

# the year of small things

*radical faith for the rest of us*



sarah arthur and erin f. wasinger

foreword by jonathan wilson-hartgrove



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For my husband, Tom,  
our pietist in residence,  
who practices more spiritual disciplines  
with his pinky finger in ten minutes  
than I do all week. Love you.  
—Sarah

For Dave, who keeps saying yes.  
—Erin

And for our beloved community  
at Sycamore Creek Church,  
which has taught us more  
in these past twelve months  
than we could ever hope  
to learn on our own.

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## acknowledgments

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From Sarah: Many thanks to my patient husband, Tom, and our two little boys, Micah and Sam, who are now conditioned to feel abandonment whenever I open my laptop. Mommy is all done

now, I promise. Thanks to my parents, Bob and Peg Faulman, who inevitably catch whatever diseases my children carry but lovingly watch them anyway. David and Penny Van Dam, your sweet lakefront “Mobe” was a lifesaver, the ultimate writer’s retreat. Extra-special thanks to our church “grandma,” Alice McKinstry, who had never heard of new monasticism but babysat my children, took them to play music at a nursing home with church friends from the neighboring trailer park, folded our laundry, welcomed struggling people to live in her house, loaned us her car, worked our soil, and bathed us in the love of Jesus—all so I could write a book about sharing life in the small things. Really, your name should be on the front cover, not mine. Finally, Erin, Dave, Alice, Violet, and Louisa, you are a treasure. I still can’t believe you agreed to this. Here’s to another year of small things!

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# foreword

jonathan wilson-hartgrove

In the summer of 2016, when I first read this book, Simone Biles went to the Olympics in Rio and dazzled the world with her grace and skill as a gymnast. My daughter was six, and we happened to be spending the week at a beachside cottage that had been gifted to us. Every evening, after playing in the sand all day, we turned on the TV to watch the best gymnasts in the world—maybe the best of all time—and went to sleep in awe of what the human body can do.

Now my wife and I are trying to figure out how to get our daughter into gymnastics.

I suspect we're not alone. Watch any baby grow up and you learn that imitation is fundamental to human development. We imagine our own lives based on what we've seen and heard in the lives of others. Whenever someone strives to reach the fullness of her own potential, other people notice. We don't simply admire Simone Biles because of what *she* can do. Each of us also has to ask, even if we couldn't possibly say it aloud, "I wonder if I might be able to do that too?"

When Saint Paul searches for a metaphor to help people imagine the spiritual life, he often chooses the Olympic athlete. “Train yourself to be godly,” he writes to Timothy (1 Tim. 4:7 NIV), using the same Greek word that was used to describe Olympic training. To the Corinthians he writes that this is his own model: “I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize” (1 Cor. 9:27 NIV). In the language of the Letter to the Hebrews, all such striving is an imitation of Christ himself: “For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:2 NIV).

Imitate me as I imitate Christ, the apostle says. When someone in contemporary society fasts for forty days or gets up to pray in the middle of the night or sells his possessions to give to the poor, we worry about him. That kind of devotion seems extreme. But such discipline for the sake of Olympic glory is not considered masochism. When my daughter watched Simone Biles, it seemed natural for her to want to become what she’d seen.

When we see the fullness of our own potential in someone else, it only makes sense to do everything we can to pursue it.

One thousand six hundred years ago, in the desert of Upper Egypt, monasticism was born as a movement to follow the way of Jesus to the fullness of our potential as daughters and sons of God. By most every account, Saint Anthony was the spiritual gold-medal Olympian of ancient Egypt. So many people went out into the wilderness to imitate his asceticism that his biographer, the bishop of Alexandria, said, “The desert became a city.”

I love the story Saint Jerome tells in his *Life of Paul the Hermit* about how Anthony, in his nineties, had a vision of a man, someone even further advanced on the way to holiness than he was, living in a remote cave somewhere in the desert. Knowing that he had to learn from this man, even without knowing where he was—even if he died trying to find him—the nonagenarian Anthony set out across the hot sand of Upper Egypt, trusting that God would show

him the way. (Ask yourself what you would do if you learned that your grandparent had decided to make such a pilgrimage.)

Of course God leads Anthony to Paul the Hermit. Standing at the door to his cave, the great Abba Anthony begs to come in and sit at the feet of this man no one has ever heard of. He even says that he'll have to lay down and die there if Paul doesn't grant him an audience. Opening the door with a wry smile, Paul asks, "Are you surprised that I didn't rush to greet you after you threatened to die on my doorstep?"

Yes, you're supposed to laugh. Because in the end, the joke is on each of us. Whenever we see someone living the life that's really life—that fullness of what we were made for—it only makes sense that we would want to imitate it. Jesus says it would make perfectly good sense for us to go and sell everything we have to buy the pearl of great price. So we give ourselves to imitation. We strive to follow the way that has been paved by those who've gone before us—Christ himself chief among them.

All of this is natural, and it is good. But in the end, the joke is on us because no amount of training and striving—no discipline or monasticism—guarantees that we will grow up into the fullness of him who fills everything. I love that Saint Anthony knew, even at the end of his life, that he still had so much to learn. I love that he was still willing to sacrifice everything to sit at the feet of one who could teach him. And I love that Paul laughed at him—that he helped him to laugh at himself because, amid all his striving, God had already done everything that was needed to make him perfect.

I love that old story about Abbas Anthony and Paul for the same reason I love this book. It takes seriously the work that is ours to do—and the reason it's worth doing in a world where we are so easily held captive to the patterns of death by principalities and powers. These spiritual mothers of American suburbia have heard the call to sell all and follow after Jesus. And they have not gone away sad.

They have, instead, like the ammas of old, given their attention to training for godliness in the small things of everyday life. Doing so, they have learned that this way is not easy—that it takes no less effort to live the way of Jesus in the suburbs than to live it in the inner city or the ancient desert. Reading their account, I see some ways that it’s even harder. Wherever we are, it turns out, there is a cross to bear if we are willing.

But that is not all. At the end of the day, the joke is on them, just as the joke is on me. The joke is on each of us. I can see old Paul the Hermit smiling. I can hear Jesus saying to the disciples, “It is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32 ESV). I hear Abba Anthony whispering at the end of his life, “I no longer fear God, but I love him.”

And I laugh. I laugh till I cry, just like I imagine Simone Biles must have when, after all those years of work, she nailed her routine, won the gold, and knew deep down inside that it was all a gift.

# introduction

## *the street view*

One of the elders said: Either fly as far as you can from men, or else, laughing at the world and the men who are in it, make yourself a fool in many things.

—Desert Fathers (4th c.)<sup>1</sup>

Sleeves rolled up on a gorgeous fall day last week, I (Sarah) grabbed a rag from a bucket of soapy water and ran it along the hood of the little car in my suburban driveway. It was not my car—you'll have to wait till the end of the book to find out why that matters—but I had offered to wash it. And it was not my house; this was the parsonage to which my husband and I had been appointed when he said yes to itinerant ministry. But it was our home. My two little boys were napping, the leaves were turning, and warm sun bathed my grubby sweatshirt and jeans as I cheerfully scrubbed a decade's worth of bugs off the front grill. Children called to each other in the nearby green space. Someone walked by and waved. This is good, I thought, humming. Life is good.

And then a car drove by, one of those with a camera on top, the kind that takes pictures for online maps. It cruised down my cul-de-sac, went around the loop, and came back, making a leisurely turn past the parsonage. Three hundred and sixty degrees of street view, documenting the bucket, the soapy rag, the little car, the shop vac, my work clothes, the squint on my face as I stood in my suburban driveway, feeling a mixture of amusement and annoyance. I realized there would now be a public record that I do, in fact, live here—the last place I ever expected to call home. Presumably, anyone zooming in on our street would see a typical middle-class suburban woman doing a typical middle-class suburban task, washing a typical middle-class suburban car. What they would not see is the journey I'm still taking to be at peace with this, to live my faith on the ground in this context.

And they wouldn't know what the car *means*.



You see, this hasn't always been my zip code. Before moving here six years ago, my husband Tom and I lived for three years of graduate school in an intentional Christian community called Isaiah House of Hospitality located in northeast central Durham, North Carolina. This was effectively the inner city, one of America's abandoned places, complete with all the stereotypes: boarded-up houses, overgrown lawns, rusted cars, police tape, prostitutes, roaming dogs. FBI raids. Gunfire at night, especially in the summer. Drive-by shootings of children.

And yes, we lived there on purpose.

Well, to be exact, our housemates Rebecca Byrd and her husband, David Arthur (no relation to us), lived, and still live, there on purpose. In fact, they plan to raise their children, grow old, and die there. Smack in the middle of Police District No. 1, Durham's "bull's-eye" for the most known residences of gang members, they will continue to renovate that former crack house and work the quarter acre of urban garden and feed their chickens and take in

the homeless. There where David once found a bullet lodged in the shingles of the front porch. There where Rebecca once told a fugitive hiding on the back porch, in the midst of a block-wide manhunt, “Children are in this house, and you will leave *right now*” (hospitality has its limits).

This is where David and Rebecca were planted, mere blocks from the congregation where Tom and I worshiped during our years at Duke Divinity School. Through that congregation we met them and eventually moved into the household.

My in-laws not-so-jokingly called Isaiah House the hippie commune. And in many ways they were right. Together with other members of the household, we shared our worldly goods (except our bank accounts and underwear—*eww*), worked the earth, welcomed the homeless, and practiced most of the twelve “marks” of the radical Christian movement known as new monasticism—more on that shortly. We ate and prayed daily with our housemates, rotated chores, and befriended our homeless guests. We watched children, cooked meals, and mopped the everlastingly dirty kitchen floor. We attended hearings, went to prayer vigils, cleaned up an empty lot. It was hard. It was amazing. It changed our lives.

But we knew it was temporary. Once we graduated from Duke, our United Methodist bishop would appoint Tom to serve a church somewhere in our home state of Michigan. Submission to the itinerant system of our denomination meant no control over our next zip code. And while we knew this could be anywhere, needless to say we were not prepared for the culture shock of an appointment to the suburbs of Lansing, Michigan.

When we first pulled up in the moving truck that Memorial Day six years ago, I was a bewildered mess. Don’t get me wrong: we were grateful. Grateful that our bishop had understood Tom’s desire to learn church-planting culture and assigned him as the second pastor of a young church-plant near one of our state’s largest urban centers. Grateful that Sycamore Creek Church had already welcomed us with open arms on two previous visits. Grateful that

the church had carefully and thoughtfully, on a shoestring budget, purchased this suburban parsonage for its new pastor to live in. These were people who already loved us, based on no merits of our own, because that's how God loves. They had already spent dozens, maybe hundreds of hours cleaning, painting, and dealing with all the stresses of new home ownership—by committee, no less. And now they had given up their Memorial Day celebrations to stand in the driveway, waving, as we made the final turn after thirty hours in that blessed truck.

“Welcome home!” they said.

That Memorial Day in Michigan we learned something. We learned that the love of Jesus transcends zip codes. It even transcends whatever “rules” or “marks” you seek to live by. That day, smiling, generous people gave up their holiday to unload our stuff, set up our house, feed us and all the workers, and pray with us—breathtaking hospitality to the stranger on a communal scale. Culture shock aside, I've never been given a spiritual community so instantly, without guile or pretense, people determined to love us despite our panicked expressions, boxes of crap, and occasional superior asides (“oh, we won't be using the dishwasher because [insert self-righteous moralizing about our former life in a ‘radical’ household, combined with barely informed commentary about the global water crisis and probably something else about sustainability here]”). Grace, pure and simple.



And yet.

And yet, steady formation in a way of life changes you, for better or worse. Six years into our appointment here, Tom and I knew that we had begun to capitulate to suburbia's vision of the good life: two nice cars, a weed-free lawn, two well-dressed and well-shod boys (Micah, age four; Sam, age one), a pantry full of premade foods, and little to no intentional interaction with those on society's fringes. We were insanely busy with work, parenting,

and church commitments. We could have easily convinced most anyone that we had no margin to reinstate some of the practices of simplicity, sustainability, and hospitality that had once characterized our life in community. In my husband's words, "I feel like our values have been neutered." So was that it? Was that all we could say about our lives? "We were cool once, and now we're just 'normal'—in all the worst ways."

It wasn't enough. We couldn't settle for simply thinking of radical faith as something in our past, a fun hobby, something possible only for those carefree, kid-free graduate students who had packed up and moved into the inner city just because we could. We began to realize we had to *reclaim and live* the practices that had become core to our understanding of what it means to follow Jesus. We had to translate some of the practices of radical faith—things like simplicity, hospitality, sustainability, reconciliation, justice—right here, right now.

Because if we were struggling against the false vision that comfort, safety, wealth, material possessions, pleasure, and leisure can bring ultimate fulfillment, then most likely other Christians had to be struggling too.

Enter Erin, Dave, and their three little girls (Alice, age six; Violet, four; and Louisa, two).

The short version of a difficult, beautiful story that Erin will soon tell in more depth is this: Three years ago, Dave and Erin left their jobs at a newspaper in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, for Dave to work at a sister publication, the *Lansing State Journal*, here in the capital city. They found Sycamore Creek Church. And after they had attended our church for a while, we learned that they too earnestly desired to loosen their grip on the American Dream. (I mean, what sort of middle-class mother cashes in her 401[k] from the job she left on purpose, in order to pay off school debt, so she could be ready for what God wanted next?) They had been reading the more "radical" voices in American Christianity—Francis Chan, David Platt, Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove—as well as

activists such as Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker Movement (a side of Catholicism these former Catholics had never dreamed existed). And all of that was compelling. But they felt like they were stumbling their way forward, alone and weird. Like us.

So we had them over for dinner.

“What if,” we began to brainstorm, “what if we read some books together?”

We’re geeks, so that sounded great. We talked about those evangelical megachurch pastors such as David Platt (*Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream*) and Francis Chan (*Crazy Love*) who are calling God’s people to eschew the American Dream in favor of global missions.<sup>2</sup> We agreed that while they’re making some good points, our real roots and interests connect more with the movement known as new monasticism, as expressed by its chief spokespersons, Shane Claiborne (*The Irresistible Revolution*) and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove (*New Monasticism; God’s Economy; Strangers at My Door*). Described in broad brushstrokes, new monastics are downwardly mobile, youngish adults from all denominational backgrounds who form intentional Christian households or communities in abandoned urban centers, and who are identified by twelve unique marks—including simplicity, hospitality, reconciliation, and contemplative Christian practices, among others.

This was our (the Arthurs’) background; these were our people. Finding another couple willing to talk about this—who even knew what new monasticism *meant*—was like finding people who speak your mother tongue. And all this reading and discussing was great, except . . . nothing had changed. At another dinner, in early summer, we wondered, “What if . . . what if we actually tried this radical faith thing right here, right now? What if we made this some kind of yearlong experiment?”

And that’s when our imaginations began buzzing. What if we took the twelve marks of new monasticism and attempted to translate them into our context, one per month, over the course

of a year? We weren't trying to change the world here. In fact, the most we could probably manage was one small practice, one tiny change, in each area. But we could at least *try*. And best of all, we could hold one another accountable.

"I think this should be a book," I said to Erin that night. Dinner was over. All nine of us had emerged onto the parsonage lawn, where a warm, light rain pattered around us in the dusk. Our children twirled, giggling, while I yanked up rhubarb stalks and placed them in Erin's waiting arms. "I think," I said, "it should be called *The Year of Small Things*. And I want you to write it with me."

One look at Erin's face told me everything. "Yes!" she said, her face wet with rain—or was it tears? "Yes!"

That night we stood in the front yard, faces upturned to those watery clouds, realizing that a year of living radically was somehow bigger and yet more manageable than we could have dreamed—now that we had accountability. We were like the newly returned exiles in the Hebrew Scriptures: the deep thirst to restore the dream, the reclaimed vision of what could be after what had been. It was all possible. Hard, but possible.

"For whoever has despised the day of small things shall rejoice," wrote the prophet Zechariah when the people of God had begun to rebuild the temple (4:10). Yes, the new temple was tiny compared to the old. It lacked the former glory, the attraction, the bling. And the Israelites who remembered the first temple wept when they saw it (see Ezra 3:12). But the second was built out of obedience. It was built out of a desire to do the best with what they had, because small things for God were better than no things. And God promised to bless it (see Hag. 2:9).

Not all of us will move to the inner city or live with the homeless or protest unjust laws before city councils. Some of us will do just one of those things; a few of us might do several. But many of us are called to try this radical thing right where we are, facing our current battles and barriers, one day at a time. Mother Teresa is often quoted as saying, "We can do no great things, only small

things with great love.” Well, that’s all we’ve got. Small changes, small acts of hospitality, small attempts at solidarity with “the least of these.” This is what our families, with help from some wise friends and our local church, attempted over the course of one year, taking notes as we went. We hope that others, like you, will not only rejoice with us but give it a shot.

Welcome to the year of small things.



Before we go any further, what are the twelve marks of new monasticism? This is a good page to flag, because we’ll be coming back to it a lot. First, the marks or practices are not “rules,” although they were born out of a conversation back in 2004 between a number of communities that were practicing radical discipleship and considered establishing a kind of “rule of life,” like the older monastic orders (such as the Benedictines and the Jesuits). They didn’t end up establishing a “rule,” but they did identify what appeared to be the key characteristics or practices of those communities. Taken all together, these practices become what new monastics call a “school for conversion,” the training ground for turning one’s life away from the false promises of the American Dream and toward Jesus.

### Twelve Marks of a New Monasticism

1. Relocation to the abandoned places of Empire.
2. Sharing economic resources with fellow community members and the needy among us.
3. Hospitality to the stranger.
4. Lament for racial divisions within the church and our communities combined with the active pursuit of a just reconciliation.

5. Humble submission to Christ's body, the church.
6. Intentional formation in the way of Christ and the rule of the community along the lines of the old novitiate.
7. Nurturing common life among members of intentional community.
8. Support for celibate singles alongside monogamous married couples and their children.
9. Geographical proximity to community members who share a common rule of life.
10. Care for the plot of God's earth given to us along with support of our local economies.
11. Peacemaking in the midst of violence and conflict resolution within communities along the lines of Matthew 18.
12. Commitment to a disciplined, contemplative life.<sup>3</sup>

During one of our earliest conversations about all this (if you can call it a conversation, since we spent most of the time refereeing small children), it became pretty clear that these twelve marks and our twelve months were not going to line up perfectly.

"I love this," Erin said. "But I don't quite get it. How do you do these things with small kids? Do you just add 'with children' to the end of each sentence? And anyway, are no women writing about new monasticism?"

"They're busy changing diapers," I said.

The questions kept piling up: What are we supposed to do about debt? Are celebrations allowed? How about Christmas presents? Can you hire a sitter so you can go on date night? And what about depression or other mental or physical illnesses? Is it selfish to take care of yourself, or can you get a gym membership? Is eating kale required (Erin asks warily, edging away)? And so on.

If we were going to tackle some of these issues—especially given our suburban (and in Erin and Dave's case, rural) context—we realized our twelve practices were not going to line up perfectly

with new monasticism's twelve marks. In fact, discernment about what God wanted us to do, in our unique families, given our unique circumstances, would be the single most important Christian practice we would learn.

Meanwhile, as the year progressed, other concerns that affected our two families became evident, concerns that no doubt affect our readers as well.

First, privilege. There's no getting around the fact that our families are able to *choose* practices of downward mobility because of our cultural status as educated, white, middle-class Americans. This is one of those moments when the gospel, rather than comforting the afflicted (as the old saying goes), instead afflicts the comfortable. We're assuming that if you find the title of this book compelling, you're probably not among the afflicted. You may *feel* afflicted sometimes, particularly when it comes to debt, stress, or any number of first-world problems. But if the bottom falls out, you have a network of support that will keep you living at roughly the same level you do now. That's us too. Fair warning: things will get harder. Chapter 12 may not be your favorite.

Second, we recognize that yearlong experiments are a trend. While we were wrapping up the first drafts of this manuscript, the book *The Year without a Purchase* came out, chronicling one family's attempt to live more simply after serving as missionaries in Central America. It's hilarious and worth the read. We're not pretending to have invented anything new. However, the fact that we are a "we" and not an isolated individual or family is, we feel, significant. This entire project is born out of a covenantal friendship between families embedded within a worshiping congregation of people who are seeking, in small and big ways, to follow Jesus in solidarity with those who struggle. This is not a personal hobby that makes a great read when we're done. This is, in the language of new monasticism, a lifelong "school for conversion," in which we voluntarily engage in communal accountability to turn toward Christ *as a people* for the rest of our lives. If you're going to make

lasting change, you need a posse. You need covenantal friendships. And some, if not many, of those friends need to be among the poor.

Third, we recognize that a growing number of counter-voices are responding to the more radical trends of American Christianity, including Jonathan Hollingsworth's poignant missionary memoir *Runaway Radical: A Young Man's Reckless Journey to Save the World*. We've shared some of our own cautions and questions in appendix A. But we want to be clear: we are not defending the suburbs. We believe that zip codes matter. When the new monastics claim as their first mark or practice "relocation to abandoned places of Empire," we take them seriously. In fact, partway through this experiment our entire *congregation* moved from worshipping in suburbia to buying a former Methodist church building smack in the middle of Lansing proper. This was huge. This was the single biggest thing that happened in this year of small things. And it changed the Wasingers—changed all of us—permanently.

But the parsonage didn't move. Tom and I remain in suburbia—because we also take the new monastics seriously when they insist on "humble submission to Christ's body, the church." In fact, the tension between these two marks lies at the heart of this experiment. And yet, no matter who we are or where we live, our current location doesn't give us a pass. If anything, the reality of zip code forces us to practice daily discernment about what, in fact, God is calling us to do, particularly when it comes to solidarity with the poor.

And therein lies the biggest challenge: discernment. Trying to figure out what God wants *you*, within the context of your church and community, to do. Perhaps you too have been reading and listening to some of the more radical voices in American Christianity, and perhaps you too have felt both convicted and confused about how to respond. In reading these voices it's easy to assume that, one, radical faith is nothing less than changing the whole world; and two, changing the world begins with those of us who call ourselves Christians becoming *more committed*.

Now, some of these guys attempt to clarify that it's about changing our own hearts, which is true. And it starts with one person at a time, which is also true. But it feels like the overarching message is that if we were *really, really dedicated* as followers of Jesus, if we really took Jesus seriously, there would be no global food crisis or sex trafficking or nuclear arms race or (insert your systemic sin of choice).

Which means we're all flunking. Big-time. As one commentator put it, "It's really hard to read these books, one after another, and confidently declare yourself a Christian at the end."<sup>4</sup> Even I feel like that, and I regularly invite the poor to live in my house. To my knowledge this has made zero impact on my city's housing problems, much less on global poverty. There is no village in sub-Saharan Africa that now has running water because of me—and I have lived in sub-Saharan Africa.

Not to diminish what so many amazing people are doing out there, the sacrifices they are making, the journeys God has called them on. Some of you *are* those people—or maybe *were*, having spent months or even years working for some mission agency or other, or living on purpose in the forgotten urban centers of America. But your own firebrand efforts have exhausted you. You became what you thought was really, really committed only to find yourself really, really burned out. Or maybe God called you to something else: graduate school, pastoral ministry in a small town, caring for a family member, getting married, having kids, getting out of debt, taking on a family business, battling illness, even battling post-traumatic stress disorder. And now you're feeling like a spiritual dropout, no longer really, really anything except tired.

Whether this call to downward mobility is new or you have done or are doing the radical thing, if you get nothing else out of this book, we want you to get this: radical faith is not about being übercommitted. It's not about being überspiritual. It's about *discernment*.

This isn't about receiving a sudden vision, a decided clarity about what you're supposed to do. Discernment is more like standing on a foggy mountain trail, peering into the gray mass that is your best guess at a trail. You take a few steps at a time, check your compass and the crumpled map in your pocket. Sometimes there's a surprise vista when the fog clears; occasionally you miss your turn. Most of the way you're plodding along without a clear sense of what's next. But you don't go it alone. You hike with a team. And together you listen for the voice of One calling in the fog.

One way we practice this listening is by sharing everyday life with others in covenantal friendship. And also by sharing everyday life with the stranger, the poor, the one with his "back against the wall."<sup>5</sup> Because when we share life, others' problems become our problems; the things God cares about become the things we care about. We discover turns on the trail that we never noticed on the map before. We witness a fellow hiker struggling, and we struggle too. And as a community we can leverage our strengths to bear one another's burdens.

That's how the world gets changed for the sake of Christ.

That's what radical faith looks like for the rest of us.

It's that small.

It's that huge.



So break it down: One city, one church, one year. Two families. Twelve small but radical changes. That's our story in a nutshell. That's what we'll be telling in this book: each chapter a different month, each month a different discipline, all cumulatively conspiring to make us a little less "normal," a lot more vulnerable, way more honest, and, we hope, a bit more like Jesus than we were last year.

What does this entail for you?

First, pick a month in which to start. For the Arthurs and the Wasingers, it was August 2014. We had been kicking around ideas

since that rhubarb-picking epiphany in early summer, but finally we said, “Let’s do this.” For you (and your family, if applicable), it may be January, or it may be after school gets out. Whatever the case, pick a date. Say, “In two months, it’s getting real around here.” Say, “I don’t fully get what this is about, but I know I need it.” Say, “Let the wild rumpus begin!”

Then, make a list of practices. A glance at the covenant at the end of this introduction can be your guide. Each month we tackled a different area or topic in which to practice radical faith. Each family chose (or fell into) one small thing—just one—that we would begin to do in that area. Sometimes we chose the same thing. Sometimes our families each faced unique challenges that required unique focus. Whatever the case, we added those practices cumulatively over the course of the year, giving ourselves grace when we took more steps backward than forward, or when circumstances outside our control meant starting all over again, or when nothing seemed to be happening at all.

Don’t worry: the twelve months are cumulative. You can go on to the next small thing even as you’re working out the details of the previous ones. And you don’t have to go in order (other than starting with covenantal friendship, which we feel is essential). It’s all of a piece. Be patient with yourself. But start.

By the end of one year, where are you? Twelve steps closer, we hope, to the One who can make something out of nothing. You may not have changed the world, but you’ve begun to let God change you.

Below is the draft of our covenant, which details what we identified as each month’s focus. This was not a slow warm-up: we dove right in. Tried and failed, tried again. Feel free to write your own version of what follows. Or simply read and reflect. In any case, pray. God may have different things in mind for you than God did for us. As we’ve said, the practice of discernment is the single most important spiritual discipline we learned along the way. This, we hope, will be the case for you as well.

## Covenant

The year of small things: an experiment in small but radical changes, to embrace the way of Jesus, right where we are.

The challenge: to discern one small change in each of the following areas that we can embrace or reclaim over the course of the next year.

### August: Covenantal Friendship

Through accountability and wisdom from others in intentional community, our first month is about covenanting in spiritual friendship with those who can help set the transparency and boundaries required for our yearlong experiment of small but radical changes.

### September: Hospitality beyond Martha Stewart

Whether it's shared space (your home) or shared time (meals, laundry, holidays together), new monasticism is straightforward about welcoming the "other"—a radical reorientation of our culture's obsession with status and family, as well as an affront to our culture's distortions of true hospitality. We want to debunk the myth of "safety" and challenge all of us to welcome Christ in the stranger.

### October: Radical Finances

Rejecting the American Dream. Period. (Debt reduction, spending less, giving more, accountability.)

### November: Reclaiming Spiritual Habits

Reclaiming and integrating shared spiritual practices into our lives. (Prayer, confession, Sabbath, etc.)

### December: Stuff

Downsizing during the holidays; exploring what it means to be creators rather than consumers; navigating cultural and family expectations without “buying into” society’s myth that stuff equals status or even love.

### January: Holy Time

Striking a balance between serving, working, family relationships, creating, learning, personal health, social obligations—not to mention friendship with the poor, the stranger, the other. In the new year, as busy families, how do we set apart Sabbath time?

### February: Vows

Strengthening our commitments in marriage or singleness for the building up of the whole community and protecting those commitments when our culture—and even when all the good “radical” things we’re attempting to do—overwhelms us.

### March: Planted in the Church

Recognizing that new monasticism is not a substitute for the local church; it isn’t a new or alternative way of doing church but a unique “order” within the larger community of faith. Embedded in a local body of believers, we embrace the challenges and celebrate the victories of our congregation.

### April: Kid Monasticism

Shared life means not waiting till this season in our families’ lives has passed or all our fears are addressed before we make radical changes. We affirm that our big decisions impact how our children participate in and experience God’s kingdom. We encourage kids to grow in their faith and to serve God in radical ways too.

### May: Sustaining Creation

Food choices, water conservation, community gardening, composting—we consider ways to live as sustainers of God’s creation even as we recognize that it is creation, through God, that sustains us.

### June: Unselfish Self-Care

It’s at first a counterintuitive notion that to serve the community, you need to take care of yourself—and we don’t see many new monastics discussing it, which is exactly why it needs to be talked about. How is taking care of yourself (your health, your exercise, your sleep, your diet, your downtime) a way of attending to the overall health of the community?

### July: Just Living

To live in America means to participate in systems of injustice. But Christians cannot *just live*; rather, we must seek to *live justly*. So how can we as a worshipping community leverage our resources and our access to power—in solidarity with those who struggle—to make for change in this, God’s city? We recognize with humility that we are going to mess this up. But we keep on.

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Drafted in August 2014 by

Sarah, Tom, Micah, and Sam Arthur

Erin, Dave, Alice, Violet, and Louisa Wasinger

Reviewed by

David Arthur and Rebecca Byrd of Isaiah House of Hospitality, Durham, North Carolina

~~~~~ *Questions for Reflection and Discussion* ~~~~~

1. If you could ask contemporary Christian radicals one question, what would it be?
2. Sarah and Erin talk a lot about the Christian practice of *discernment*, of seeing a way forward on the journey of faith *together with other Christians*. According to the apostle Paul in some of his letters to the early churches (see Eph. 1:17–19; Phil. 1:9–11; and Col. 1:9–10), how does discernment happen? What is the point?
3. How might your zip code affect your perceived ability to follow Christ in radical ways?
4. If you were to draft a covenant of twelve practices, what would it include? (For covenant suggestions and templates, see [www.yearofsmallthings.com](http://www.yearofsmallthings.com).)

~~~~~ *For Further Reading* ~~~~~

- Claiborne, Shane. *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006.
- The Rutba House, ed. *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005.
- Starbuck, Margot. *Small Things with Great Love: Adventures in Loving Your Neighbor*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2011.
- Thurman, Howard. *Jesus and the Disinherited*. 1949. Reprint, Boston: Beacon, 1996.
- Wilson-Hartgrove, Jonathan. *New Monasticism: What It Has to Say to Today's Church*. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008.

# 1



## covenantal friendship

Wait, you've heard of Shane Claiborne?

—Sarah Arthur (to Erin Wasinger, in one  
of their first coherent conversations)

### **Sarah's Story**

When Erin arrives with some ingredients for our weekly dinner, her three girls bundled against the cold, she looks tired and frazzled. At the last minute, Dave had to work the night shift. Because I'm deathly allergic to their dog, she is the one who comes to us. Even though it's six degrees and dropping. Even though she doesn't have winter boots. Even though it takes what feels like forty-seven minutes to get the girls suited up and out the door. Even though, as she will tell you, depression intensifies with the winter darkness and shuts her up inside like a caged animal. She is here, food in hand, ready to share a meal.

All because she and Dave made a vow of “yes” to this year of small things.

Dinner once a week. That’s it. That’s our one small thing in the quest to build community. We will attempt to do this again next week, although life regularly conspires to keep this from happening. If it’s not soccer, it’s travel, weather, or the never-ending flu season. When we first started, we managed it only monthly until Thanksgiving, then didn’t pull it off again until late January. But it’s always on the calendar. We’re not going to beat ourselves up if it’s not consistent. We figure hit or miss is better than never.

Erin shows up with Alice, Violet, and Louisa around 4:45, we pool what we’ve got in our pantries (usually coordinating ahead of time who will provide what), and we start to cook. Micah and Sam flail around in delirious excitement: so many blonde girls! Go crazy, Y chromosome! The children wander, fight, interrupt. Someone sets the table, arranges chairs. I attempt to ignore my dirty kitchen floor and hope the bathroom is at least serviceable. When not working the night shift, Dave shows up from work, pitches in. Tom pours some wine and goes on a problem-solving binge about the Wasingers’ job situation or their housing quandaries. A child is pushed by another; there are tears.

We light a candle, say the opening verse of Psalm 23. We eat. The grown-ups talk. Reflect on this year of small things. How are finances going? Any breakthroughs on hospitality? Have you had a date night recently? Before I can finish a sentence—any sentence—Sam tips his bowl of risotto onto his tray, then onto himself. Occasionally we remember to invite the children to reflect on what Micah calls “instirring” questions. The children happily excuse themselves to play the fourteenth round of hide-and-seek. We talk until Sam or Louisa or both fall apart, then hurriedly clean up while the three oldest create a swirling vortex of tired craziness. We corral the troops, attempt to pray one last time by candlelight, sharing where we experienced God this week. It takes

several adults to bundle everyone up, but before they leave we sing “Go Now in Peace.”

Small things, we tell ourselves. Remember?



Covenantal friendship. That’s the first task.

On the surface, it may sound rather simple: find a small group of other Christians (preferably local) who are interested in covenanting with you in shared practices of radical faith. People who will make vows to you, vows to lovingly ask you the hard questions.<sup>1</sup> But we’ll be honest: this could be the hardest thing you do all year. It may be the first and only thing you truly flunk at.

That’s because the quest for this kind of honest, vulnerable community flies in the face of rugged American individualism. The nuclear unit in the single-family home is the standard of our collective imagination. Most of us are raised by parents who have inherited this vision and attempted to make it happen, for better or worse. And once we get old enough, we are expected to forge our own way, start our own self-sufficient primary unit, complete with happy marriage, two kids, two cars, and, oh, let’s throw in the picket fence.

But you and I know this isn’t enough. It’s not even working. As American demographics shift and our economic situation becomes more and more complex (read: difficult), it’s clear that something needs to change. And rather than being the last to abandon the false promises of the American Dream, we as Christ-followers need to be at the front edge of something different. A new vision for sharing life. A vision of covenantal community.

So the year of small things begins here. It begins with a small group of fellow travelers on the journey, folks with whom we are vulnerable, folks who will hold us accountable, who are willing to share *life*, not just “outreach” or “mission.” And by “life” we mean the material stuff of daily existence: the food, housing, transportation, chores, child care, prayers, conversations, finances, problem solving that it takes to make our lives run.

As I've already mentioned, when it comes to this aspect of radical faith, Tom and I have done some big things. While in seminary at Duke, we went from a one-bedroom apartment near campus (which we thought was small, after our house in northern Michigan) to *one bedroom* in Isaiah House. Shortly after we moved in, the residents of Isaiah House numbered twelve, including three nursing infants and a three-year-old. Yup. It was nuts.

Children cried at all hours of the day or night. Dinnertime was a crazy mash-up of vegetarian entrées, guests frying fish in what seemed like two feet of oil, and inedible-smelling baby food. The kitchen floor—mopped loyally once a week by Tom—stayed clean for the thirty seconds it took him to rinse out the mop. When seminary friends would ask us, “How’s life in community going?” we’d say, “It’s hard.” But when they inevitably followed up with, “So are you going to leave?” we’d say, “What? No. This is where God has called us.”

It was tough; it was also full of joy. We went on retreats to the mountains and the sea. We decorated for Advent, watched babies take their first steps, borrowed from and loaned things to our neighbors. We worshiped together at our local church. When Rebecca had their second son, we took turns hanging out with Big Brother till grandparents arrived.

Sharing life.

It was perhaps the closest I've ever come to the vision of community that we see in Acts 2:41–47. The passage depicts the strange result of Jesus's mandate to go into all the world (Matt. 28:19–20): a vision of people who stay put, doing life together. They hold all things in common, share resources, help others in the community who have needs, worship together, study, pray, break bread in one another's homes, and celebrate the God who makes it all possible. And not just occasionally, for special events like Easter, but “day after day.” For weeks, months, years.

It's easy for Tom and me to judge our other attempts at building community against that radical experience. But this is not the

year of big things; it's the year of small things. So the struggle for us is not to try and *replicate* Isaiah House in a new context but to discern what a creative reframing of that vision could look like.



The new monastics value both “nurturing common life” and “geographical proximity to community members,” and it was in this spirit that we attempted to build some kind of community in our new suburban neighborhood. Our first few years in Lansing were like a gag reel of outtakes: one failed attempt after another. We started a community garden in our subdivision, which, after two summers of attrition in the volunteer pool as well as the addition of small children to our family, now lies abandoned by everyone except the birds and our neighbor who is forced to look at it from his kitchen window. We also attempted to share lawn-care equipment with another family down the street: they used our mower in the summer, and we used their snowblower in the winter—when it worked, which was almost never. The list goes on.

Eventually we figured out that the Wasingers happened to live roughly ten minutes down the road. Not just neighborly acquaintances, but genuine, on-the-ground, in-the-flesh potential partners in this radical Christian thing. Friends who were willing to ask us the tough questions—and who were willing to let us do the same for them. And so our challenge, as this year began, was not just to envision but actually to build community together.

What does “shared life” look like between separate households, separate schedules, separate finances? Both dads work outside the home in demanding jobs that often include evening responsibilities. Both women are write-at-home moms of small children, which at times feels like living under house arrest. Until recently Erin homeschooled their three girls; I arrange part-time child care for Sam so I can freelance while Micah is in preschool. Both families are deeply invested in ministry at our church, which involves meetings, billions of emails, planning, programs, Sunday-morning

responsibilities, and billions of emails—did I say that already? Billions. Add errands, doctor’s appointments, the occasional extra-curricular activity, plus eleven other intentional spiritual practices over the course of a year, and dinner together once a week feels downright heroic.

So we start there, and along the way we consider how to shoulder the burdens and blessings of hospitality. We trade, borrow, or give material things that the other family might need. We brainstorm child-care needs between the two households. We look at each other head-on and say, “So, how is it with your soul?”

Community on this scale is a not-so-subtle subversion of our culture’s top value: take care of your own. Deal with what you need to deal with, but do so within your family unit. Rely on those people first, and if you haven’t got family to speak of, either become some kind of burned-out attempt at a superhero or fill out an application for social services. Whatever you do, don’t drag your “church family” into the mess, aside from the occasional prayer request (because, let’s be honest, most of us don’t really mean that phrase “church *family*”—not really). Rugged individualism, right?

Or, as Erin and Dave learned, *wrong*.

## Erin’s Story

“Whoa. I almost filed your email in the ‘family’ folder,” Sarah told me over the phone the other day. We were discussing church programming details during Sam’s naptime, which is one of the few times of day either of us can complete a sentence.

“Well, we kinda are now.”

Around the Arthurs’ dinner table, we had made vows to each other as friends. We had scribbled a covenant and ratified it with David and Rebecca of Isaiah House. We had tossed around the vague buzzwords “community” and “shared life,” eventually zeroing in on “covenantal friendship.” We promised to be transparent; we promised to be one another’s cheerleaders. We didn’t know

then, of course, that we would come to love one another, but that happened too, somewhere along the way. We had become family.

Dave and I had needed this kind of friendship on a deep level. We'd tried the rugged individualism thing the first seven or eight years of our marriage, living eight hours from family.

We had three kids in rapid succession. We had two cars, a century-old story-and-a-half home in Wisconsin, and a dog named after a character from *Sex in the City*. We had the makings of the American Dream: the education, the full-time newspaper jobs, the marigolds in the landscaping. And the debt. Oh, the debt: our student loans, the car payments, the hospital bills. The picket-fence thing is all I thought I wanted.

Once I had it, though, my imagination froze. I remember those weeknights vividly. I'd set a glass of red wine beside me while I folded laundry in front of public television shows. Dave would come home long after I went to bed. A baby might stir upstairs, and I'd mourn that I got to see her only one hour that day. I might hear a car door slam, the neighbors coming home. I didn't know their names.

And then Dave started going to this little church that met in an old photography studio. Water City Church was so unlike the Catholicism we had grown up with. The pastor took the congregation on a five-year walk through the book of Matthew. They sang old hymns and David Crowder songs, and some would raise their arms in exultation, eyes closed. Unnerved, Dave and I sipped our beverages and observed for the first few months. Still, they welcomed us like old friends whenever we walked in. We began to share dinners, swap babysitting nights, and have long conversations over tea about careers and parenthood. I loved them before I knew I also loved Jesus.

Jesus bowled us over there in illustrations and metaphor. The Holy Spirit had ample time to hook us on that phrase Saint Matthew uses over and over: "the kingdom of heaven." "The kingdom of heaven is like," Pastor Jason would repeat and unpack, week

after week: it's like a mustard seed, yeast, hidden treasure; it's like a wedding feast and bridesmaids waiting for the groom. Easy to enter for those who are humble as children, but difficult for the rich. Jesus's parables and Jason's teaching wove cross-grained with the growing sensation in my gut that Dave and I had to choose: Would we follow Jesus (whatever that meant), or would we let this feeling pass (maybe it was just indigestion)?

Spoiler alert: it was not indigestion. Matthew's Gospel unnerved us to the point of response. We began praying with the girls ("I think I'm doing it right," I told my friend Amy). We learned to tithe. We bought a children's Bible and read it at bedtime.

We started to wonder—aloud—if we ought to get serious about the debt thing, the career thing, the Jesus thing. A series of small yeses thawed our imaginations on what the kingdom of heaven might look like *now*—yes to helping lead the moms group at church, yes to taking communion there, yes to volunteering in Sunday school, yes to the refugee resettlement project. Questions bloomed in that fertile ground, and we got a bit ambitious: What *couldn't* we say yes to? Quitting the job that paid for day care? Moving to be closer to family in Ohio? Using our gifts and passions for the elusive yet all-encompassing kingdom of heaven?

The kingdom leaves no map, and all we had were a bucketful of parables and the energy that said we could do this (whatever "this" was). We had no plans, but when a job posted at a sister newspaper in Lansing, Michigan, Dave sent his résumé. Late in August 2012, Lansing called.

The five Wasingers—plus Mr. Big, the carsick mutt—piled into the van for a tour that lasted fewer than forty-eight hours of the city that could be home. As we left Oshkosh early on a Saturday morning, I saw a friend running on the bridge on Wisconsin Street. What a bizarre memory of her, one of the people I loved best, in the rearview mirror . . . like I was already saying good-bye.

"Welcome to Pure Michigan," a blue sign beckoned four or five hours later.

My heart skipped. I weighed pros and cons on that drive. I could quit my job, but I'd have to leave our church. The Eastern time zone has longer summer nights, but I'd have to say good-bye to my house. And on it went. Some of these I said aloud, but the blue sky!—oh, that Michigan sky spoke louder. All those Great Lakes must make the sunshine dazzle more in the Mitten State: the azure romanticized the weedy parking lots that welcomed us; the sky faded to periwinkle as we dined alone downtown, the streets all but deserted in the state capital on a weekend night in late summer.

“Could we really move here?” Dave asked.

I sipped my wine, staring out at the empty sidewalk. We'd walked by a bail bonds shop, vacant storefronts, and the domed capitol building. We snapped a selfie and smiled. Maybe, our expressions said. Maybe this could be home.

“Maybe.” I sipped more wine.

This trip, the official second interview, was more a double date than interrogation. Dave's future boss took us on a tour of the city, the newspaper building, and even a local farmers' market. More questions came up about Lansing itself than about the actual job. What were the schools like? What about affordable housing? Each answer came as inevitability: Home? This? As we drove away from the city toward Wisconsin, I took in the boarded-up showrooms on overgrown car lots. The homes that had taken the recession hard. The liquor stores and pot shops with grates over windows. The congested suburban thoroughfares and the stoplights that turned red despite the lack of pedestrians or cars in the heart of downtown.

And the blue sky shone overhead, turned that stunning periwinkle at dusk.

The job offer came shortly thereafter, once we'd returned home. Dave laughed into the phone as he called me with the news. “So,” he said, “want to move to Michigan?” I stood in the parking lot of Alice's pre-K, waiting to pick her up. “Um, wow. Wow. Dave,” was all I could say. My church, I thought. My heart.

“God goes with you,” my friend Amy said one night on my couch. “You’re not going alone. You’re being sent, Erin. I don’t want you to go, but you’re being sent.”

So we went.

The first voices we encountered in this new wilderness were those in books; we had no friends here, no church yet, so books kept us company for many long months. We read David Platt, Francis Chan—and I’d set them on my bedside table and think, “Yes, but . . . we have fifty grand in debt.” Then came Shane Claiborne’s *The Irresistible Revolution*. His was a voice that resonated. We felt that the new monastics understood how we wanted to spend this life: diligently following Jesus; intentionally generous with our stuff, money, and time; and committed to a place. New monasticism is compelling to people who have just left their church home for a new state. It calls you to ground yourself, to stay put.

But as Dave and I read more, we realized we were reading these books in a vacuum. We needed a church community to help us discern how any of the marks could be translated into our context. Could we practice any of these marks in our rural rental without diluting them to the point of being inauthentic at best, harmful at worst? Could we, how could we—? We had so many questions, especially about where to even begin, with three kids and a load of debt.

Even as the questions continued over our first year in Lansing, our GPS brought us to a spot on the map where God was busy: Sycamore Creek Church. It was with gratitude that I stood stunned in the rhubarb patch that day when Sarah asked us to join the Arthurs’ experiment in small things. They, and Sycamore Creek Church, didn’t need us. We needed them.

We needed them not for socializing, though there’s wisdom for homeschooling parents in leaving the living room once in a while, especially around February. We needed this covenantal friendship and the shared dinner once a week because nowhere else were our questions considered a healthy part of our formative growth rather

than a nosy intrusion. These weekly dinners weren't about gathering fellow Shane Claiborne readers and geeking out about his most prophetic quotes. It wasn't a fan club; it was spiritual formation. It was, if you will, a baby step toward an *order*.

Like novitiates, if you're praying that God will speak through this new community, things get real, fast. Brace yourself for truth telling.

See, partway into our year of small things I was unhappy; something in our family life wasn't working. I live with depression, sure, but this was more than clinical. It was something I couldn't put my finger on. My soul was being crushed by something wearing an invisibility cloak. As I prepped a homeschooling lesson one December afternoon, I noticed a yellow school bus drive by our house. The next morning at breakfast, again. That afternoon, as I finished the lessons and was folding laundry, again. Again and again, I'd look up just at the right time. And I'd be longing for that bus to stop.

We had begun to homeschool because a teaching method that a friend was using back in Wisconsin resonated with us, the burned-out employees who saw their children for an hour or two a day. This bibliophile who worked more than full-time envisioned rest and renewal in days spent reading good books and exploring nature. But in practice, now that we were in Lansing, *snow*. So much snow. Our first two winters in Michigan were the worst on record for any human life anywhere (almost). And in practice, isolation: we were miles from everything. And in practice, my kids weren't learning with anyone but their burned-out mother. And in practice, we're a really white bunch in our house. The world doesn't look like us; it's much, much bigger.

What started as slow mornings reading and long afternoons outside became petty arguments between siblings, a strain in my voice. And meanwhile, I was reading all that Jesus, all that Shane Claiborne, all that Dorothy Day, all telling me to get out and serve my world; it was a recipe for incongruity. So partway through

this year of small things, Tom spoke as a prophet (but don't tell him that).

"It sounds like homeschooling is the problem." French toast casserole and bacon took the edge off his statement at the parsonage dinner table that Tuesday.

"Homeschooling isn't really the problem," I argued. The girls and I were reading such good books!

"Or maybe it's where you live? You're really isolated out there." But, you know, we were in a lease. "You're stressed, and something's not working." Tom is never afraid to go on, and his voice remained calm and kind. "How do you see homeschooling and new monasticism working together? What about where you live?"

"I don't know. Yeah, I don't know."

When pieces of your life start to move because of this friendship, consider God to be at work. Be humble; be patient. Tears pooled in my field of vision. A toddler squirmed on my lap. I ate more bacon. Sarah nudged Tom along with a cough (he didn't catch her cue); she started picking up the dishes.

"We'll be praying for you," she said later as we put on gloves and coats. I knew they would. We hugged at the door. "We love you, friends."

We stewed and prayed about this together for months. Finally, while the Arthurs were visiting family in Florida in February (some people have all the luck), Dave and I decided that, at the semester's end, we would quit homeschooling. We sent an email, which Sarah says she raced outside to the pool (again, in February, but I'm not bitter) to share with Tom.

"I didn't think you'd actually do it," Tom laughed a week later, around the Tuesday dinner table again. We admitted we had no idea what came next.

"Yeah, so we're blaming you guys if this is a horrible mistake," I joked, putting forks and spoons on napkins, there at the table that had originally sparked this dramatic change. "Not really," I added.

“But kind of,” Dave interjected. And the relief—oh, the relief—that if disaster or winter struck again, the Arthurs would be there with us too. Oh, the relief of that spiritual support.<sup>2</sup> This is a gift: discernment in community can be a beautiful part of a life of listening. No longer can we be deaf to God’s voice—not when we sense our prayers and our friends’ prayers pointing in the same direction.

## Back to Sarah

This could be the hardest thing you do all year: not just finding people who are willing to make vows to you in covenantal friendship, but listening, discerning, asking and being willing to hear the tough questions. As Jon Stock says in *Inhabiting the Church: Biblical Wisdom for a New Monasticism*,

We might even call the practice of vow making prophetic, in that vow making will often prove to tell the truth to the world around us, and in that vow making will never fail to tell the truth to us who enter into vows. Our vows will always expose us to both the tragedies and joys that are the bane and the blessing of our humanity. Communities who live by vows may not always function as cities set on a hill, but, if they will be honest with themselves, they will always be confronted with the truth of who they are.<sup>3</sup>

Here’s another snapshot of what we mean: One night back in graduate school, those of us from Isaiah House found ourselves at a potluck with another group of young adults who shared a household. They were a bunch of grad students and activists and urban gardeners who were trying the hippie/hipster thing but were otherwise irreligious. When they heard us describe ourselves as an intentional Christian community, one of them asked, “What does that mean? What do you do that we don’t do?”

We thought for a moment, then one of us replied, “Well, we confess our sins to one another.”

Awkward pause.

“Yeah,” one of them finally said, “we don’t do that.”

You may have an ideal community in mind: the perfect housemates, the perfect hippie/hipster commune, the perfect network of like-minded families. But you can’t manufacture honest covenantal community without the One who is the source of it: God in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. From before the beginning of time, sharing holy, creative, joy-filled, beautiful, truth-speaking, righteous, loving, selfless, empowering, healing, reconciling life. From the Father to the Son, from the Son to the Father, through the Holy Spirit, pouring into one another. Life that the Trinity offers to the “other,” the stranger, to those who are not God. Meaning: us.

Shared life within a truth-telling, covenantal friendship does not begin with humans. You can’t force it to happen, build it from scratch with your grubby bare hands. It’s not a matter of simply finding a bunch of hipsters with cool glasses who are willing to do unconventional things like share a car and grow kale in the front yard (watch Erin back away slowly). You can’t pull true community together through a book or a movement or even a year of small things. It begins and ends with God, who is the One who heals you and allows you to see others the way God sees them. To paraphrase theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his timeless *Life Together*, if you’re seeking community for the sake of community, you will simply find disappointment.<sup>4</sup> If you’re humbly seeking to do God’s will with others who are on a similar journey, you will find authentic community thrown in—even with people you never expected.

Awesome. So this year of small things begins with an impossible task: build a human community that can’t be built by humans. Got it.

Oh, wait. That’s what we call the church. Start there.

Our assumption is that you’re already part of a worshipping community, a local feet-on-the-ground group of Christ-followers in your area. We’ve mentioned Acts 2:41–47. Read it tonight, then

again tomorrow, then every day for a couple of weeks. Pray. Email it to a couple of friends you trust. Ask, “Am I reading this correctly, or does our life look nothing like this?” Ask, “But could it? Just an eensie bit?” Ask, “Why not?”

So start with your church. Maybe it doesn’t look anything like this. Hints and glimpses, perhaps, but not quite the rich vision that we see in Acts 2. But chances are, there is one other person or family in your church that is already doing something different: an older couple that takes in foster kids; a youngish family that is aggressively paying off debt so they can give more; a young woman who volunteers at the homeless shelter once a month. Note that these may not be people for whom you have a natural affinity. They may not like the same food, listen to the same music, wear the same styles. They may have never heard of any of the authors or activists we’ve mentioned. Never mind. Consider sharing a meal with them, one family or person at a time, and asking two simple questions: Why do you choose to live differently? How can we be in this together?

Probe a bit. You’re not merely asking how you can do the ministry stuff or the outreach stuff together. This is not about program logistics. This is about sharing life. The daily stuff: meals, chores, transportation—even, if it makes sense in your context, housing. Tell them that you have been reading Acts 2 and are drawn to the vision, asking yourself what the church, the world, your life would look like if you lived this way. If you sense an openness to continued conversation, plan another meal in which you share about the year of small things. Perhaps begin reading this book together. Map out a covenant. Set a start date. Begin.

By the end of one year, you will not necessarily have Acts 2. It’s certainly not what we have. Yours may be a small group, for instance. Or a network of households. Or a virtual cohort whose goal is to build little pockets of local communities over time. Or just one other person, couple, or family that’s at least willing to have one more meal with you to talk about all this.

Small things. Remember?

~~~~~ *Questions for Reflection and Discussion* ~~~~~

1. Who are your closest Christian friends? What draws you together?
2. How would they react if you asked them to hold you accountable to some of the more radical practices of downward mobility (paying off debt so you can give more, for instance)?
3. Who in your church is living in unusual, even radical, ways—even if it’s in just one obvious area of life? How might you get to know these people better?
4. What might “shared life” look like in your context, within your faith community?
5. What is your greatest fear about entering into covenantal friendship?

~~~~~ *For Further Reading* ~~~~~

- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1954.
- Heath, Elaine A., and Larry Duggins. *Missional, Monastic, Mainline: A Guide to Starting Missional Micro-Communities in Historically Mainline Denominations*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014.
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