Instructor Reading Guide

Donald finds a spiritual director, Jeff, for Sara. Note that Jeff is a Presbyterian (162). These Episcopalians at St. Gregory’s are very open-minded folk.

And what is she to do about the attacks of 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq? For 9/11 she opens St. Gregory’s. For the invasion of Iraq she plans a liturgy, and finds herself bereft of certainties. “Becoming a believer seemed to be giving me less interest in maintaining a set of rigid beliefs – about God and about politics” (160). She tries to center of Paul’s “faith working through love” [Galatians 5:6] (161).

She’s asked to give sermons. At St. Gregory’s the sermons emphasized “critical scholarship and personal experience.” Donald said that the idea was “to meet God in the wildness and immediacy of life,” not in “correct” doctrinal formula and “telling one another how to look at life” (176). This is not a very common affair. Critical scholarship undermines the common literal interpretation of the Bible, and personal experience and reliance on the guidance of the Spirit can seem flaky to churches with a strong liturgical practice like they have at St. Gregory’s. What do you think of this? Do your church’s sermons combine both critical scholarship and personal testimony – without “telling one another how to look at life”?

Sara observes that if the New Testament stories were correct, Jesus was “singularly uninterested in church” (178). Not your usual Christian notion. Does she mean to say that worship is unimportant?

She is asked by an acquaintance to perform a marriage ceremony (183).

She meets Paul Fromberg who shares Rick and Donald’s belief in “radical hospitality.” Bishop Swing had mentioned to her “the crazy hospitality, the open extravagance of the Last Supper” (189).

The Nicene Creed was not a part of St. Gregory’s service. Paul says: “It’s basically a toxic document set up to standardize belief and overturn heresies and draw a sharp line between us and them” (191).

While delivering food at the Potrero Hill projects, she reflects: “This was God’s holy hill: the Hill…. God lived in Ruth’s hands” (196). Is this part of what she means by Jesus’ being “singularly uninterested in church” (178).

The food pantry volunteers wanted 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” (214). Sara’s impressed with the resilience of people, and “in breaking bread with my people, and hearing their stories, I was learning … something about God: You can’t hope to see God without opening yourself to all God’s creation” (217).
St. Gregory’s holds regular “feasts of friends,” potlucks modeled on early eucharists (218). What do you think of this? Doesn’t it seem indecorous, and not the proper sort of ambience for being close to God?

Jesus’ own practice, by the way, was to eat meals with people, and the practice of the first Christians was to actually have a meal in which Jesus was remembered and communion was celebrated.

Paul volunteers to cook on Fridays for the pantry volunteers, and they discuss religion while cooking. The usual denominations depend on the idea that their own sect has the “secret code…. That was idolatry …; magical thinking, pagan religion…. God was not manageable.” Paul says, “The message of Jesus is the only sure cure for religion” (221).

Sara finds her faith in “the wild conceit that a helpless, low-caste baby could be God. That ugly, contaminated, and unimportant people embodied holiness.” She reflects that the kingdom was primarily about an afterlife, “but I believed it was this world, just as my parents had, in their secular way, insisted so long ago” (222).

Are you comfortable with this view? You might keep in mind that the Hebrew Scriptures are very much focused on how to live life – this is what the Covenant and Torah are all about. For a Jew like Jesus, God’s “kingdom” or “Ruling” meant primarily that lives could be lived differently – as in feeding the hungry, forgiving, and loving one’s enemies. In the early Christians’ faith in the Resurrection, this new living extended also into eternity. They believed that Jesus’ Resurrection vindicated his – and their – vision of living in the Kingdom.

Sara finds a new dimension of faith in healing. She holds Michael who faces an operation for stomach cancer (230-231).

She had begun to believe more in resurrection as something mysterious and about “the eternity available in a fully lived instant” (231).

(Surely Sara is right to be skeptical of too-easy descriptions of eternal life? “Resurrection” even in traditional teaching is a mystery and one needs to guard against “dumbing it down.” It’s not a matter of scientific knowledge or technological manipulation. It is “immeasurable” in that sense. But so are God, creation, and the human spirit. Christian faith is mysterious from the very beginning.)

Sara and Martha decide to get married. Notice that it is Katie (ca. 15 years old) who insists on this (232). And later at St. Gregory’s Donald and the other priests and others bless the marriage in an irregular rite (234). Then the marriages are annulled, but “what had happened at St. Gregory’s was outside both the law and the Law.” Their marriage became a metaphor for the “the difficult and vital imperative to love others”(235).
Interesting issues here, to be sure. Can gay people marry? Is the government the proper entity to decide this, and not the couple themselves? That is, the government can’t decide a religion for you, but it can decide a certain kind of partner or number of partners? You can see other questions here also: Mormons and Muslims. Clearly, such things as rules about child marriage are not controversial, but these other rules – about adults -- seem to require a little more justification than they are usually given, especially in the light of American belief in freedom of religion and conscience.

In addition to believing that the pantry being itself is eucharistic, Sara finds herself being asked by a little girl, Sasha, to apply to her baptismal water, the water “God puts on you to make you safe.” For Sara, it hadn’t made her safe. It was a sign “the unavoidable reality of the cross at the heart of the Christian faith” (236). Lynn gives a blessing to Sasha, and Sara “saw something flowing between them: the child, crucified, anointing Lynn with the power of her crucifixion, and Lynn, receiving it, anointing Sasha” (237). Lawrence is overwhelmed when he hears the story.

Sara reflects that people “often wanted more … sacraments, more rites, more prayer and healing and blessing” than the church was willing to give” (240) She thinks further that “real Christians” could be “total outsiders and still perform rites that evoked the Gospel messages of healing, new life, shared food, shared grief, shared peace” (241).

What do you think? Can you perform such rites? You should recall again that Jesus and his companions weren’t priests; they were lay people. The “authorized” people were those at the Temple in Jerusalem, and you know how that story went. Peter, Paul, and Jesus’ brother James were all executed. Isn’t there something radical, disturbing, and “unauthorized” about the Jesus movement? Maybe “being a human being” is something that in itself is “unauthorized”?

$200,000? The heart of it all is “the experience of being bread” (246). Derek, the very formal and controlled lawyer, asks her to write a prayer for him (247).

Extending the pantry? A difficult question. Notice their resorting to the Quaker practice of a “clearness committee” (248-249).

“You can’t be a Christian by yourself… I was going to be changed, too, and lose my private church” (256).

“The Cost of Faith” is the title of chap. 24. Before her, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a top Lutheran theologian, executed by the Nazis, had written of The Cost of Discipleship (1937) which attacked the notion of “cheap grace,” the idea that faith doesn’t cost anything. Here she has serious conflicts with here wife Martha and daughter Katie. And important realization is that that she was not purer than anyone else (262). Are you purer than other people?

“The unavoidably political Gospel of incarnation and murder” (265).
“Learning from experience instead of memorizing a formula forced me to pay attention. Doing the Gospel rather than just quoting it was the best way I could find out what God was up to” (265). This is almost a throwaway line, but it links learning from experience, paying attention, and action – and contrasts this with following formulae. What do you think? Could your life use a little more “paying attention”? And what would you do once you saw something important – black Americans being denied education with whites, for instance? And what would happen to you and your family if you decided to do something about it? Rocks through your window? Threats? Attacks?

Paul had admonished the Galatians that in Christ “there is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave nor free, there is no longer male and female” (Gal. 3:39). You can see the political implications, I’m sure: there couldn’t be Nazi laws about Jews, American laws about blacks or Indians, or the usual laws restricting women. All this visionary dreaming is very much “outside the box” of the culture of Paul’s day. Admittedly, Sara is a dreamer (and very much an actor, of course, as Jesus and Paul), but does that necessarily mean she’s wrong?

The point of church is not getting people to go to church but “to feed them, so they can go out and, you know, be Jesus” (265).

Sara used to live with Millie, her lover then, and Millie’s son Jay, and now Millie was dying. Sara followed Episcopal rules about only priests presiding at the eucharist (267), but as Millie got sicker, Sara needed extra strength. Then something happened as Sara prayed over the toast for Millie’s pills and broke it. “Oh, my God, it’s real” (272).

“Christianity wasn’t an argument …, a thesis. It was a mystery that I was finally willing to swallow” (274).

Her spiritual director, Jeff, says, “We don’t understand the eucharist, or that bread and wine live within us, so we ritualize the things that hold the mystery” (276).

Sara finally comes out to her atheist mother as they share a meal of lamb, bread, and wine. It wasn’t an official eucharist, but “it was real communion” (278).

She imagines “life, everlasting.” All her family and friends are there. “We’re eating together. The door opens. It is never over” (280).