of innocent victims”? Had you thought about resurrection in that context? Do you think the hope of resurrection is for everyone... just those who believe... just those who behave a certain way... just those who are innocent victims?

**B. The Holy Spirit** - Brackley points out that the Spirit is not referred to often by Ignatius in constructing the exercises... Brackley thinks there are reasons to explain that fact, but that the “Spirit is clearly operative, even pervasive, in Ignatius’s vision and practice.”

1. What does it mean to have the spirit of God and the spirit of Jesus “leaven the mass of humanity with the divine life”? Who do you think has been leavened with this life? Have you? Brackley says that those “who allow the Spirit to reproduce in them [Jesus’] way of thinking are those who have been leavened with the divine life. Is it something we are necessarily aware of?

2. In what ways does sharing in suffering complete the picture of God and Jesus leavening us with divine life? Brackley alludes to this in Chapter 21 when he talks about those who have less to lose and less to cling to as having the interior freedom to receive the kind of consolation that demonstrates the risen Christ living and breathing in and through us.

**C. Recognizing the Risen One** - Brackley seems to think that one of the ways we experience the risen Christ (even if we don’t realize it) is through seasons of unexplained consolation and happiness. In his view, these experiences point us to resurrection life.

1. Had you thought about it that way before? Are there other explanations? “[T]he resurrected one is here, consoling the afflicted, producing hope against hope and the energy needed to struggle against the odds.”

## XXII. Consolation, Action and Liberation (Chapter 22)

**A. Christ's Spirit in Us; Liberating Us into Action** - Brackley talks about the man imprisoned in Alabama for protesting our country's military policy in Latin America, about the disciples more broadly who were crushed by Jesus' death and consoled by his resurrection, about the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. In all of them, Brackley believes that the burning sensation we feel in those moments is God and the Spirit, the risen Christ, living in us. But he goes on to point out that consolation, as used by Ignatius and in the Bible, encompasses more than comfort in times of sorrow; it is also clarity and zeal for mission, inspiration to act, and joy and courage under fire.

1. As you think about your own faith journey, in what ways have you experienced this type of consolation? In what ways do you feel "clarity and zeal for mission, inspiration to act, joy and courage under fire"?

2. Do you agree that consolation and desolation are contagious?

**B. The Prophetic Spirit of Communal Consolation** - Brackley writes that church communities, when functioning properly, are themselves God's consolation brought about through the risen Christ. And he goes on to say that the church is where a "community of equals happens".

1. In what ways have you seen this to be true in your church communities? What are some examples? In what ways have churches failed in this regard?

2. Do you feel challenged to make this type of consolation a reality in your own church community? In what ways do you see yourself as a prophet in bringing that about? In what ways is the risen Christ, living in you, behind that? What is your mission??? In what ways do you see God working through you in order to bring it about?

**C. A Life of Liberation and Action** — For Brackley this "community of equals" is a place where exiles are liberated and restored to Jerusalem in "justice and prosperity" (see Isa. 40:1; Isa. 40:4; Isa. 49:13; Isa. 51:3; Isa. 52:9). Handel opens "Messiah" by directly quoting the passage from Isaiah. The Gospel of Luke intimates that the ministry of Jesus represents the fulfillment of these texts from Isaiah. And Brackley seems to be saying that the resurrection represents the ultimate fulfillment of this type of consolation (i.e., the human body, destined to death and decay, is now fully restored in the permanency of Jesus' resurrected body)... the beginning of God's kingdom of justice and peace.

1. How does this idea of that the resurrection represents the culmination of God's ultimate consolation (of God's comfort for God's people... of the liberation and restoration of God's people... of the coming of the community of equals); how does that change your understanding of the birth of Jesus... of the Cross of Jesus?

2. What does Brackley mean by a "community of equals"? What does that mean to you? How do you think it should be lived out today?

3. What about the idea of being “consoled for mission”? What does that mean? What is the great commission? See Matt 28:16-20. What is your mission in light of that? Are you an “activist” or a “passivist”... or something else? A Zen maxim... “So trust in God as if all the success of affairs depended on yourself, and nothing on God. Nevertheless, so work in them as if you were accomplishing nothing in them, and God everything.”

## XXIII. Learning to Love Like God (Chapter 23)

**A. Finding God in All Things; Grateful Love and Service** - Brackley starts this last chapter by referring to three well-known Ignatian catch-phrases: “Find God in all things”, as “contemplatives in action” in close “familiarity with God.” We are then reminded of two truths: first, “that love ought to be expressed in deeds more than words” and, second, that “love consists in a mutual sharing of goods; that is, the lover gives and shares with the beloved what he or she has, or out of what he or she has or can do, and vice versa.”

1. Had you thought about the idea that God’s love means contemplating God’s deeds? What about the idea that love recognizes, above all, the dignity of those the world despises ... listens to their stories”? “The purpose of the Contemplation is to arouse love in us; to become so aware of God’s love that we are moved to respond by loving in the same way.”

2. Do you find yourself so overwhelmed with God’s blessings that it’s “only reasonable” to offer to God in return everything you have? All of your liberty... your memory... your whole will? Does it help to look at your life retrospectively as Brackley suggests... as they do in AA? How does gratitude more generally come into play here? In what ways can our prosperity and/or privilege rob us of perspective in this regard?

3. Are there times when you are able to see God in everything and everyone... making each be what it is? What are the conditions in which that experience is most likely to occur for you? What about the opposite... where it’s harder for you to see that or to fail to even contemplate it? What about the idea that God is laboring through those things to bring you consolation?

4. Do you agree that “all good things and gifts descend from above”? How does that look for you? What do you think of the four exercises ... (a) recalling our own blessings; (b) that God is present in all things; (c) God labors through all things for my own good; and (d) that all good things descend from above?

**B. God and Science and the Meaning of Christmas** - At some point, as science became more and more accessible to average human beings, the need to reconcile biblical readings and understandings with scientific observation became paramount among many religious scholars. Brackley points out how a Newtonian or Einsteinian view of science, combined with a literal inerrant reading of scripture, made it difficult to reconcile reality with religion. But he points out that now that we are developing a deeper understanding of the science of the Universe, and becoming more open in our reading of scripture, the two seem to be reconciling a bit.

1. Does your view of science make it difficult for you to see “God in all things”, at least the God we come to understand in scripture? Does it make it challenging for you to believe in literal interpretations of biblical stories... the creation narrative, the flood, the parting of the Red Sea, the resurrection of Jesus?

2. What did you think of Brackley’s idea that broken aspects of nature point us to God as much as the more beautiful aspects? “Every butterfly and blade of grass reveals the God of Jesus,



but only if we can recognize God in broken human beings as well.” In what ways is this the real story of Christmas? “Where Are You Christmas”?

*“Where are You, Christmas; why can’t I find You; why have You gone away;  
 Where is the laughter; You used to bring me; why can’t I hear music play;  
 My world is changing; and I’m rearranging; does that mean Christmas changes too;   Where  
 are You, Christmas; do You remember; the one You used to know;  
 I’m not the same one; see what the time has done; is that why You have let me go;  
 Christmas is here; everywhere oh oh; Christmas is here if you care;  
 If there is love; in your heart and your mind; you will feel like Christmas all the time;  
 I feel You, Christmas; I know I’ve found You; You never fade away;  
 The joy of Christmas; stays here inside us; fills each and every heart with love;  
 Where are You, Christmas; fill your heart with love”*

A final quote from Brackley:

*“We can avoid the God of Jesus in the sunsets and flowers, if we try, but not in the poor who place us unavoidably before that God. If we cannot recognize God’s face there, it is doubtful that any butterfly on earth will reveal the God of Jesus to us. When we can find God in our jails and AIDS hospices, we can find God coming to meet us everywhere else. We all suspect that the world is a crueler place than we dare to admit. Since the poor confront us with this evil, it is tempting to avoid them. But if we let their stories break our hearts, they can open our eyes [and our hearts] to marvels we scarcely dared imagine. They reveal the revolution of love that God is bringing about in the world.”*

... and more to the point, when we can find God (or Christmas) in our own suffering and in the shared suffering of those we love and know most closely, we find a God who never abandons us, who always points us in the right direction (i.e., back to God and God’s purpose in our lives), and who we see and come to know in everything and everyone around us (the beautiful, the hideous, the uplifted and the broken). As Brackley points out, “we perceive daily resurrections only if we open our eyes to the crucifixions.” Thanks be to God, whose grace and mercy makes all of this possible. And for Jesus, in whom we see all of it.