

A Conversation with Sara Miles

1. You use the phrase “eating Jesus” in your book. What do you mean by that? What is the difference between “finding Jesus,” a term we hear often, and *eating* Jesus?

SM: As an adult convert, I think I heard the invitation to eat the body of Christ and drink his blood as something fresh and shocking--- not as a symbolic phrase dulled by years of repetition. It hit me the way it hit the first disciples, who found the idea completely disturbing. To say that communion means we are “eating Jesus” reminds me of how risky—and how thoroughly physical—the encounter with God is.

2. You write about both physical and spiritual hunger. What do you see as the causes of hunger?

SM: Most of the people who come to get free groceries at our food pantry are working people with kids. They simply don’t get paid enough: at minimum wage, they can’t afford to provide both food and rent for their families. But the scandal of hunger in this country goes way beyond individuals living in poverty: it’s a political issue involving the whole wasteful, over-subsidized agricultural system, which fails to feed even middle-class people well. As a nation, we’re obsessed by food, afraid of it, and deeply out of touch with what it means to sit down and eat real food with other people. We’re surrounded by abundance, we’re fat, and we’re starving.

Spiritually, I think we’re hungry because we believe we can only eat with the right people. And we’re hungry because we’re afraid to put the wrong thing in our mouths.

3. What’s been the most surprising response you’ve received to *Take This Bread*?

SM: Some of the most gratifying responses to my book come from people who have committed their lives to feeding others; it’s inspiring to hear their stories. I’m also deeply moved by letters of support and blessing from people whose political and theological views are very different from my own –conservatives who think homosexuality is wrong, evangelicals who think liberalism is ridiculous, atheists who can’t stomach the idea of religion at all. I’ve heard from Salvation Army officers, Orthodox priests, radical Catholics and Mormon housewives. Their generosity and openness to the message of *Take This Bread* reinforces my faith that the Holy Spirit blows everywhere—frequently knocking down denominational and political walls.

4. What are the biggest challenges to your faith that you face on a daily basis?

SM: Oh, I’m definitely my own biggest challenge. I’m bossy and impatient and I like to be right. My struggle is to try to control things less...to be open to change...and to be ready to see God in unexpected places and the most unlikely people.

5. What do you recommend for Christians who disagree with a lot of the right-wing evangelical rhetoric dominating the political landscape?

SM: First, *do* something. Feed, heal, help. Don't just argue about ideology.

Second, pray for your enemies. Don't pray that they become different, or start doing what you want them to do. Just pray for them.

You don't get to practice Christianity by hanging out with people who are like you and believe what you believe. You have to rub up against strangers, and people who frighten you, and people you think are evil or stupid.

6. And what recommendations would you make to leftists who find no room for religion?

SM: Again, *do* something. Feed, heal, help. Don't just argue about ideology.

Second, understand that secular leftists and religious leftists of many faiths have worked together to make political change throughout history. You don't have to wait to act until everyone agrees on every point of doctrine. Being a leftist isn't about being pure: it's about being willing to work with other people for justice, and for human rights across the board.

7. What do you most want readers to walk away with from *Take This Bread*?

SM: I hope that readers, whether or not they're religious, will be able to take away Jesus' message: *Don't be afraid*. That they'll find ways to act; to feed others, to accept being fed by others; that they'll be willing to open up to people very different from themselves.

Reading Group Guide and Topics for Discussion

1. When you hear about people “finding Jesus” what comes to mind?
2. In the prologue, Sara Miles writes: “At the heart of Christianity is a power that continues to speak to and transform us.” Do you believe that such a transforming power really exists? Where do you see faith transforming people? Where do you see faith making people narrow-minded and causing conflict?
3. Living in cities here and in the Third World, Sara was confronted daily by people in need. Where do you encounter the poor, homeless, hungry, frightened, weak and sick, and what happens to you in these encounters?
4. Sara writes that, as a journalist, “what mattered...was that I could launch myself into a morning, an unknown town, a war zone, and be fed—usually by strangers and sometimes by comrades, occasionally by enemies, but always by someone who was as hungry as I was or hungrier.” When have you been fed by strangers? When has eating with other people made a difference in your life?
5. With her grandparents’ missionary background, and her parents’ atheist background, are you surprised at Sara’s conversion? Do you think religious belief depends mostly on the way someone was raised?
6. The church Sara walked in to is both similar to and different from other churches. What about worship at St. Gregory’s do you think had the biggest impact on Sara’s understanding of Christianity?
7. Because she wanted to experience God, Sara fed people. What would you do in order to experience God? How would you know if you were hearing God speak to you?
8. Because she’s a lesbian, some people don’t believe that Sara can be a faithful Christian. Why do you think homosexuality has become such a divisive issue in churches?
9. At various points in her journey, Sara became aware of her core values. If you had to write down your own five core values, what would they be? Where did you develop those values? How do they affect your daily life?
10. All kinds of people came to the food pantry Sara started. Some of them, she admits, were thieves, or crazy, or difficult. Why do you think she insisted on keeping the pantry open to “the deserving and undeserving alike?” How would you make rules if you were running a food pantry?
11. How has your own understanding of faith changed since reading this book?

Discussion Guide for Lenten Study and Adult Christian Education

1. What has been your most powerful experience of communion?
2. Do you share Sara's belief that Jesus' Table should be open to everyone? Are there people you think should not be allowed to receive communion?
3. Discuss Sara's understanding of the rites of healing, marriage, baptism and Eucharist. Do you think rites that take place outside of what she calls an "official" church context can be truly sacramental? Do you ever experience church outside of church? Have you experienced Eucharist outside of a church service?
4. Sara was baptized as an adult, and writes that she takes her baptismal vows seriously. Read through these vows, and discuss how you live each one out.
5. "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." What does this mean in the context of Sara's food pantry, and the people involved with it?
6. Sara is a lesbian and a Christian. Does reading about her experience change your religious beliefs about homosexuality?
7. Sara writes that food pantry was "not a social service program, but church....it was modeled on the Eucharist." Is there a difference in your church between the way you do liturgy and the way you do outreach? How does Scripture inform your outreach work?
8. As a lay person, Sara preaches, serves communion, anoints, blesses, and leads prayer at her church. Do you know other laypeople who do any of this kind of work? What is your own experience of doing this work? Do you think that certain work should only be done by ordained people?
9. Visit St. Gregory's website <http://www.saintgregorys.org/> and read "About the Liturgy." Discuss the ways that St. Gregory's theology is expressed in its prayers, liturgies and practices.
10. Sara believes that conversion is not a single moment of epiphany, but an ongoing process. Discuss your own experience of conversion.
11. What is the Bible passage that you think best expresses the message of *Take This Bread*?

Action Guide

1. Contact http://www.secondharvest.org/zip_code.jsp to find your nearest food bank. Then locate a pantry, soup kitchen, or feeding program, and volunteer or donate money to help feed the hungry.

2. Write to Sara sara@saramiles.net and invite her to come speak to your church, study group, school or community food program.
3. Have a meal with a stranger.