

Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion

Sara Miles
Lunch and Stretch Discussion Guide
Fall 2020

I. Prologue and Chapters 1-4

A. An Unlikely Convert - a “blue-state, secular intellectual; a lesbian; a left-wing journalist with a habit of skepticism”. Miles was moved by “the eternal and material core of Christianity: body, blood, bread, wine, poured out freely, shared by all” and had discovered “a religion rooted in the most ordinary yet subversive practice: a dinner table where everyone is welcome, where the despised and outcasts are honored”.

1. What about Sara’s story do you find most compelling? Do you see the power of the Holy Spirit moving in and around her conversion story? Sara refers to it as “the Gospel that moved me, the bread that changed me, and the work that saved me, to begin a spiritual and an actual communion across the divides”.

2. Do you find it ironic that there were so many barriers that had to be overcome in order for Sara to find her faith? What about her statement that she was “claiming a faith that many of [her] fellow believers want to exclude [her] from?”

3. What about Sara’s background and story made her the perfect conduit for a new kind of faith paradigm? “It turned out that the prerequisite for conversion wasn’t knowing how to behave in a church, or having a religious vocabulary or an a priori “belief” in an abstract set of propositions: It was hunger, the same hunger I’d always carried.” “I wound up not in what church people like to call ‘a community of believers’ — which tends to be code for ‘a like-minded club’ — but in something huger and wilder than I had ever expected: the suffering, fractious, and unboundaried body of Christ.”

4. Sara wrote this back around the time that Obama was elected president. Much has happened since then. Do you see reason for the same hope that Sara expresses in the midst of her frustrations over the state of the Church? Or do you think there is more reason for despair today? As Sara notes, “[i]t may seem deluded to assert that people can still be fed with this ordinary yet mystical bread, so besmirched and exhausted and poisoned by centuries of religious practice, in ways that will change our own real lives, not to mention the world, for the better.” In Sara’s view Christianity “proclaims against reason that the hungry will be fed, that those cast down will be raised up, and that all things, including my own failures, are being made new.”

B. The Importance of Family - Even though raised as an avowed atheist, Sara's grandparents on both sides were strong Christians... missionaries and ministers. Sara clearly has a fondness for them and the role they must have played in shaping her faith, noting that "Girls who had obediently bowed their heads in pews became, abroad, imbued with new authority: white, foreign, representatives of a powerful country and a mighty church. And though teaching children and caring for the sick in a strange country might be lonely and grueling, faith, for these young women, meant hurling their own bodies into action, "joining the band," as my grandmother wrote, of the brave and the true."

1. What lessons can we learn from Sara's grandparents? What stands out to you about their stories? And what stands out to you about how those stories may have impacted Sara in her moment of conversion? What do you think led to Sara's years of wandering?
2. What lessons can we learn from Sara's parents? Why do you suppose they were so adamantly opposed to Christianity... or really any faith? What aspects of the "White" church that we learned about in Cone's book do you think had an impact on the way Sara's parents viewed the church and their faith?
3. In many ways, Sara's story about Robert (up in Chapter 4), her boss at her first restaurant job, is a story about family. He sort of took her under his wing and clearly played a very critical role in her life... much the way family does. Who are some people who have served similar roles in your life? In what ways, did that help you become the person you are today? In what ways was it a source of your own faith foundation?

C. A Pilgrimage of Sorts and "Going Upstream" - When Sara left on a trip to Mexico City to help the poor and the oppressed, she had no idea it would be the beginning of a process that would ultimately lead first to her professional career and then, eventually, to her conversion.

1. In what ways did Sara's experience in Mexico City, and the Corpus Christi Massacre represent the ideas of going upstream that we read about in Ron Rolheiser's book? Had you heard about the Corpus Christi Massacre previously?
2. What do you think happened in churches in the United States that led to a scenario in which a woman so committed to serving the poor (in the ways that Jesus had commanded) could be so turned off by Christianity? Do you think the idea of reaching the lost and saving souls for Jesus is a more important goal than serving the needs of the poor? Are the two ideas necessarily contradictory?
3. How do you think God feels when someone finds a deep abiding faith through their individual compulsions to serve the poor? ...as compared to someone serving the poor because their faith would compel them to (even if begrudgingly)? Is there a difference?
4. When talking about work as a restaurant worker, Sara says "I had no idea then that feeding people would not just be a way to earn a paycheck but would become a central

part of my life, informing the way I experienced friendship and community, political organizing, and eventually belief. It would train me in physical suffering, sustain me with the most basic satisfaction of making a meal for someone, and, in midlife, bring me full circle to a strange church kitchen where I'd bang pots around on a six-burner range." As you reflect on this part of her story, what stands out to you? In what ways is food connected intimately to our faith... to our mood... to our ability to connect to other human beings... to our own self-confidence... our own sense of self-worth?

D. Raging Against the Machine. Sara is adamantly non-conformist. Her informal education made her distrustful of dogma of all kinds... "I couldn't swallow the official party line of the left any more than I could automatically trust a government spokesman." "To figure out what was really happening behind the clichés, I'd learned, meant a practice of looking not at the center but at the edges of things—at the unlikeliest and weakest people, not the most apparently powerful. It meant asking lots of stupid questions, making room for inconvenient facts that didn't fit a schema, and trying to remain honest about what I didn't know."

1. Do you find it ironic that as you learn more and more about this Atheist's development as a person and a professional, that her path and approach so closely mirrored that of the life that Jesus asks of us?
2. Should all be as distrustful as Sara is of dogma, of party line, of clichés? In what ways does questioning help our faith? In what ways is this relevant during election season?

E. The Dirty (and Beautiful) Business of Being Human. Much of Sara's world view seems to have been shaped by her time as a restaurant worker, and Robert seems to have been a big part of that process, and also as a reporter. "When I pulled on my slightly starch-stiff whites, the uniform changed me from an individual, with my own tedious history, to a ritual figure, one of millions of restaurant workers, with a time-honored and predictable role. I'd learn the same thing again as a reporter: In the middle of a riot or a battle or a government press conference, a woman with a notebook and pen and a determined look can go anywhere."

1. I think Sara would likely agree that one of the great problems of our current society is the constant desire to separate ourselves from other humans... to have more... to be more... to do better. How does this resonate with you as you think about our past conversations about serving the poor, about racism and lynching, about the oppressed, and about how power is wielded in our society? How do you think our world would look if everyone in positions of power was required to have served a stint as a restaurant worker?
2. Reflect on the last paragraph of Chapter 4, in which Sara says "I learned solidarity, the kind that only comes through shared bodily experience, sweating and lifting and hauling side by side with others. I learned from watching customers that the rituals of even the plainest or most cynically prepared dinner could carry unconscious messages of love and comfort. And at the end of a rush, when I sat down with the kitchen staff and waiters, I learned how central food is to creating human community, what eating

together around a table can do. As a wise bishop would tell me, years and years later, in words I couldn't possibly have grasped back then, "There's a hunger beyond food that's expressed in food, and that's why feeding is always a kind of miracle."

II. Chapter 5

A. Nicaraguan Revolutionary Wars - Miles notes that her time in Nicaragua as a researcher and reporter during various wars and outbursts in many ways was similar to her time as a restaurant worker. As she puts it, "I also knew how much it had changed me simply to be immersed in regular life with people who weren't like me, to share food and conversation and crowded buses." Sara says that she learned more from being on the ground with folks, in the middle of things, than she did from studying religious or political doctrine ... even though both were very much at the core of what was going on down there.

1. Can you think of similar scenarios in your own life or in stories you've learned from others, where the narrative from afar was quite different than what was really happening on the ground? Are narratives ever really capable of conveying the entire story? And do you think they are helpful or not?
2. Have you ever had your understanding about a particular issue changed, simply by getting to know someone actually living through it? What are some examples?
3. What seems to have driven Sara to remain engaged in (and to even become almost romantically drawn to) the wars in Central America, seems to have been her "intensity of connection that collective experience" provided. Have you had similar experiences... even if less intense and life-threatening? What have they meant to you over the years?

B. Seeking Truth; Not an Agenda - About her time on the Nicaraguan birdcages, as she refers to them, Miles notes that "[w]hat mattered to [her], increasingly, were the details: the how and the why behind the land mines and psychological operations manuals, the Salvadoran death squads and the Nicaraguan contras." Among the truths she discovered... that people (no matter how impoverished or embattled) figured out a way to feed her... and many of the poor around her seemed inextricably driven by their Christian faith.

1. What do you think Sara's point was in talking about her trip to interview the guerrilla army in the Philippines? Would you ever make a trip like that? Do you find it surprising that Sara was so willing to trust the many individuals who offered her food and shelter along the way?
2. How important is it to experience true "need" as part of our Christian walk? Do you think that had an impact on Sara's walk? What about the idea of food as "scarcity" as opposed to food as "cuisine"? Are we missing something in a culture that focuses and experiences almost exclusively the latter?

3. Reflecting on her interview with Martin-Baro , she says the “power of the cross—the idea that suffering for others can lead to new life—was for me then, as it was for the unbelievers Saint Paul wrote about, and remains for rationalists today, “folly.”” Do you agree and, if so, why do you suppose that is?

4. Did you find it interesting that the Jesuit priests, when discussing the ideas of Democracy, reacted negatively to the idea of women deciding how the government should be run? What about Martin-Baro’s response that the people in a Democracy will make mistakes, but that “we should welcome them”?

C. Desperate Times; Acts of Desperation - Sara talks about a boy she sat next to on a flight to Cuba. He was extremely nervous, as he seemingly had never been on an airplane, and he was shocked when they flight attendant brought food (he had never seen packets of sugar and didn’t even know what they were). This boy had just joined the Sandinistas.

1. Reflecting on this, Sara writes, “[o]f course there was a lot of suffering in Central America, and predictably that suffering made lots of people ugly: crazy, dishonest, desperate, cruel. I knew why. I'd pretended not to understand Spanish so I wouldn't have to listen to a distraught taxi driver tell me about his son's death; I'd lied to a human rights lawyer so I could stay at home eating ice cream and reading a book instead of taking him to visit his clients; I'd told poor people I was broke.” How important is it when reflecting on a particular situation or circumstance to understand the circumstances that pre-dated it? Is this idea problematic in its tendency to explain away poor behavior?

2. Have you had similar experiences... where your first impression of someone changed once you understood where they had come from? How does the idea of mercy come into play here?

3. What do you think of how it shaped Sara... “over and over, I also saw how war created a community, a people, and how that community was nourished by gestures of sharing. It was sharing that didn't depend on personal intimacy, and a community that didn't depend on everyone's being friends; it foreshadowed what I would come to understand as church, at its best”?

D. The Impulse to Share. Sara believes that “[t]he impulse to share food is basic and ancient, and it's no wonder the old stories teach that what you give to a stranger, you give to God.” In describing her experiences as a reporter and correspondent in the wars of Central America and Southeast Asia, she points that while the specifics of how she was fed by others along the way didn’t necessarily matter, she remembers them with striking clarity. “The mineral taste of poor people's tortillas, their thick dough prepared with lime and scorched on an iron griddle. The slippery sweetness of mangoes. The chemical bite of bright red sodas; the funkiness of goat. Handfuls of gluey rice, spoonfuls of milky sherbet, cupfuls of spicy broth.”

1. Have you been to a third world country and experienced any of the tastes or smells that she describes so vividly? Do you agree that the idea of feeding a stranger is akin to giving that meal to God or Jesus? Why or why not?
2. Why do you suppose those experiences were so formative for Sara in her journey into faith? Do you think Sara may have found a truth that had just not been able to come through for her in the Christian teachings of her grandparents? Do you find it ironic that she learned these lessons in spite her parents' steadfast atheism?
3. What do you think of Sara's comment that the wars she had experienced taught her how helpless she was to save anyone? Is that a lesson all of us need to learn? What about the idea of letting go of shame in the process of trying to save or to help others? Sara writes "I'd have to learn to receive when I was proud and give when I was burned-out and poke around in strange places without knowing what I was going to uncover."

E. The Unquenchable Force of Life. Toward the end of Chapter 5, Sara talks about falling in love with Bob and the somewhat irrational decision to have a baby. It's what ultimately led to their return to the United States.

1. What lessons can be learned from the fact that Sara's irrational reaction to the despair, the violence, the hatred, the poverty that surrounded her... was to bring a new life into the world?
2. What does a baby being born in the midst of chaos provide to those who are living in it? Is there something spiritual or God-given about that?

II. Chapter 6

A. Life and Death - After having moved back to the US, Miles was forced to confront the realities of new life (in the birth and rearing of her newly born daughter) and death (literally, in the loss of friends and family to disease and war, and figuratively, in the loss of her relationship with Bob). The late 1980's and early 1990's were rough politically and personally for her (and many others). In the midst of her pain, Sara was anchored by tending to the needs of her young daughter - physical and emotional.

1. What strikes you about the juxtaposition of those elements (life and death) in this period in Sara's walk? What do you think about Martha's advice about crying... that there are "way worse things" like not crying, for example?
2. Sara talks about marginalized communities and, in particular, "formerly marginalized" gay people who found their voices in response to the AIDS crisis. What strikes you about that? When you think about the role of the Church and serving the marginalized, do you think we have done a good job, a poor job, somewhere in the middle? How do you think Sara would respond (both in terms of her experience in the LGBTQ community and in her experience with the poor and marginalized in Latin American cultures)?
3. How do you see God working in Sara's life as she was tumbling inexorably toward that moment at St. Gregory's?

B. First Communion - Sara claimed it was a “reporter’s habitual curiosity” that led her into the church that morning. She was completely unaware of all of the baggage associated with the structures of the Anglican Church or of churches more generally.

1. What do you think led Sara into that church that morning? Do you think her openness to God’s call was in part due to her lack of awareness of those structures? Do you think she would have been more drawn in if she had been (like how she was called into Central America in the midst of their political battles)?
2. What about the idea of open communion? In what ways have closed minded ideas about communion excluded people from communities of faith? What does it mean to say “Jesus invites everyone to his table”?
3. Reflecting on her conversion and the happen-stance way in which it played out, where do you think Sara stood with God immediately before she waked into St. Gregory’s? What would have happened if she had just resisted that impulse?

C. A Neurological “Short-Circuit” - About the moment of her first communion, when someone said that the bread she had just consumed was the “body of Christ”, Sara says that what she thought was happening at an intellectual level, as compared against what she knew she was experiencing at a spiritual and emotional level in that moment “utterly short-circuited [her] ability to do anything but cry”.

1. At what point does faith become something we can only experience and no longer explain? In what ways does describing faith in words that seem impossible to be true intellectually actually help us to contextualize something we are experiencing but can’t explain?
2. Have you had similar experiences... where your only response to an experience you to be so true but couldn’t explain rationally led you simply to cry? Why do you suppose that is? In what ways do we prevent that naturally human process from happening by placing entirely human parameters and limitations around the faith experience? In other words, in what ways does a closed communion or similar constraints in faith communities close those communities off from experience the full breadth of God’s love (leading the witness, I know)?
3. What do you think about Sara’s comment that she thought maybe she was having a “contact high” ... coming to faith because she had been surrounded so long in these Latin communities of strong believers? Is there something to that? Does it sometimes help us to have been around others and watch them contextualize and understand their own experiences in order to be able to contextualize and understand our own experiences?
4. How does love play into all of this? And how does that help us understand Sara’s conversion process? What are some examples? Sara says “For some inexplicable reason, I wanted that bread again. I wanted it all the next day after my first communion, and the next week, and the next. It was a sensation as urgent as physical hunger, pulling me back to the table at St. Gregory’s through my fear and confusion.”

D. A Life-Giving and Life-Affirming Mystery. Sara goes to great lengths to point out how crazy the idea of transubstantiation and communion. It is too crazy to be believed ... and sort

of gross. An idea that is totally against our social morays and those of the earliest Christians. And yet, she says “it was real”!

1. What do you think she means? What do you think about her struggles with her own mental capacity as she struggled with the paradox? Is it possible to answer this question without being overcome by the need to be logical about it?
2. Compare Sara’s experience at St. Gregory’s to Martha’s? How does this illuminate the many ways in which God is revealed to us? Why do you suppose Martha was more comfortable with the more generic version of faith exhibited at an AA meeting?
3. In searching for a church, Sara says about one of them “[w]hen it came time to take communion, I was unmoved by the dead white disks of wafers and the fussy little shot glasses full of grape juice, dispensed decorously to parishioners who knelt in line at an altar rail”. She goes on... “These were the kinds of churches my parents must have grown up in, I realized: where good manners ruled, the traditional authority of the clergy went unquestioned, and the body of God was draped decorously in an ironed white napkin.” What was your reaction to that? What about Sara’s background made her more open to the less formal version of communion she had experienced at St. Gregory’s?
4. What do you think about Sara’s comment that “[w]herever I went, I'd have problems as well as glorious epiphanies”?

IV. Chapter 7

A. The Sin of Certainty - In thinking about her first year at St. Gregory’s, Sara notes that “back then, I thought “believers” were people who knew exactly what they believed and had nailed all the answers...” But she came to realize that uncertainty is the heart of faith and that even when we are “certain” about anything, that certainty has a tendency to flicker on and off. Seeing the community of believers through her new eyes, her curiosity was nearly limitless and she was looking for the answers she had assumed all of the other believers already had.

1. What strikes you about Sara’s assumptions about the believers she encountered during her first several months at St. Gregory’s? Have you “nailed all of the answers”? What are some dangers in approaching faith in that way?
2. What about Sara’s friend, Jose Suarez? What about his expectations of being able to “hear God” caused a crisis of faith for him? Is that true in general about a transactionally-oriented faith paradigm?

B. A Legion of Cynics - Referring to her secular friends who were shocked that she started going to church, Sara says that, to them, church “was the most reactionary force in the world, anti-Semitic, misogynist, homophobic ... the Vatican ... the Crusades ... Jerry Falwell ... child-molesting priests ... Ralph Reed...” But she goes on to say “I'd hated, during the 1980s, being expected to defend left movements or revolutionary parties, even when they were screwed up.

I had no interest in defending another more fabulously corrupt institution.”

1. Sara had some pretty clear biases about Christians and her views of poor non-English speaking congregants were seemingly more charitable than that of middle-class evangelical Christians. Her closest friends at the time of her conversion also had a fairly non-charitable view of all Christians. Were any of those views or — — — [biases fair or justified? Were they harmful ... to Sara ... to others?
2. How would you have handled the situation with her secular friends? Would you have worried about them finding out you were a Christian?

C. What Do We Mean by “Pray”? - In her conversation with Jose about his life struggles, Sara told him that he should pray. When he asked her what she meant by that, Sara’s response was “I really don’t know. I don’t know what I believe or who I’m talking to. Sometimes I just try to stay open, sort of. Especially when it hurts. And I try to—I know this is corny—but I try to summon up thankfulness.”

1. What has prayer meant to you over the course of your faith walk? Has it been helpful? What does it mean to you today? What does it mean to “just try to stay open” in the context of prayer?
2. Jose’s recollection of Sara’s response was a bit different. He recalled that “it was incredibly earnest. [Sara] said prayer was like having this intense, profound longing that you just had to be with. That you put the longing in the hands of God, in a certain way. That it was important to be receptive to the unfulfilled, and not fill it or deny it.” Do you have a model of prayer for yourself... for others? How does this translate at the community level?

D. Feeling Our Way to Theology - Sara wasn’t interested in theoretical faith or concepts like the Trinity or trying to prove divine existence. Instead, “[i]t was the materiality of Christianity that fascinated [her], the compelling story of incarnation in its grungiest details, the promise that words and flesh were deeply, deeply connected.”

1. If you’re able, spend a minute contemplating Sara’s description of her time growing inside her mother and her daughter growing inside of her...of her description of how her father had become a part her the way Jesus has become a part of us through communion. In what ways is Sara’s description of the incarnation and trans-substantiation similar to her experience as war correspondent in Central America? What do you think of her process of coming to her theology through gritty on-the-ground experience and interpretation?

2. What about Sara's experience about "wanting God and not even knowing what that was"? What about her questioning of how religious instruction might shaped her in moments of intense spiritual curiosity during her younger years? Have you had similar experiences? What did religious instruction do or not do to help you understand those yearnings? Or, like Sara, was religious instruction absent during those formative periods in your life? What does this say about how we inform our youth as a church? Do we need to spend more time helping our youth to understand their feelings and connect them to God's calling in their lives?

3. For Sara, it was food that had grounded her and connected her to others in those formative times... and it was food (through communion) that was grounding her at the early stages of her faith walk. Has food served a similar role in your life? Does food serve a similar role in all of our lives, whether we realize it or not? What are some ways in which other vehicles serve similar roles in our lives (e.g., art, music, athletics, hobbies)?

4. What do you think of Sara's comment that faith is not a destination but a process ... "The child I was, protected from religion by her parents, at some point had become the woman crying at the communion table. Those tears weren't a conclusion, or a happy ending, just part of a motion toward something."?

V. Chapter 8

A. All Religion is Political? - Sara came to faith at about the same time that George W. Bush was campaigning for the 2000 election. As she noted, the cultural wars were in full swing and at the forefront of campaign issues. Sara says about that time she realized that "all religion was political, and before too long, [she] would come to delve deeply into the issues that divided the church".

1. Do you agree and, if so, has it always been this way?

2. Sara goes on to say that, even the midst of this, she had many more important things to work through than politics. What does she mean by this and does it contradict her earlier comment?

3. Was Jesus political? Do we need to have spaces available for people to come to know Jesus in an apolitical context? As Sara noted, "[i]t was tempting to sidestep my disturbing spiritual questions through the familiar process of making a political analysis, but right now, politics, for once, wasn't the most interesting thing for me to figure out."

4. In the latter part of the chapter, Sara describes how she reconnected with her grandmother, who was a bit of revolutionary herself. "Yes, it is true: I have been arrested as a 'disorderly person.' Jesus told his disciples to preach, teach, and heal, and likened

them to light, salt and yeast, permeating the whole of society. To me this means challenging the racism, greed, and planned murder of our empire. You may as well get used to the idea of some of your fellow Christians spending time in jail.” Dryly, she added, “There are many distinguished precedents for this situation.”” What does this tell us about politics and people? Do we sometimes [maybe unfairly] make assumptions about a person’s character based on their politics? Is Sara maybe a bit guilty of that herself regarding the woman she at at the airport at the very end of the chapter?

B. Politics as “Means” vs “End” - Sara indirectly alludes to the difference between a political philosophy geared toward justice or mercy, as opposed to one oriented around gaining political power as an end unto itself. She references “radical liberation theologians” like Ed de la Torre, who wrote “To starve after justice” to “ache for it, like food.” She also points out that recognizing one’s need is the beginning of faith.

1. How and where should faith, theology, religious doctrine, justice, mercy and politics intersect? Or should they intersect at all?
2. Can you think of ways the intersection of these ideas has been used by politicians in ways that are helpful? What about ways that are unhelpful?

C. Communion as “Means” vs “End” - In thinking about the names churches have given to communion, “sacrifice, Lord’s Supper, Eucharist, Mass, Diving Liturgy, great offering, communion”, Sara notes that the Christian experience and practice of communion is vast and varied. She also points out the many debates that have ensued about it... “is Jesus actually in the bread?”. As the debates grew, so did the attempts to license and control how and when to distribute “elements central to the faith.” Ultimately, she concludes that the many limitations placed on communion (e.g., not for the unbaptized, not for children, not for non-members, not for sinners, etc.) were contradictory to the message of Jesus, himself. “A sign of unconditional acceptance and forgiveness, it was doled out and rationed to insiders; a sign of unity, it divided people; a sign of the most common and ordinary human reality, it was rarefied and theorized nearly to death.”

1. In what ways is the “doling it out” approach an example of politics and religion intersecting? How can this be seen as communion as “means”? Is it helpful or harmful? Can it be both?
2. Do you think there should be limits on who can take communion and how it should be taken? Is so, what are some of those limits?
3. What do you think about Sara’s conclusion that it “remained, through all the centuries, more powerful than any attempts to manage it”? What does that say about the difference between politics and religion? What about what communion means to Sara... Supper with God?

D. Fearing Consequences; Seeking to Control (one's own destiny or others); Responding to/in Love - Stepping back a bit from the book, spend a few minutes contemplating the big picture of the faith community and religion in general. In particular, consider for a moment what motivates one to be faithful to a particular religious faith paradigm or doctrine. And consider why you have spent so much time going to church and worrying about all of this ... and why the generations that preceded you did so.

1. Why do you go to church? Why do you suppose others go to church? What would you say to a close friend if they asked you why they should go to church?
2. Why do we read the Bible? Why do we listen to sermons? Why do we sing songs in church? Why do we worry about sin? Why do we want our children to go to church?
3. In what ways does our motivation in these areas shape our theology? And in what ways does our theology shape our motives in these areas? How does/should fear play into this? What are some other elements? In what ways are these helpful or harmful?

E. Unorthodoxy - Sara spends quite a bit of time talking about her affection for the approach at St. Gregory's ... the a-cappella four-part harmonies as opposed to "cheesy" Christian soft-rock ... a dancing mural with a naked King David. All of this is more personal preference and style than it is a comment on theology. But the nugget of wisdom comes when she describes the placement of the baptismal font as compared to the communion altar at most churches. One marking a gateway to the other in a sign that only the initiated would be allowed to participate. At St. Gregory's the altar is a large round table placed right at the entrance of the church building, where everyone is invited to participate.

1. In what ways does architecture and design reflect our theology? What about our methods and practices ... how do they reflect our theology? What should our primary purpose be in thinking about how things like communion are designed... what about baptism? Other practices?
2. In what ways is it important to have different places of worship to meet the needs of vastly different individuals? And in what ways do our practices allow us to become complacent ... or a barrier to either our own spiritual growth or that of others?
3. Thinking more about it, in what ways are some of these designs (whether physical design or the design of certain practices) sinful? Sara says that the folks she came to know at St. Gregory's were often "refugees from fundamentalist congregations where they'd suffered for being gay, or Catholic churches where they'd felt shut out as women." Should churches design spaces and practices to make congregants feel comfortable when those practices fly in the face of the one whom they purport to be worshipping? In what ways should we be examining our own practices?

F. The Log in Our Own Eye - The thing I love most about Sara is her willingness always to examine and criticize herself before criticizing others. It's an art seemingly long-lost in our current Twitter-feed click-bait oriented culture. Sara writes "I should have felt at home with these thoughtful, open-minded intellectuals. But probably because I felt so defensive about my lack of formal education, money, and official Christian formation, I tended to get irritated with the members of St. Gregory's community. I thought they were clubby and precious; I sneered at their early music concerts. As I ducked out the door at coffee hour, fleeing one more generous attempt at conversation, I would feel by turns superior, condescending, horribly inadequate. Yet my own snobbery couldn't protect me from being drawn, more deeply, into the place."

1. Reconcile these two contradictory concepts for me? How do we go about challenging the assumptions and practices of our faith community while at the same time allowing for them to be human and to live out a faith as best as they know how? What should our standard be in determining which practices are helpful and which are harmful?

2. Sara seems to think it's about welcoming the stranger... "Donald and Rick [the two lead pastors] and the people of St. Gregory's had let God in, because they—no matter how imperfectly—were committed to letting in clueless and unprepared strangers like me: because they believed in the absolute religious value of welcoming people who didn't belong." What do you think? What would Jesus think?

G. Expressing Our Fundamental Theology... "“Blessed be God the Word,” Rick would chant before services, “who came to his own and his own received him not, for in this way God glorified the stranger. O God, show us your image in all who come here today, that we may welcome them, and you.” His prayer expressed the fundamental theology of St. Gregory's, as did the church's practice of open communion. “Jesus welcomes everyone to his table,” someone would announce during each service, “and so we offer communion to everyone, and to everyone by name.” Hospitality to strangers— baptized or heathen, pious or unrepentant— was at the center of St. Gregory's mission; the church believed that because Jesus ate with sinners, breaking down the barriers between clean and unclean, offering communion to all without exception was the “one true sign of God.””

1. What is your fundamental theology? What is the fundamental theology of our church community?

2. What do our practices and beliefs say about our fundamental theology to others? Should our practices and our fundamental theology be in alignment? How much time do we spend thinking about that? Should we be spending more?

H. Craving Certainty; Embracing Ambiguity - Sara talks about the divide in the Anglican Church and the movement to a more fundamentalist political perspective. In her view this was in part because churches took sides in the great social and political battles that were going on in the 1960's. She describes the relativism of the academy and the literalism of places like Moody Bible College and Christian Universities.

1. Sara is seemingly correct in terms of the way different groups were interpreting complicated and difficult scriptures... those on the left that stayed in churches really had no choice but to take a more open view of those scriptures? But is she correct in a broader sense? Meaning is it really a binary issue that puts one group in the literalist camp and the other in the ambiguiist camp?
2. Thinking of the growth in the growth of churches in the Southern Hemisphere, as described by the archbishop of Uganda, what is behind that? Do you think the debate about literalism and ambiguity is at the core of the rise in the Southern Hemisphere? Is it driving the decline in the north?

VI. Chapter 9

A. As If That is What I Cared About - One of my favorite quotes from the book: "When I talked with my secular friends, I could make a thoughtful case for church as a site for social change, or earnestly analyze the denominational politics of Christianity, as if that were what I cared about." Sara goes on to say that through all of the analytics and machinations, the thing she felt most deeply about her faith was her connection to Jesus and His willingness to invite everyone to His table and to feed them.

1. Do you ever find yourself trying to analyze your way into and through your relationship with Jesus? Do you ever find yourself trying to convince others that your faith practices are rational and based on sound analytical reasoning? Is that helpful?
2. How have you experienced God and Jesus in ways that can't be described through analytics? Is there a difference in those types of experiences?
3. Do you think the analytical or transactional approach to faith has harmed the relationship with many to their churches?

B. Feed My Sheep - In describing her fundamentally "irrational" belief in the resurrection, Sara describes her ability to see "God's holiness" in mortal human bodies and how human beings could "see God" by "cherishing all of those different bodies the way God did". She then goes back again and again to the story of Jesus and Peter's questions about how to follow him. In each instance Jesus says that the way to follow him and the way to love him... is to "feed my sheep".

1. How have you thought about that passage in the past? Are the layers and nuances that you think we should talk about here? Or is it really that simple?
2. In what ways do free markets impact our ability to understand and live out this aspect of Jesus's commands? Do you sometimes find yourself focused on the many things you need to be doing in your faith walk... prayer, scripture reading, church attendance, evangelizing, training children, etc... than the simple act of feeding sheep? What about our culture drives us in that direction?
3. What about the defensiveness of ordained deacons at St. Gregory's? What about the unwillingness of clergy to do menial tasks?

C. Being a Christian by Yourself - Once she became a deacon in her church, and worked through the many intricacies of that role, Sara came to what she refers to as a "dreadful realization" ... that being a Christian is not something you can do alone.

1. Is she right? What do you think she means by this?
2. Sara writes "sharing [communion] meant I was going to be touching Christ's body at St. Gregory's, through Donald and Rick and the angry older deacon with the clenched jaw [and looking] into Christ's eyes outside of church, through the cheery atheist yuppie with the sports car and the veiled Muslim clerk at Walgreens." How do we connect the dots here... between what she is saying about being in community and why you can't be a Christian by yourself? How does this tie into her notion that you see God's holiness in different human bodies? Are there implications for how we practice our faith as a church community... or as individuals?
3. In what ways is the Manhattan church already doing this? In what ways could it improve? As Sara says, "I was going to get communion, whether I wanted it or not, with people I didn't necessarily like. People I didn't choose. People such as my parents or the strangers who fed me: the people God chose for me."

D. Fearing Consequences; Seeking to Control (one's own destiny or others); Responding to/in Love - Stepping back a bit from the book, spend a few minutes contemplating the big picture of the faith community and religion in general. In particular, consider for a moment what motivates one to be faithful to a particular religious faith paradigm or doctrine. And consider why you have spent so much time going to church and worrying about all of this ... and why the generations that preceded you did so.

1. Why do you go to church? Why do you suppose others go to church? What would you say to a close friend if they asked you why they should go to church?

2. Why do we read the Bible? Why do we listen to sermons? Why do we sing songs in church? Why do we worry about sin? Why do we want our children to go to church?

3. In what ways does our motivation in these areas shape our theology? And in what ways does our theology shape our motives in these areas? How does/should fear play into this? What are some other elements? In what ways are these helpful or harmful?

E. Rule Following; Making Faith Easier - Sara talks about the point in her faith walk where she understood the strict rules some churches impose as a faith paradigm. It was easier, she said, than figuring out a way to love all of the people who were so different than she was.

1. Are there lessons here in the political realm? Do we sometimes find it easier to come up with a litmus test for those we agree with and those we disagree with? Does that impair our ability to really think critically about important issues of politics?

2. What about in the faith community ... same questions?

3. "Now that you've taken the bread, what are you going to do?"

VII. Chapter 10

A. Having a Vision; Seeking Justice - Sara talks about her vision of food security for the poor in the context of the chaos that seemingly surrounded her when she was serving communion at St. Gregory's. She describes the intimacy that is available during communion even when kids are whirling around us, even when the music doesn't suit us, and even when we don't get along with the people around us.

1. How do you experience communion? As an intimate moment between you and God? As a chaotic group activity in the midst of chaos... at times frustrating and at times beautiful? Maybe a little of both?

2. Have you ever thought of communion in the context of food security or in comparison to feeding the poor?

3. What kinds of visions do you have of "going upstream" to help those in need? How do you think of this vision in terms of justice?

B. Democratization of Food Distribution, Food Preparation and Food Consumption - Sara juxtaposes the vision of the "foodie" culture of the affluent neighborhoods of the Bay Area in that era against the vision of liquor stores and cheap fast food in the poor neighborhoods. "All over the city, gleaming boutique markets displayed the perfect organic peach, the rarest handmade goat cheese, twelve different kinds of artisanal bread. ... Some poor areas were

served only by corner liquor stores selling cigarettes, Slim Jims, and potato chips, and in the ghettos, it seemed easier to buy drugs than to find a fresh tomato.”

1. Even though she is writing in the early 2000's, this is still very much true today. What is going on here? Is it more than simply the availability of nutritious food?
2. In what ways is education at play? In what ways does access to knowledge help us to become better consumers? What about motivation? In what ways does hope for a better tomorrow help us to become better consumers?
3. What about time and priorities? In what ways is it easier for a stay-at-home parent to prepare nutritious meals than it is for two working parents? What about single parents?
4. What about the commercialization and marketing of food? In what ways do large public corporations and small private companies benefit from driving food choices in certain directions? In what ways do life circumstances simply drive large corporations and small private companies simply to fill the demand that was created by another gap in our system?

C. Food Diversity as Food Art - Sara describes the types of meals that were prepared in poor communities and, if I'm being honest, I literally start salivating. "Nacatamales wrapped in banana leaves"; "Papas" patted out by hand over huge griddled; cheap tacos; watermelon and oranges from pickup trucks from the Central Valley; nopal cactus; sliced mango.

1. How did you react to these descriptions? Would you rather have an old-school family style Mexican meal or Tex Mex? Is one better than the other?
2. What role has the industrial food complex played in all of this? In what ways, does the "foodie" culture in SF really just reflect a subset of that complex?
3. What are some of your experiences in this area? What are some ideas of how to make the system work better to nourish the people in our communities?

D. Is Food Scarcity Real; Is The Food Industry "Evil"? - Regardless of what you think about a \$1 burger, or a \$2 taco from a taco truck, or \$7 scone from cafe on Madison Avenue, food scarcity was and is real and there are lots of people in our community and our country who are hungry every day. Sara chose to take action and linked her experience with communion to that action.

1. What do you think of her vision? What do you think of her boldness to take action? Are there things you would critique about her plan? Are you impressed that she took bold steps even if the plan was susceptible to being critiqued?

2. What do you make of the director of the San Francisco Food Bank describing the food industry as “evil”? Assuming that she was right in the early 2000’s is that still true today? What about soup kitchen’s taking away dignity, reinforcing dependency and being about control?

3. Sara writes the following: “Surrounded by abundance, poor people had trouble buying food that really nourished them. Fat was cheap and filling, vegetables were complicated and scarce, so salt, grease, and sugar reigned. Obese kids ate corn chips and soda for breakfast; ninety-nine-cent hamburgers and soda for lunch; fries and soda for dinner—with liberal helpings of candy, potato chips, and soda in between. Old people crippled by diabetes sat in front of their televisions and ate ramen noodles, four packs for a dollar. Teenage moms gave their babies orange soda and their toddlers government cheese.” What is your reaction to this quote in light of the movements for racial justice and greater control over policing that we have seen over the course of the past year? How are the two connected... if at all? In what ways are the poor and the oppressed crying out for justice only to be placated or, in some cases, beaten into silence? How does all of this play into our politics?

4. What can we do to help? And in what ways is all of this tied to communion? ... “And there was that vision of a Table where everyone was welcome. Our neighbors, friends and strangers, were hungry. The very least a Christian church could do, for starters, was feed them.”

VIII. Chapter 11

A. Holding Tanks for People who Don’t Want to Act - Sara is not a fan of church committees. As she describes them, they can become “holding tanks for people who professed interest in an issue, but didn’t always want to act”. She would rather just buy some food and give it to people in need, than spend months crafting position papers on how to feed the homeless and then enter into endless debates on the topic.

1. Is this consistent with your own experience?
2. What do you think is behind it? Is it a fear of failure or fear of being proven wrong? Is it a fear that the work of helping others is actually more difficult than the process involved in debating it?
3. Was there anything in particular about St. Gregory’s that would make starting a community service program more difficult than in other churches? How is that so many other churches were able to become involved in the distribution of food to the needy ... even the “holy-rollers” were in on the action?

B. The Power of Assumption - As we think about the opposition that Sara faced in her church community over the idea of starting a food bank, let's spend some time thinking about our world in general. Sara was forced to confront a large number of assumptions about what a food bank would entail. They ranged from damage to the altar, to garbage overtaking the church building, to undesirables hanging around the church building, to volunteer burnout.

1. In what ways do assumptions hinder our ability to communicate with others? In what ways do they hinder our ability to genuinely understand the world around us?
2. How does fear play into our assumptions? What about our desire for control? What about our desire to be able to put things in neat boxes?
3. In what ways false assumptions have the ability to drive division in churches? What about in the larger world of politics? What about recent world events? What about the culture of social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc)? What about personal relationships?
4. What can or should we do about it?

C. Acts of Outreach vs Acts of Gratitude - In her letter to the congregation about the food pantry, Sara says that she started the food pantry not as an act of service or outreach, but as an act of gratitude. "The first time I came to the Table at St. Gregory's, I was a hungry stranger. Each week since then ... someone's hands have broken bread and brought me into communion."

1. Is there a difference in acting out of a sense of compulsion and acting out of a sense of gratitude? How has this played out historically in our theology? What about acting out of fear as opposed to gratitude? What about acting out of love?
2. When you think about the distinctions above, how does it help you to understand why the "adopt" a poor family program at St. Gregory's didn't really work? In what ways was the food bank different (and more humanizing) than the "adoption" program?
3. How do we ensure that programs and activities seemingly designed to help others aren't designed and don't become primarily about helping ourselves? And, we've talked about this before, but how do we ensure that our perfectly designed liturgies don't become a child's "tea party" in terms of missing the gritty reality of the world around us while living out a theoretically perfect life in a sort of ivory tower?

IX. Chapter 12

A. The Food Pantry and Baptism - Sara thinks it appropriate that she started the food pantry the same week that she was baptized. "[B]oth decisions were part of the same process and

involved surrendering my fantasies of individual control. Baptism and the pantry would both carry me through fear into richer, if untidier, life with a wider, more complicated community. They would teach me about hurt and healing and restore to me some of the joy I'd felt working with others in kitchens and on the brigades in Nicaragua. But at the time, I couldn't articulate why I felt so tugged to take these steps: I just knew I had to see what would happen next."

1. What does she mean here?

2. How does communion involve surrendering fantasies of individual control? And how does it draw us into a wider community (or does it)? Her pastor wrote, "For many of us, from our first welcome to Jesus' Table, we find ourselves drawn to follow him in his baptism, going beyond the church walls to wash away, as he did in his death, everything that separated him from any person, even the worst or most desolate." What do you think he means?

3. How does communion teach us about hurt and healing?

B. The Power of Community - Sara alludes to a concept that was included in the article that Margaret sent this week about the housing community in Austin, TX. The founder of that community talked about the fact that homeless people often don't necessarily need the physical spaces provided for them as much as they do community and relationship.

1. Do you see this in Sara's food pantry? In our conversation about a food pantry as compared to a soup kitchen, do you see differences in terms of community building? What are some examples?

2. What about Carl's sermon on Sunday morning about tone and about experience the people around us while serving as part of the overall act of service?

3. What about Sara's description of her baptism story and her belief that "baptism should be a conscious choice made after receiving communion, not a prerequisite to sharing the meal"? How does this impact community and how is it similar to the community-building that was happening at the food bank?

C. A Dialectical Faith - Marsha Linehan, who developed DBT (or dialectical behavioral therapy), says that interpersonal dynamics need to be seen more through the lens of "both/and", rather than "either/or". In her view, two seemingly contradictory facts can be true at the same time, especially when considering the world views of those with whom we are in relationship, and it's important to remember that each of us is doing the best we can AND we can do better.

1. In considering her baptism, Sara felt torn because she had to confront the opposition of parents to the Christian faith? As Sara writes, "choosing baptism seemed like a

betrayal of my parents, who had tried so hard to protect their children from Christianity and its discontents”. How could this be viewed differently through the lens of dialectics? Could both be true (i.e., the need to protect one from Christianity and its discontents and the need to be baptized)?

2. What are some ways in which these concepts play out in larger communities... our church communities... our work communities... our political dialogue? Do you ever feel exhausted from the principled battles that take place in these arenas and are they entirely necessary?

3. How can dialectics help here?

D. Past Ritual; Looking into their Eyes - “[T]he work [of the food pantry] also reminded me of what I was doing [by serving communion] at church on Sundays: not just serving a crowd of people at the altar without spilling wine on them but trying to look past the ritual into their eyes.”

1. Have you had similar experiences at church... of looking past ritual into someone’s eyes? What about serving communion? What about serving at community of hope? How has the culture of the church of your youth shaped this aspect of your faith walk?

2. What about looking into the eyes of those we serve with?

3. How has COVID impacted our ability to look into other people’s eyes? When was the last time you experienced this?

Sara writes, “[t]he people who came to get food at the pantry had been, to regular middle-class churchgoers, basically like Jesus—that is, invisible. We knew they were there, but we couldn’t see them, and their sufferings and loveliness were imagined, not incarnate in a specific body. But as I got to know them, I started to see more clearly how the people who came to the pantry were like me: messed up, often prickly or difficult, yearning for friendship. I saw how they were hungry, the way I was. And then, I had a glimpse of them being like Jesus again: as God, made flesh and blood.”

IX. Chapters 13 and 14

A. Finding “Church” in the Pantry - Sara has several stories about how she experienced communion and community in her time in the Pantry. Her story about the drug addict, who just needed someone to talk to was particularly compelling, as well as her story about the woman who would preach to Sara about Jesus being a “rock”.

1. What is the difference between church and social service organization? Do you find it interesting that the ministry seems to flow both ways in the pantry — from Sara and the

volunteers to the guests and from the guests to Sara and the volunteers? How is this different than the flow of ministry in more traditional contexts?

2. Why do you suppose folks were so comfortable just coming and hanging out in the pantry ... as much for social interaction as for food? To what extent is it tied to the bi-directional flow of ministry? To what extent does it derive from the core principle of seeing the Pantry more as “church” than as a social service organization?

3. To what extent is the power of the Pantry found in this passage from Chapter 13... “If my carefully calibrated difference from others wasn't the vitally important thing about me, then my identity was going to be bound up with all kinds of other people at their most vulnerable and unattractive. If I wasn't busy scoffing at believers for their gullibility, and I wasn't afraid of being sentimental and pious; if I didn't mind looking stupid or being a sucker for a hard-luck story, then I was probably going to cry when someone else showed me, even for a few minutes, her own weakness.” To what extent does that passage sum up the very meaning of “church”? And how is that different from a model of educating and admonishing folks into a life of salvation?

B. Church and Politics - Sara talks about a “charged intensity” at the Pantry. Folks who were volunteers and folks who were guests all seemed ready to engage on hot political topics. “And in the presence of shared food and the immediacy of such visible, common need, visitors could blurt out anything, open themselves to people totally unlike themselves, act out of character.”

1. Why do you suppose it seemed easier to talk about politics at the Pantry? To what extent does it derive from the sense of a common purpose bigger than the political issues they were discussing? To what extent could our politics benefit from that?

2. What do you think about Sara's view of the importance of participation in something other than politics as a means to facilitate political conversation? “It was the kind of political practice Martín-Baró had hinted at when he talked about democracy: It meant mistakes, sure, but also the opening up of genuine participation to all kinds of people.”

3. In what ways is the Pantry similar to the Community of Hope? Use this quote as a guide for your thoughts... “But it was the unofficial nature of the pantry that I really loved, nothing that could be written down in a ledger: the giddy sense that we were being propelled forward, almost too fast to be afraid, by a force as irresistible as the one recounted in Matthew's Gospel. I read the story about the loaves and fishes and thought about Jesus gazing at the hungry crowd, saying to his anxious, doubting, screwed-up followers: “You give them something to eat.””

C. Those “Fu*%ing” Russians - In discussing the problem of rapid growth, Sara talks about different groups and how word of the Pantry had spread. She had learned to appreciate the

different groups for different reasons, but had never grown to appreciate the Russians, who she described as pushy, grabby and capable of arguing over food distribution “with the skill of people who'd spent their lives in line waiting for inadequate food”.

1. How did you react to Sara saying, in frustration, “Jesus didn't have to deal with the fucking Russians”? In what ways does growth sometimes knock of our own envisioned purpose, while maybe at the same time pointing to seemingly different but potentially higher purpose? In what ways does getting knocked off kilter sometimes set us back on course?

2. What are some ways that you would have responded to the problems associated with growth? People who you didn't necessarily like? Managing food distribution as demand grew but supplies remained constant? Sara responded by finding sources of more food. Did she miss something along the way?

D. Logistics, Marketing Gimmicks and Government Bureaucracy - Sara talks about the growing pains of the Pantry and in particular the marketing gimmicks that food companies used (to know what kind of junk food to stock in ghetto markets) as well as the bureaucratic requirements of USDA food distribution.

1. How did you react to these kinds of tactics? What's going on behind these elements as compared to what initially compelled Sara to start the Pantry? In what ways, do these tactics sound similar to the tactics of communist governments that led to the neediness and grabiness of the Russians at the food banks? In what ways are those Russians really that different than anyone else?

2. In what ways could Amazon help here? ...not necessarily by providing funding, but by helping with logistics? In what ways is the entirety of the world's hunger problem tied more to logistics and bureaucracy than it is money or production? And in what ways does the world need more of a church-based “Amazon” than it does another church-based food pantry? Are you excited about the future? Hesitant? Fearful?

3. What did you think of Sara's fellow parishioner with experience in non-profits? “One of the biggest challenges for advocates,” she wrote, “is to not get overwhelmed by constant growing need. It seems that no matter what we do, there are more people who need help. As tragic as it is, even if we operated a pantry every day of the week, we still could not meet the demand in this city. Given this, it's very important to set a scope of each program at the most optimum level, an optimum level of operation that is strictly adhered to. Beyond that level, a new program (at another location) has to be started if more need is to be met.”

E. Gleaners? - Sara discusses the impact of the corporate agribusiness culture, as well as the American themes of the family farm as being problematic. She also compares the food pantry

idea with passages in Scripture that talk about leaving some portion of the harvest for the “gleaners”.

1. In what ways is corporate agribusiness perpetuating an unjust system? In what ways can we dismantle it? How do you think food and nutrition aid in the development of young minds and in the energy-level needed to take on higher-level tasks that our economic system rewards? In what ways is food injustice linked to larger scale social injustice ... not merely from the standpoint of hunger, but from the standpoint of assimilation into our larger economic system?
2. Should the idea of leaving something for the “gleaners” really be our goal? Is it time to move beyond that in terms of real justice... in terms of really bringing the Gospel to the poor?
3. What about the knock-on effects of growth? People urinating in the parking lot, being drunk on the steps before church service, potentially stealing from the church vestry? What would Jean Valjean have to say about that? What about the individual groups that were served by the Pantry complaining about similar groups (e.g., Black Americans complaining about Chinese immigrants, Latinos warning about Black Americans, Sara complaining about the Russians... and then realizing that she couldn't pin everything on them)?

F. Blessings in the Midst of Chaos - “I really need that.” I looked at each of them in turn and took their hands—soft, calloused, warm, damp—in mine. “Arthur,” I said, dipping my thumb in the oil and making the sign of the cross on his palms, “every time you touch someone with these hands, may you show them God's love... . Cynthia, in all the work you do with these hands, may God's mercy and justice shine forth... . Eddie, bless all the work of your hands, and may God keep you in his hands, safe and loved.”

1. How does continually going back to this idea of blessing help to reorient us in the midst of our chaotic lives... whether that be running a food pantry or simply trying to get our own children fed and to school each day? Or simply trying to get through a day of hard work and then figure out a way to put a me together after it? What about time for spiritual food?
2. How do you find Sara's overwhelming urge to live on the fringes as she says and avoid anything structured or formal, as over and against her love of ritual? In what ways is it important to find that balance... between chaos and control... between breaking down hierarchy and breathing into tradition?

XI. Chapters 15 and 16

A. Churches Driving Culture and Politics; Culture and Politics Driving Churches - In thinking about the political and religious context of the early 2000's just after 9/11, Sara says "Becoming a believer seemed to be giving me less interest in maintaining a set of rigid beliefs – about God and also about politics." And she goes on to say that the right-wingers she had come across "were the same people whose entire religion was about rules, who maintained a strict set of litmus tests for who would go to heaven." At the same, she describes GWB's war in the Middle East as a "crusade" driven primarily by his religious belief that the world should be divided into good guys and bad guys.

1. As we think about this from a historical perspective, do you think it was the religious beliefs of conservatives that led to their political perspectives on the post-9/11 era? In particular, was it their religious beliefs that led them to want to separate the world into good guys and bad guys and then destroy all the bad guys?

2. Assuming she is right about conservative Christians at that time (and certainly she is right about some of them), is Sara guilty of the same offense? Would you agree that in her view, George W. Bush and John Ashcroft were arguably just as evil as Saddam Hussein (maybe even more so than OBL) and needed to be destroyed (or at least neutered)? What do you think Al Gore would have done if he had been president? Do you think President Obama is viewed by Sara as having led a "crusade" against the people of Afghanistan?

3. What about American politics and American culture leads us into this paradigm of "good guys" and "bad guys"? Do you agree that it's an issue on both sides of the political aisle? To what extent did this paradigm create the vacuum in which it was possible for a person like Donald Trump (clearly the most unqualified person in our nation's history, both in terms of resume and in terms of his constitution) to become president? Are there lessons to be learned from the past 20 years or so of presidential politics?

B. Faith and Action or "Orthopraxy" - In talking about how her mostly theoretical efforts to make the world a better place (like writing a story about G'tmo detainees) seemed to not make a difference, Sara says "But faith working through love: That could mean plugging away with other people, acting in small ways without the comfort of a big vision or even a lot of realistic hope. It could look more like prayer: opening yourself to uncertainty, accepting your lack of control. It meant taking on concrete tasks in the middle of confusion, without stopping to argue about who was the truest believer. Whatever else, I could at least keep working in the pantry, feeding as many people as I could."

1. How is this idea of "Orthopraxy" similar and how is different from the idea of "going upstream" as we talked about when discussing Ron Rolheiser's book? In what ways can this approach change hearts first... minds second? Do we even need to change minds?

2. Why do you suppose Sara's efforts at writing and theorizing about the world's problems were ineffective? In what ways have these realities (and the corresponding difficulties) been exacerbated by social media? As a percentage, how much time do you think the average American Christian (liberal or conservative) spends trying to change hearts as compared to how much time they spend trying to change minds?

3. What do you suppose is the reason for our tendency as Americans to prefer talking about political ideas more than working with the people who form our polis? Is this a uniquely "American" problem or is it a simply "human" one?

C. Becoming More Like "Jeff" - "Jeff was a Presbyterian minister who said things like "My goodness!" in a sweet voice; he was handsome and trim with a perfectly groomed little beard and had chintz pillows arranged in rows on his sofa. He had a New Age streak ("Woo-woo," he explained helpfully to me, the first time he "invited" me to "visualize" someone "wrapped in light") and was very gentle, in a kind of classical-music-loving, sweater-wearing, great-cathedrals-of-Europe way; he was profoundly devout, really smart, and utterly unflappable."

1. Sara's spiritual director reminds me of my own. Good ones seem to have this uncanny ability to care nothing about convincing us what to think and instead to care deeply about and press us forward into a conversation with Jesus. And they probe about the areas in our lives where we seem reluctant to do so. In what ways was this process helpful to Sara? In what ways can it be helpful to us in navigating political issues? In what ways is it helpful navigating church politics?

2. What do you think of Jeff's response to Sara's description the prayer she had written for Pantry volunteers... "I'd started to talk about the religious imagery of being bread. 'Like I could be Eucharist,' I said excitedly, and Jeff interrupted. 'Um, Sara, dear,' he said, 'what is this like for Martha and Katie when you talk like this? I mean ... that's a lovely prayer, but what's going on at home?'"

3. How is Jeff's orientation different from that of most of the people we encounter (including ourselves) when talking about the Church, about our faith or about our politics? Thinking of Sara's series of questions and responses to Donald and Rick (the lead pastors at St. Gregory's) as compared to Jeff's response, which do you resonate most with? What did Jeff mean when he said "'Dear one,' said Jeff, 'you are part of the church. You're a part of the whole of humanity.'"?

D. Dwelling in the "Whole of Humanity" as Compared to "Seeing Both Sides" - Sara was loathe to giving in to the idea of "seeing both sides" of the war issue. But Jeff seemed to be guiding her in that direction.

1. Do you agree that Jeff was advocating for a “both sides have a point” governing philosophy? In what ways is the idea of assuming both sides have a point anti-the tidal to the ideas that Jeff seems to be advocating?
2. In what ways is being a part of the “whole of humanity” different from being able to see both sides of an issue? In what ways do the issues become less relevant in this context (or at least less relevant than some other guiding principles that Jeff seems to point us toward)?
3. What are the implications of Sara’s statement that “Being a Christian in wartime, for me, was turning out to be the opposite of having “God on our side.” It meant expanding not just a personal capacity to suffer but the personal and institutional capacity to dwell in ambiguity and unsettledness.” (emphasis mine)? How is this different than “seeing both sides”?
4. Do you find it ironic that Sara felt she could talk to her mom about the Food Pantry, but not about being a Christian? Even if not ironic, what are the implications of this?

E. A Hunger Beyond Food - Taking us back to the meaning of the Food Pantry, Sara’s meeting with the Bishop of California can be illuminating. The Bishop said “There's a hunger beyond food that's expressed in food ... and that's why feeding is always a kind of miracle. It speaks to a bigger desire The feeding of the five thousand the miracle wasn't that Jesus multiplied the loaves. It's that the disciples took the bread and did what they were told, got up and started feeding, and something happened.”

1. What exactly happened in that moment? In what ways does this story tie back to the other topics in these chapters... in particular, the idea of dwelling within the “whole of humanity”?
2. What does it mean to “just shut up and go feed people”? What does it mean to “trust and eat”? And what does Sara mean when she says it was in a moment of not trusting that she began to preach?
3. Donald said “Jesus our teacher asked his listeners to cut through what they'd been taught... and all their careful doctrinal constructs and formulations, to meet God in the wildness and immediacy of life... . We follow that pattern: we're not telling one another how to look at life ... but to listen to our lives as they are.” In what ways can preaching, or doctrinal disputes and formulations, or political debates, allow us to avoid listening to our lives “as they are”? Assuming this paradigm can be helpful in our faith walk, in what ways does listening to and living with those with whom we disagree teach us about who Jesus is and about who we are in relationship with Jesus?

Sara wrote: ““I think,” I said slowly once, looking out at the Sunday worshippers, “that we're being called to something harder than being conventional ‘Good Samaritans.’ To understand ourselves, individually and as a church, being rescued by strangers and foreigners, by the wrong people. To understand ourselves, individually and as a church, as beaten, hungry, hurting, lost at the side of the road. Called to touch the parts of ourselves that are strange and damaged and needy. Called to receive love from people we don't know and have no reason to trust. And only then, in turn, being called to the second part: to go and do the same thing—knowing it will change us in ways we didn't plan and may not like.”

XII. Chapters 17 and 18

A. Reliving Her Experiences in Central America - Sara talks about the similarities between her experiences in Potrero Hill in San Francisco and her experiences in Central America. In both instances, people she encountered had been separated from the dignity of their own humanity, both in terms of their living conditions and in terms of their spiritual health.

1. What did you think about Sara's comment that as she went further along in her time at the Food Pantry, she began to believe more and more that Jesus was singularly uninterested in Church?
2. Sara believed that she would only find what she yearned after, that first experience of communion, in the “rough places”, the “lonely places”, the “desert”. Have you had similar experiences? If Sara's conclusions are true, what does this say about Church? What role should it be playing?
3. How should Church work for someone like Richard, the pot-smoking man living up on Potrero Hill, who suffered badly from diabetes? In what ways does Church inoculate us from feeling Richard's pain? Do you think our empathy for Richard should be mitigated by the fact that he smoked pot all day? What about the people they delivered to who seemed to be smoking crack cocaine? What does Sara's experience with Ruth, the mother of the middle-aged man who was in and out of jail and only came around to steal stuff, teach us about this?
4. In what ways do you think Sara would tie her thoughts about Church and liturgy with her experience at the police station, as a middle-aged white woman, when she dropped off that 357 Magnum handgun? How do our expectations about how and where we function as society help us to get through the day to day? And in what ways do they keep us from being able to fully and completely experience God dwelling in us? And in what ways do they prevent us from becoming our truest selves?

B. Paul Fromberg, the Churches of Christ and Fuller Seminary - Paul Fromberg, whom Sara met at an Episcopalian retreat in North Carolina, was raised in the Church of Christ in Texas,

and then went to seminary at Fuller in Pasadena... just one degree of separation from my wife! His journey is an interesting one on many levels, but let's focus for a minute on his thoughts about liturgy, art and healing. Paul said "[i]t was clear to me that a lot of suffering was chemical, not just psychological. I felt, as a talk psychotherapist, I'd be fooling people and not giving them what they needed. At the same time, I was beginning to believe that Word and sacrament might have something to do with healing."

1. What do you suppose Paul meant by this? In what ways was the art exhibit, in which his painted body covered secret messages about his life, healing? In what ways is it emblematic of ways in which liturgy can be harmful? How does Paul's experience help us better understand the questions in Section A; Question 4 above?
2. Do you agree with Paul's notion that the Apostle's Creed is basically a toxic document set up to control believers and drive out heresy? In what ways is this conclusion a byproduct of his transformation over the years as a minister? In what ways is this conclusion a byproduct of his Church of Christ upbringing?

C. "Experienced Grace" as compared to "Codified Religious Law" - Before heading out to that retreat in North Carolina, Sara's spiritual director, Jeff, asked her to reflect on this passage from Deuteronomy: "Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away, [Moses told his people]. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe."

1. In what ways is this passage symbolic of the primary mission of St. Gregory's and the Food Pantry? Recall that the liturgy around communion and the food pantry, "wasn't just about offering bread and wine to all comers but extending the welcome through what they called "radical hospitality," making the entire liturgy transparent and accessible to strangers every step of the way".
2. What do you think Sara means when she says "I walked away [from that retreat experience] reflecting on all the ways religion tried to manage and tame God: through compulsive rule-making, magic rituals, good behavior, the sheer weight of church tradition"?
3. Reflect on Sara's words from the end of Chapter 17: "The sharing of food was an actual sacrament, one that resonated beyond the church and its regulations, and into a real experience of the divine."

D. Giving is Something All of Us Need to Experience - Sara pointed out to her spiritual director how much Michael enjoyed working at the pantry and that they had some 23

volunteers, most of whom were not parishioners at St. Gregory's. Jeff is unfazed: "Why not? ... It feels great to give stuff away. Look what it's done for you [Sara] ... And if [a person is] poor, how often do [they] get to give? Here, you hand good food to two hundred and fifty people in an afternoon, and they're all smiling at you and saying 'Thanks.'"

1. We've all heard the saying "it's better to give than to receive". Do you believe it? In what ways should we be focused not only on giving people food, but on giving people the opportunity to give other people food?
2. Who do you think is blessed most by the food pantry, the workers or the guests?

E. Derek the Tort Lawyer - So Sara meets Derek Howard, a tort lawyer specializing in class action law suits against banks, who has decided to designate the food bank as a recipient of excess unallocated settlement awards in class action law suits. With the \$25,000 he offered, Sara decided to use the money to start new pantries, recognizing the logistical limitations of her own.

1. In what ways was this an act of living out the faith she had come to learn in her experiences at the pantry? What are the lessons here for how best to help the needy? In what ways does diversifying the food distribution program to other pantries help facilitate the dual objectives of not only giving people food, but giving people the opportunity to give other people food?
2. What do you think about Derek? As Sara describes him... "He lived in Marin, had two young daughters, coached soccer, and generally sounded like a rich suburbanite lawyer, albeit with a strong, independent will; a bulldog passion for justice; and a notable lack of patience. He was a cradle Episcopalian, but he thought the church was "too friggin' patriarchal" and "not inclusive;" he also added, as if I hadn't noticed, that he hated being told what to do." What about Sara's response to Derek's complaints about the Church: ""There are just a lot of principles that are hard for me to explain in the rational world," said Derek. "Yeah," I said. "There really are.""?
 3. At Starr King Elementary, Sara learned through Laticia the importance of the family dinner. Aside from that part, what are some other aspects of community building that the pantry was helping to facilitate? What did you think of the slogan "Pick up your children and Pick up your groceries!"
 4. Are there broader lessons for churches here? What about Sara's comment that "It was as if the very habits of churchgoing had stripped away people's capacity to take authority and do things on their own"?

XIII. Chapters 19 and 20

A. The Importance of Collective Experience - The Food Pantry was comprised of a group of “misfits”, as Martha described them. And yet the pantry was a huge success because of their collective efforts and their collective experiences. Each volunteer seemed to bring something to the table that was essential to the success of the pantry

1. What are your experiences with different leadership models and team-building endeavors? What are some examples of successful teams? What are some examples of not so successful teams?
2. How do teams and organizations go about setting metrics for success? How important is that in your experience and what are the right metrics for something like a food pantry or other service oriented ministry? How does this play out in churches more generally?
3. Let’s discuss the interaction between Sara, Mercedes and Nirmala. If you recall, Mercedes was extremely upset by those who would take from and try to cheat the pantry. Nirmala’s comforting words in trying to quell Mercedes’ anger: “Honey,” she said, “you can’t change people; you just have to forgive them.” Mercedes’ response: “I know I was brought to this pantry for some reason,” she said. “What a great school God has given us here on earth.” ... Without getting into the theological/sociological components, what does this interaction teach us about Sara’s leadership style and the importance of a collective experience a diverse team-oriented approach to the work of the Pantry? What can it teach us about our work in other organizations?

B. The Long and Painful Process of Learning How Similar We Are to Those We Don’t Necessarily Like - Sara describes working with the volunteers at the Pantry as being something of a “school” for her. “That was the school, and in it, I was getting taught, not always with pleasure, how much I was like each of the volunteers. How, as much as I wanted to separate myself from them—just as I wanted to be different from St. Gregory’s members or from other Christians, parsing the distinctions among us and setting myself apart—I’d been drawn to the pantry, and the church, just the way they had, looking for something real.”

1. Have you ever had similar experiences? Do you generally agree with Sara that, although God may not necessarily direct and cause folks to come into our lives to teach us lessons about life, that God created a world in which that happens... if we are able to open our eyes to see it?
2. Whether or not you’ve had similar experiences, do you think it’s possible that you’ve missed lessons along the way... where others in your life that you thought were there simply to annoy you, were actually there to teach you something about life... or about God?

3. What about the way Sara handled the “skanky” man who was trying to take advantage of the girl with the mental impairment... and his reaction to her?

C. Wanting More Than Food - “They wanted, in fact, church: not the kind where you sit obediently and listen to someone tell you how to behave but the kind where you discover responsibility, purpose, meaning. They wanted a church where they could bring their sorrows, their gifts, their entire messy lives: where they could find community.”

1. Let’s discuss what the Pantry as “church” community did for Teddy and for Lauren. In what ways has the Church (in the broad sense) failed in this type of endeavor? In what ways has it succeeded?

2. Do you agree with the premise?

3. If you do, what can be done to ensure that the Church becomes (or continues to be) a leader in this regard?

D. Breaking Bread with Volunteers and the Holy Spirit - At the Pantry, they had started the practice of making at first simple meals to share... and then fairly elaborate feasts... all for the volunteers to share as part of their overall experience. It became something that everyone looked forward to.

1. In what ways do you see the Holy Spirit at work in this? In what ways was that enabled by the openness of Sara’s leadership style... and that of the lead pastors at St. Gregory’s?

2. Do you think the Holy Spirit is at times stifled by certain types of leadership? What are some ways to overcome that? Does Sara’s openness make you feel uncomfortable?

E. Letting God “Take Over” - “So, okay, tell me what you were saying about the Virgin Mary.” “Yes,” he said with enthusiasm. “Right. Here’s the radical thing about Mary: She doesn’t need a man to have a baby. Her virginity means that her womb belongs to her.” “And that she’s willing to be taken over,” I said, reaching for a spoon. “To let God move in her and not know what’s gonna happen next.” “Exactly,” said Paul. “The thing about modern fundamentalists is that they think they can control God like a piece of technology and that they’re the only ones who have the secret code.”

1. Are you a modern fundamentalist? Do you feel a need to stay in control of God? Dig deep as you think about this question and really consider the ways that we, even progressive-minded intellectual Christians try to control God? What lessons are there to be learned from “letting God take over”?

2. Have you had experiences in your life where God did take over? What were they like for you? What were the impacts... in your personal life, in your larger social/familial circles, in society at large?

3. In what ways could letting “God take over” open our world to a new way of thinking/being? Do you think it would be a net positive? And, if so, in what ways?

XIV. Chapters 21 and 22

A. Christian Sacrament and Liturgy - The sacraments, rites and liturgies that Sara describes about the Episcopal Church are not that same in all faith communities, including our own. Sara seems to see them as being beneficial in terms of their power to bring familiarity and meaning to important moments in people’s lives, but also believes that their meaning can become even more powerful by tweaking their forms from time to time.

1. What are your experiences with Christian sacraments, rites and liturgy, and what are some examples of where they have been helpful to you in your faith walk?

2. What are some examples of where tweaking liturgy can make it more meaningful? And what about the idea of spontaneous liturgy... does that make you uncomfortable? Or do you find it helpful?

B. Healing Prayers - Sara describes her thinking of healing prayer before her conversations with folks like Lynn Baird, the nurse, and George Schenk, the cook (like a slick of California snake oil), as compared to afterwords (as both a physical healing and a broader healing).

1. In what ways has the concept of “healing prayer” been used in a way that is destructive in your experience? In what ways has it been used in a way that is helpful? What do you think about Sara’s story about Marshall, the man she had met at the Pantry who needed healing for stomach cancer?

“Finally the day came when Marshall said he was going in for surgery. He grabbed me and started to cry. I remember every detail of that moment: Marshall’s blue work pants, his funny mustard-colored corduroy coat, the damp warmth of his hands. He laid his head in my lap while I held him, and all thoughts of sickness and operations and cures dissolved. Everything around us slowed and hung there, until there was just God’s breath between us, rising and falling in our two chests, not separate at all.”

2. Do you believe that God heals people in response to prayer? If so, in what ways?

3. What implications does the concept of healing prayer, and the ways in which it is taught and practiced, have on our broader theological understanding of God?

C. The Pantry and Gay Marriage - Sara's thinking about rites and sacraments naturally led her to wonder about marriage for couples like Sara and Martha. For the most part she wasn't interested, given the way the issue had been treated, and had a "bad attitude" toward the idea. Then her daughter Katie started to insist that she and Martha get married in the wake of a 2004 ruling in California that provided gay marriages would be recognized in that State. Her description of the moment is compelling...

"Our marriage commissioner was a portly, dark-haired Irish guy. He took our papers, greeted us, and pulled Katie, our witness, over. "Okay," he said. "Put down your coats and bags." We stopped, and everything stopped. "Okay," said the marriage commissioner. "Okay, take a deep breath. This is real. Look at each other." Martha and I started to cry. We said the vows, exchanged rings, kissed Katie, hugged everyone within reach, signed the papers, kissed some more."

1. What are your thoughts on marriage as a sacrament? Do you see it as something churches stand for... or as Sara had said about her feelings before she got married, is it something that probably shouldn't be on par with the likes of communion or other sacraments?
2. What distinctions are there, if any, between a state-recognized marriage and a church-recognized marriage? Are there differences between civil unions and marriages?
3. Aside from your thoughts on the issue (whether from a political or religious perspective), what do you think about the human aspect of Sara's story about her marriage?

D. Sasha and Baptism: "Yes, I want that water!" - It's remarkable how children are able to help us see so much more about the reality of life than we can see in their absence. When Sasha approached Sara about the water that "makes you safe" she opened Sara's eyes (and opens our eyes) to an understanding of baptism that alludes us in its simplicity. As Sara describes it, the water most certainly did not make her safe. "Nothing about that water had made me safe. It had pushed me further out from the certainties and habits of my former life, taken me away from my family, and launched me on this mad and frustrating mission to feed multitudes. It had eroded my identity as an objective journalist and given me an unsettling glimpse of how very little I knew. I was no less flawed or frightened or capable of being hurt than I'd been before my conversion, and now, in addition, I was adrift in this water, yoked together with all kinds of other Christians, many of whom I didn't like or trust."

1. What does Sasha's baptism teach about God, about Jesus and about us? "Sasha closed her eyes for a moment, then looked down directly at the seated priest, and I saw something flowing between them: the child, crucified, anointing Lynn with the power of her crucifixion, and Lynn, receiving it, anointing Sasha."

2. What are some experiences you've had with children and baptism that have been particularly illuminating for you?
3. What do you think about Sara's view that baptism (and the water) don't make you safe... and that, in fact, they do quite the opposite?

E. You're Not Saying "Feed Everyone"? - As the Pantry expanded and grew, Sara became more and more conflicted about the meals they would share as a group of volunteers while others in need waited outside to get groceries... and knowing that some would need to be turned away. Then, another \$200k showed up from the settlement fund. In her conversation with Derek, the lawyer who had arranged for the Pantry to receive the funds, she offered him the daily prayer at the Pantry "O God of abundance, you feed us every day. Rise in us now, make us into your bread, that we may share your gifts with a hungry world, and join in love with all people, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

1. What does it mean to "multiply loaves" and what does it mean to "feed everyone"?
2. In what ways do you see the Holy Spirit at work in Sara, in Derek and in Paul? What do you think of Martha's response ("They're going to tell you this comes from the Holy Spirit.")? And what about Sara's thoughts on the topic ("I called a slew of people from St. Gregory's, and she was right. But I suspected it might be the Holy Spirit, too. Blowing everywhere and filling all things. Making all things new.")?
3. In what ways do you find their process of discernment (on what to do with the new funds) helpful? Have you ever approached decision making in that way?

"So one morning, Paul and Lynn Baird and I sat in a small room with four others from St. Gregory's and the pantry in silence, around one of the Sunday school tables. The idea was that they could only ask questions—not discuss or argue or strategize. After I answered, we'd wait together until a picture became clear to all of us. Only then could we start to come up with a plan."

XV. Chapters 23 and 24

A. Crossing the Line from Self-Righteous Do-Gooder to Crusading Zealot - After their period of discernment, Sara was "on fire" for the Pantry. She had come up with the idea of having it on Sunday afternoons, but this would require moving some art and music programs and might make Sunday church-goers a little uncomfortable. The response was not what Sara had expected... "I felt as if I'd thought long and hard about a beloved friend, looking for the perfect present that would reflect her values and enrich her life—and then she'd spurned my offer."

1. Are there similar examples in your life, when you had what you thought was the perfect plan for God to be revealed to the world, only to have others pour cold water on it? What do you think of Sara's approach? What about Carol, the woman who wanted Sundays to be quiet and uninterrupted? What about Lawrence, who struggled with the idea of being with people who were different from him, but then recognized that he was being called to serve others?
2. Sara thought that a Sunday pantry could do wonders for Church growth. What do you think about that? What about the member who questioned the need for growth? Is it possible for Churches to become too large and should they be trying to grow?

B. Abiding with Those we Think are Sinful... and Those we Think are Stupid - Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote: "unity is a gospel imperative when we recognize that it opens us to change, to conversion: when we realize how our life with Christ is somehow bound up with our willingness to abide with those we think are sinful, and those we think are stupid."

1. What was your reaction to this in light of Sara's frustration over the reaction to her idea for a pantry on Sundays? Recall that this vision came after a period of intentional discernment over what to do with the extra funds the Pantry would receive from the litigation settlement award.
2. What about Sara's angry letter to Donald Schell, one of the lead pastor's at St. Gregory's? Recall that Donald was person who cast the vision that ultimately led to Sara's conversion and her starting the Pantry in the first instance.
3. What about Paul, who said that they should wait and see what happens? And what do you think about what did happen ... the Sunday Pantry became or more low key and sanitized version of the Friday afternoon Pantry? Is that a bad thing? Or, as Sara put it, "mildly disappointing ... in the way that church itself could be, compared to the radical vision implied by Jesus's meal"?

XVI. Chapter 25

A. Controlled, Constrained Communion - As Sara recalls, "even though church was where I found communion, church couldn't, finally, contain it." "The Table's a threshold, a paper-thin place, luminous, where heaven and humans meet,' Jeff told me. 'It could be anywhere—a room, a jail cell; I could be ego-focused or doing a shitty job remembering the prayers; but I still cross that threshold.'"

1. As you reflect on this book, and Sara's walk from that first day at St. Gregory's to her blessing of Millie after her passing, in what ways do you find yourself thinking about institutionalized religion as having imposed unnecessary and unreasonable constraints

upon the power of the Eucharist? Things like limiting those who can deliver it, or limiting those who can receive it, or limiting the places where it can be delivered or the form it can take? In what ways do you find yourself thinking about all that institutionalized has done to preserve its power?

2. More importantly, in what ways have you discovered that God is actually fairly indifferent to all of it? Or do you think God has a view on the topic?

B. A Paradoxical Mystery to Swallow - Sara seems to have given herself over to her faith, despite her better sensibilities on the topic. "Christianity wasn't an argument I could win, or even resolve. It wasn't a thesis. It was a mystery that I was finally willing to swallow." This was in response to her reflection on Jay's response after he had watched Sara blessing and praying over his mom, Millie, who had just passed away. Jay had said that he didn't believe in God, but that in the mountains Colorado, above the tree line, he had experienced a "big, big love".

1. Thinking about Sara's quote, which is so simple and yet so insightful, in what ways is it descriptive of an internal struggle in her life (as opposed to the seemingly outward focus on Jay's faith, given the circumstances of the quote)? In what ways (if any) have you found this internal struggle to be true in your own life? What about the outward aspects of this struggle?

2. To the extent that this struggle is reflective of flawed theology within institutionalized religion, in what ways do you think that flaw may be intentional? In what ways is it unintentional?

3. What is your reaction (at an emotional/intuitive level) to this notion that Sara allude's too of a sort of universal experience of God that is unbound by religion or even scripture?

C. Balancing Our Desire for Things to Be Better/Different - As we reflect on our time in this book and Sara's story, we've spent considerable time questioning our faith practices and beliefs, as well as those of the institutions we've been a part of and the people with whom we have lived out our faith. Sara seems to have led us down this path, as she is clearly one who is easily frustrated by lumbering institutions and short-sighted individuals. At the same time, Sara has an uncanny ability to step back and look her frustrations from afar, recognizing that God is alive and present in the midst of them.

1. Thinking about this journey that we've been on, in what ways is God calling us to rethink our approach to "going upstream", as Rolheiser might say, as regards those in need? In what ways is God calling us to reconsider our own belief systems about faith, about communion, as well as to push for change in the institutions that act as the primary conduits for them?

2. And in what ways is God calling is simply to look for God, for Jesus, in the midst of our frustrations with those same people and those same institutions?

“You know,” Swami Jeff told me once, “God couldn't care less about the church. We don't understand the Eucharist, or that bread and wine live within us, so we ritualize the things that hold the mystery. We focus on the container and formalize the mystery. But you don't have to do that.”

D. Sara's Heavenly Feast; Your Heavenly Feast - Sara has spent considerable time in this book describing her feelings about communion and about feeding people, mostly using prose as a means to do so. At the end though, she describes her vision of heaven, using something more like poetry (and seemingly harkening to the Book of Revelation) in doing so.

1. What do you think of Sara's description of heaven? In what ways is it reflective of her reality here and today? In what ways is it forward-looking? Recognizing that Sara's world revolves around food and the Eucharist, in what ways is her description of heaven much broader than that? In what ways is her vision of heaven similar to your own? What are some words or thoughts that come to mind as you think about her vision of Heaven ... and your own ... reconciliation; reunion; love; beauty; friendship; peace; freedom from hunger; freedom from thirst; no more tears; freedom from fear; the five senses?

“Life, everlasting. Carol will be blushing, as she always does when someone pays attention to her, because the new guy is flirting as he hands her a plate of chicken. Steve will come in with his baby, Elijah, and six Chinese women. Homer will be chewing steadily and sadly. Martha and Katie will arrive, talking and laughing excitedly together with Jose. The room will fill with the intense smell of hops from the brewery across the street and pineapple from the stacks of overripe fruit by the baptismal font. Miss Lewis will serve the salad. I'll be listening to Veronica tell me one more time about her sick mother. My mother will be there, smiling at me. My father will be there, helping my brother David carry out a platter of fish. Paul will reach for the salt. We're eating together. The door opens. It is never over.”