

The Work of the People  
**THE RIDICULOUS JOURNEY**  
*Following A Nobody from Nowhere*

*A search for purpose and meaning in the events and choices of our lives. A costly journey with an unknown destination. A Middle Eastern homeless man from twenty centuries ago and why he still stirs the souls and imagination of so many.*

**Each of us gets to choose**

**the paths we will travel.**

**They will of course contain**

**unforeseen surprises**

**of both the welcome and unwelcome**

**sort.**

**Where shall we go**

**you and I?**

**Shall we go along together?**

**How shall we get there?**

**And how will we know**

**when “there” is now “here”?**

**“Come, follow me,”**

**a voice interrupts.**

**Who is this?**

**A wandering homeless man.**

**Why should we give up all of this**

**to follow this nobody from nowhere?**

**It is a ridiculous journey.**

**Which, of course, is the only kind there is.**

**So, let us begin ...**

It appears there is something deep inside of us that yearns for a journey. Consider the popularity of books such as *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert, *Wild* by Cheryl Strayed, *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho and *A Walk in the Woods* by Bill Bryson. One particularly influential movie for me was *The Way* starring Martin Sheen and Emilio Estevez. And in his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell showed us that The Hero's Journey lies at the heart of nearly every great story: from Greek mythology to the lives of Moses, David, Buddha, Muhammad and, yes, even Jesus.

So why Jesus? What about his story is unique if it simply “fits the pattern” that our minds seem to enjoy so much? Why should the largest religion in the world be based around this one, singular person? And even though I appreciate the stories of so many others, why is it his story that speaks to the depths of my soul and beckons me to go on this particular journey?

Frankly, if Jesus' invitation to become a part of his story seems to require so much sacrifice on our parts, we should also ask, “Is it really worth it?”

I don't at all intend to make light of these questions. Neither do I intend to provide you a definitive answer. Because you deserve to make the journey yourself. All I can do, all any of us at The Work of the People or any of the people featured in our films can do, is share with you our own stories and whatever wisdom life has given us. We hope it helps you along the way.

In two days I will set out on a 200 mile dirt-trail bike ride with my wife. Neither of us have ever done anything like it before. I am excited but also nervous. I yearn for the adventure but I also fear the unknown. I could do any number of other more "sensible and productive" things with the coming week and yet there is something that calls me and beckons me to go.

And I say the same about Jesus and his invitation to "come, follow me." It's an invitation to a ridiculous journey. But what else is life for?

Christ's peace,

Rich

*Rev. Rich Nelson*

*Your discussion guide writer*

***About Rich Nelson***

Rev. Rich Nelson is a disciple of Jesus Christ, husband, father and Episcopal priest who has served both Episcopal and Lutheran faith communities. He also co-founded Bridge Ministry of Burton, TX, an example of what it can look like when people in one small town come together across denominational and racial differences to serve their community together in Christ's name.

Rich's passion is creating curriculum around the Shema/Great Commandment, including the *Following the Way* reflection series for adults and *Following the Way with Francis and Friends* which helps families explore spirituality through time in nature using the guidance of St. Francis and St. Clare.

He is married to the Rev. Karen Buck Nelson and they have two sons. It is a wonderful life.

You can find out more about Rich's work and contact him at [www.revrichnelson.com](http://www.revrichnelson.com)

***This series includes 8 sessions:***

SESSION 1 // The Ridiculous Journey

SESSION 2 // The Revolutionary

SESSION 3 // The Reconciler

SESSION 5 // The Lover

SESSION 6 // The Sage

SESSION 6 // The Presence

SESSION 7 // Following Jesus

Series on The Work of the People here:

<http://www.theworkofthepeople.com/bundle/the-ridiculous-journey>

# The Ridiculous Journey // Session One

## THE RIDICULOUS JOURNEY

### // REVEAL // Watch Film [The Jesus Strategy with Greg Boyle](#)

Father Greg Boyle, known for his work with inner city youth, talks about an Ignatian spiritual practice called *The Two Standards* which envisions “see[ing] Jesus standing in the lowly place ... not saying anything ...”

1. What is the difference between a Jesus who points us to the lowly place and one who stands there silently saying nothing
2. Father Boyle says the Jesus Strategy includes standing outside the circle precisely so the circle will widen. By doing so, we force the choice that “Either you include them with me or you won’t include me either.”
3. Who resides in the lowly place today? Who is it that we are attempting to push outside of our circle and label a dangerous “other?” If the faithful Christian response is to stand with them, risking our own possible exclusion, how do we do that—practically speaking?
4. How do we resist the urge to speak on behalf of the voiceless and instead, as Father Boyle recommends, to make the space for them to speak and encouraging them to do it?

### // READ // **Life is Complicated by Rich Nelson**

Life is complicated and cannot easily be reduced to a set of formulaic, simple answers. Anyone who says otherwise is either naive or a huckster. Life is also entirely too short to screw around and waste it. So we should be wary of anyone who walks up to us one day and says, “Hey, why don’t you just walk away from your entire life, leave behind all your family, friends and your stable job, and come follow me.”

How much more suspicious we should be if that person is a complete stranger who looks like he doesn't have a dime to his name. Frankly, the only sane thing to do would be to politely excuse yourself and get away as fast as you can. Even if he turns out to be completely harmless, we've all got too much to do to waste our time following after a starry-eyed dreamer on a ridiculous journey. At best it will be a fun distraction. At worst it will get us killed.

So why is it that so many people did just that? Dropped their nets and left their old man standing in the boat with a ton of fish. He told a man to sell everything they had and give it to the poor. He told another man to skip out on his father's funeral. One left the empire's money on the table and just got up and chased after him, a nobody from nowhere. In the end, this wayward leader was executed as a heretic; and, many of the people who chose to follow him eventually were killed too. They should have seen it coming from the start.

So who in their right mind today would listen to a story like that from centuries ago and say, "Okay, sign me up! I will die too."

Crazy people, that's who! If you choose to take a pass on the whole following Jesus thing, know I completely understand! Life's too short to waste it on such a ridiculous journey.

But, I have to admit that there's something about his story that continues to draw me in.

And this story still has the same attraction for some of the wisest, most beautiful souls I have ever met. So either we are all crazy together (entirely possible), or maybe what's crazy is *not* following him. Maybe going along with the predominant cultural narrative that says it's all about:

- "getting ahead" of others (as if life is a zero-sum game),
- amassing enough wealth so we can "live comfortably" (as if all the money in the world could shield us from pain and tragedy),
- and "making a name for ourselves" (as if it won't be forgotten eventually when even the letters of our tombstones wear away)...

Maybe buying into that story is actually even more ridiculous. And if there's a chance that this Jesus guy knows a better Way than that, then maybe it's worth considering it as a viable alternative.

It's crazy, I know. But for some reason it's the only thing that makes sense.

**// REFLECT // *Watch Film* [The Merton Prayer](#)**

*MY LORD GOD, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. —Thomas Merton*

*The Merton Prayer* by Thomas Merton begins “My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.” That’s pretty honest. Even if we agree to follow Jesus, it doesn’t mean the path will suddenly become clear. It will likely become less clear in the beginning because his ways are not our ways.

But the more we travel down the path he has laid before us, the more sense it begins to make. Again, in all honesty, the same can be said of the path to lunacy. The difference, I suppose, is whether love lies at the heart of the path or not. Is this path leading you into greater love for others or less? Greater love for yourself or less? Greater love for God or less?

To forgo all of the other possible roads is a risky move.

**// RESPOND //**

What is your journey like these days? What keeps you searching?

Pray the Merton Prayer each day, asking God to guide you into the Way of peace.

## The Ridiculous Journey - Session 2

# THE REVOLUTIONARY

### **// REVEAL // Watch Film [Personal Relationship with Jesus with Nadia Bolz-Weber](#)**

Pastor and author Nadia Bolz-Weber questions the wisdom of seeking a “personal relationship” with Jesus, saying it would be much safer, for God and for us, to keep our distance.

1. She says, “Sometimes Jesus just, like, hunts your ass down and there’s nothing you can do about it.” When has Jesus hunted your ass down? What did that look like? How did that feel?
2. Nadia goes on to say, “I wish God would leave me alone half the time. Getting closer feels dangerous. I’m gonna end up loving someone I don’t like again. Giving away more of my money? I don’t know. It just feels like a bad idea.” So why do it? What’s the reward? And don’t answer that question with “heaven.” Heaven isn’t a reward we earn, it is a grace given only by God’s forgiveness and mercy. Think deeper than that. What’s your response to someone who asks “What’s in it for me?”
3. At the end of the film, Travis says, “Cut! Can’t sell that.” That’s right. We can’t sell that. It’s a product that few people are in the market for. But maybe it’s not a product we are selling but something of more value. How often do we substitute selling a cross necklace because the actual cost of discipleship is something we don’t think people will buy from us?

### **// READ // Jesus Stole My Cross by Rich Nelson**

*Jesus stole my cross. Either that or I lost it, but it’s a better story if Jesus stole it so I’m going to tell it to you that way.*

Many have stories of Jesus calling them to take up their cross to follow him. Jesus called me to follow him by taking my cross away.



I was very active in my local church as a teenager. It was one of the few places where I felt I belonged and people valued what I might have to offer. Before I graduated from high school and moved away to go to college, they gave me a cross on a necklace to wear. It was a simple silver cross on a plain chain, but it quickly became my most valued possession. I wore it every day.

Whatever it was that happened, happened in the parking lot of the grocery store. I'd just gone inside to buy something, I forget what, but I remember it was just one thing and I got exactly \$5 change. As I unlocked the door to my truck and put one foot in, a voice came from out of nowhere so shocking that I physically jumped. I looked up and saw a man dressed in old clothes standing by the hood of my truck.

"Excuse me, but do you have \$5 I could borrow?" The shock of his voice and presence couldn't mask my confusion at his request. It was the first time anyone had ever asked me for money that way. And in hindsight the specificity of the request is equally shocking. He didn't ask for "some money." He asked for \$5. Precisely what I had in my wallet.

Did he know I had \$5? Had he been watching me in the store? Or was it just a coincidence that he asked for exactly what I had to offer?

I did at that moment what many people do when caught off guard. I reverted to our usual patterns of fear, mistrust, greed, avoidance. "No, sorry," I said, "I don't." And quickly moved the rest of my body into the truck. But before I could close the door the man got in the last words.

"It's ok," he replied. "I just saw the cross on your necklace and thought maybe you could help me. Have a blessed day."

I drove home with the man on my mind and the \$5 in my wallet feeling like the weight of the world. If I turned around would I be able to find him? What would I say? Maybe I did the right thing. You never know what they will use the money for. And on and on went my thoughts.

So I just drove home. I didn't tell anyone about what had happened and I wouldn't for a long time to come. But that night as I went to get out of my clothes and into my pajamas, standing there I saw it in the reflection of the bathroom mirror. My cross. It was gone.

Of course I searched for it, around the house, in my truck, back in the grocery store parking lot where there was no man in old clothes to be found. I moved away a couple of months later, leaving behind my childhood and that cross, wherever it was.

For a long time I felt guilty about that day. I took the loss of my cross as judgment that perhaps I was not yet worthy to wear it. But as I matured and continued to think back on that day, I am thankful for what happened. Maybe the old man was Jesus. Or maybe he was just one of the many faces in which Jesus would appear to me over the years—hungry or sick or cold or naked—and ask me for precisely what I had to give. Whatever it was that happened, it woke me up to the cost of discipleship, which is great. It has cost me much more than a prized piece of jewelry. It has cost me friendships, it has challenged my complacency, and many times I have felt like Abraham standing before the sacrificial altar questioning why God was asking so much of me.

And then I remember those early followers of Jesus. He asked a lot of them too. He didn't just ask them to go along for the ride. He asked them to be a part of the revolution. And revolutions are costly.

### **// REFLECT // Watch Film [A Humble Call](#) by Ann Voscamp**

*Then Samuel said to all the house of Israel, "If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Astartes from among you. Direct your heart to the Lord, and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines." —1 Samuel 7:3*

Ann Voscamp gives a lengthy prayer-poem of grief for the ways we fail to follow our king. Much of it centers around ways in which we spend our time and money on vanity and selfish desires when an equal amount of time and money would alleviate the real pain and suffering of others.

How do we balance our desires to alleviate our own pain with our call to help alleviate the pain of others? What would you include in your list of griefs?

### **// RESPOND //**

Where are you feeling pushed to grow? How are you handling the growing pains?

Based on 1 Samuel 7:03, she suggests praying each day at 7:03. Set your phone to sound an alarm at 7:03 every day, calling you to prayer. Allow this to become for you a sign of your willingness to let God interrupt your own plan for your life. And then allow for other interruptions as they appear.

# The Ridiculous Journey - Session 3

## THE RECONCILER

**// REVEAL //** *Watch Film:* [A Glimpse at Communion with Emmanuel Katongole](#)

Rev. Dr. Emmanuel Katongole, author and Associate Professor of Theology and Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame says, “One of the things I do believe and I do know for sure is that God is neither Democrat nor Republican, that is God is neither African nor American, that God is neither an Iraqi or a Palestinian or an Israeli, but God’s vision of creation is much broader than each of these loyalties and how these loyalties claim us for themselves and they tell us ‘You are mine, therefore you cannot belong to anything else or anybody else.’”

1. Katongole says, “Each one of us is fragmented ... [these different loyalties say] ‘You only belong here. You can’t belong there.’ Each of these loyalties try to deny vehemently the other ... when in fact the truth is always beyond them.” We live in a world full of people, parties, and places that compete to define who we are. Is Jesus’ invitation to “come, follow me” just another competing loyalty or is it something more? Is this invitation one that brings other loyalties into harmony or does it supersede and supplant them?
2. He goes on to say, “I feel the invitation for us in this ministry of reconciliation, for all Christianity, is to create those kinds of spaces in which people from either sides of the divide can begin to discover not only the truth about the other but also the truth of their own story and their own community and see how it has gifts but also how it has limitations.” How is it helpful to think of our politics as “political assumptions,” as he puts it, rather than the more commonly used phrase “political convictions”? How can we cultivate a community of humility before God that seeks to listen to the voice of God and others instead of perpetuating a culture of arrogant conviction that seeks to prove others wrong?
3. At the end of the film, Katangole describes developing “very unlikely friendships” across political, cultural and religious spectrums. What are you doing in your personal life and community affiliations to make space for these kinds of friendships to develop? What is something new you could try?

## **// READ // Written by Rich Nelson**

All young children seek to please their parents. Years of research into child psychology and animal behavior show that even when rejected by the parental figure, young children will continue to come back to them seeking to reconcile and repair this primary parent/child relationship.

Sometime in adolescence, active attempts at reconciliation are often abandoned, though for many the hope at reconciliation can remain well into adulthood or even for life. And in animal behavior, it is likewise observed by many that animals we form deep relationships with, dogs for instance, desire to maintain connection and are eager to reconcile after a period of emotional or physical distance.

We are innately geared to want to be in relationship with others. Why then do we go to such great lengths at times to push others away? Why do we seek to define ourselves over and against others rather than define ourselves with and for others? “This is what I am not” becomes as central or even more central for some to our identity as “This is what I am.”

And yet we worship a God known by the name I AM.

Like many people, I am a child of divorced parents. Growing up, I realized that my mother and father had different hopes and aspirations for who I would become. Seeking to please and be in relationship with each of them, I learned to be one person when I was with my mom and a slightly different person when I was with my dad. But as I became an adult, I realized that it was more important that I be who I wanted to be. I had to figure out how to reconcile these two different versions of myself into one, to let my own hopes and aspirations take hold, and to be brave enough to let me be me whether my parents, friends and others were disappointed by that or not.

I love that Dr. Katongole acknowledges just how fragmented our loyalties are. Our primary task is to work to reconcile who we are as individuals, to love and appreciate all aspects of ourselves, and to allow for the inherent contradictions that come with being human. Though I am not a psychologist or sociologist, I am a pastor called to observe and care for people. It is my belief that most of the rancorous discord in our society (political, racial, economic, social, what have you) is an externalization of the fact that we cannot or will not figure out how to reconcile our own internal warring

factions. So rather than deal with what we don't like about ourselves, we project that onto other people and other ideologies and hate that "enemy" instead.

And then along comes Jesus, who tells us "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous." (Matthew 5:43-45)

This is a ridiculous request. It is also pure genius. If we can stop scapegoating others, if we can begin to see the inherent value and goodness in their differences from us, if we can begin to honor them as legitimate children of God with as much right to life, love, joy, peace, justice and prosperity as we have, then there is hope for us as a society yet. And maybe, just maybe, if we stop hating others for a little while, it will allow us to come to terms with what we hate about ourselves and learn to forgive, love, accept or reconcile with that person too.

How far does love go? "Love goes as far as God's heart can go," Dr. Katangole says. That's a long, long ways. Much, much longer than this brief life that we enjoy. If God's love goes that far, and God is the source of all love, then maybe our love can learn to go that far as well.

Have you gotten a glimpse at that communion?

**// REFLECT // *Watch Film [I AM Sorry](#) by Kelly Stewart Hall***

A Reflection on I AM Sorry

This blessing was written with an ancient Hawaiian practice of reconciliation in mind. It is called Ho'oponopono. This practice of reconciliation and forgiveness focuses on taking responsibility for one's part in any illness. My dad learned it during a work-stay he had a few summers ago on the islands and taught it to me.

Last week, I barely had time to digest any of the horrific events before yet another tragedy occurred. Violences, humans against humans. Regardless of how the facts pan out, people died...they were important, and were taken too soon. Much of the nation is grieving, angry, and hopefully inspired to change. I know that change starts with me.

It starts with each of us doing our own inner work to be willing to let God extend through us.

As I listened in prayer for words of comfort, I began repeating the phrases “I am sorry. Please forgive me. I love you. Thank you.” All four of these phrases ring true for me as a person involved in this story of racism. I have some love to share, some amends to make for not being part of the solution, forgiveness to ask of God and my brothers and sisters of all nationalities, and thankfulness for how their lives enrich and bless mine. The written prayer used for this film is just an extension of that intention. Interestingly, as many of the benedictory words I write tend to do, the words came through from God’s perspective which I found comforting.

God met me where I was in my prayer, and prayed alongside.

I am sad and sorry for all of the deaths that came from last week, all of the pain, all of the loss. It is my hope that we can reach for and embrace one another and effectively take responsibility while being an active part of the solution. It is not my intention to further injure with these words, but continue to extend love and mercy in troubled times. May God be praying alongside you, alongside all of us. May God continue to teach, heal, dignify, grant peace, and make all things new.

Peace,  
Kelly Hall

### **// RESPOND //**

This week, seek to have a meaningful conversation with someone who sees things in a way very different than your own: politically, culturally or religiously. Make sure they know you have love for them.

# The Ridiculous Journey - Session 4

## THE LOVER

### // REVEAL // *Watch Film* [Love Made Flesh with Brene Brown](#)

Renowned professor and speaker Dr. Brene Brown says, “I believe God is love. It’s that simple and it’s that complicated.” She says that it is only in the flesh can we see what true love looks like because our imaginations would make it too polished and shiny otherwise.

1. Brown notes, “You would have to send someone to show what love in the flesh looked like. ... Otherwise we would romanticize it. We would make it easy.” What about our image of love is still filled with rainbows and unicorns? How does our image of easy, romantic love (which is in fact it’s own kind of love) make the other kinds of love more difficult to accept?
2. She goes on to say, “If you really love, I mean fierce, big love, you will become dangerous to people.” Why would people perceive us as dangerous? What about Jesus was so threatening to people? He didn’t plan to overthrow the government or destroy the temple. So what was the real threat?
3. What relationship(s) in your life right now are requiring less of you? What relationship(s) are requiring more? What can these two sides of love teach you about the totality of love and the nature of God?

### // READ // *Loving with a Broken Heart* by Rich Nelson

Who was the first person who broke your heart? It was someone you loved deeply, wasn’t it? Perhaps it was a parent who failed you in some way. Perhaps it was a beloved pet who died too soon. Perhaps it was your first crush who turned out to not love you as much as you thought you loved them, even though you once stayed up all night praying her family wouldn’t move away because you were sure, *just sure*, she was the one you were supposed to spend eternity with... (okay, let’s move on)



Jesus invites us into a life of love, which is a very cruel thing to do on one hand. Because it will inevitably lead us to a deeply, deeply broken heart. Our heart will be broken by our inability to let someone else know just how much we love them. Our heart will be broken by our inability to know just how much someone else loves us. Our heart will be broken by people we thought we could trust, we thought we could count on, who will invariably let us down. And if we allow our hearts to grow big enough, it will be broken by a world that is full of violence and hate and greed and indifference to all that we care about.

This risk of love is so great, many choose not to take it. We keep other people at a distance. We divert our eyes from the pain that seems too much to take in. We don't allow ourselves to dance naked, as King David did, because we can't risk being that vulnerable and imperfect in front of others.

But it is only in our nakedness (spiritual, emotional, physical), only in that moment when all that separates us one from another, that keeps our humanity from making close contact with another's, when all that hides our shame is gone and we must allow ourselves either to be accepted as we are or rejected as we are not, it is only in that moment that we can truly receive love.

Why should we ever risk to love then? "We love because he first loved us," says 1 John 4:19. It is only in God's naked vulnerability on the cross in the form of Jesus, bearing the full rejection of all humanity and the ultimate betrayal—and still reaching out to us with words of forgiveness and grace—that we see what true love looks like.

Even though he may have been celibate his whole life, Jesus is the greatest of lovers. He shows us what it looks like to be fully present and accepting of another in all our beauty and goodness, all our brokenness and pain. Love isn't pretty. And it isn't simple. And it isn't easy. Love is more often than not messy, and complicated and excruciatingly difficult. But the alternative, to not love, is to refuse to truly be alive.

**// REFLECT // Watch Film [Everything is New](#) by Travis Reed**

*So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not*

*reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. —1 John 4:16-21*

The tornado that leveled the town of Joplin, Missouri in 2011 again revealed the shocking power of the Earth's forces. Tragedies such as these, as painful as they are, oftentimes bring out the best in us as we witness profound acts of love. What is it about times of utter brokenness that connect the souls of the people going through it? What might God be making new in the aftermath of your own tragedies?

**// RESPOND //**

How are you allowing yourself to be loved by the Great Lover of all? How can you fall in love in return?

Seek to fall in love with something true this week.

# The Ridiculous Journey - Session 5

## THE SAGE

**// REVEAL // Watch Film [The Way. The Truth. The Life. with Rowan Williams](#)**

Former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams says, “In [Jesus’] life, from start to finish, there’s as much God as humanity can hold.” This is a profound statement about who Jesus is. He is what a human being looks like when they are filled from head to toe with God.”

1. Williams goes on to note, “When we see Jesus we realize just something about how distorted our own world is. And we’d rather not know.” What distortion does Jesus reveal about the world to you?
2. “Jesus says, ‘I am the Way and the Truth and the Life.’ This is it. And where I am is where reality is to be found.” Where do we go in today’s world to find Jesus and encounter true reality?
3. Williams says that is the people who have the most to lose who reject Jesus’ vision of the world. But the people who have nothing to lose are the ones who say, “This makes sense.” How much do you have to lose? What stands in the way of it making sense to you? When in your life has it made sense and what was going on in your life at that time?

**// READ / Credentials by Rich Nelson**

It happened on a sunny day. Great crowds of people were following him around. They were coming from every direction because the word had spread that he could heal them. And heal them he did. He cured them of the incurable. They had afflictions that no one before him had been able to affect. Afflictions of the spirit and afflictions of the body. What they didn’t realize was that he was about to cure them of their greatest affliction, something so insidiously hidden that even they didn’t realize it was there.

And even if the first few lines of this sermon were the only ones to have survived over time, they would still be just as world-changing as the entire sermon was. “Blessed are the poor . . .,” Jesus said.

Wait, what? No. I’m afraid not. That is not at all how it is. It is the rich who have all the “blessings.” They are the ones with big fancy houses, the servants who care for their every need, the doctors who cure their diseases, the lavish garments, the sumptuous banquets, the beautiful concubines, the fear and respect of the people, the fancy umbrellas to shield them from the sun and the rain.

But he went on. And with every passing word, contrary to all of the opposing evidence, the vision of reality that he described seemed less and less of a dream and more and more of a reality: Be reconciled to your brother and sister before you seek reconciliation with God or it will be empty. Be faithful to your commitment to those you say you will love. Love those you say you hate. Your devotion to God should not be a badge of honor to gain favor with people. Do not worry about tomorrow, today’s troubles are enough for today. You don’t know enough about other people to judge them. Quit building your spiritual houses on shifting sands. Build it upon a solid rock so it will withstand the storms that are to come.

And when he finished, the crowds around him were astonished. They’d never heard someone talk this way before. People yearn for mentors, someone who has walked ahead of us a little farther on life’s path and knows a thing or two that we yet need to learn. But true mentors, true sages are extraordinarily hard to come by.

Nothing about Jesus gave him the credentials to speak in this way. He wasn’t a religious authority from Jerusalem. He wasn’t a wise man from a distant land. He was a kid from Nazareth, born out of wedlock, who’d lived the first 30 years of his life in relative obscurity as a common laborer. He had no titles, no diplomas on the wall. His only credential was the validity of the words that came from his mouth. But for the people who heard them, they were all the credentials they needed.

Today, we give great authority to the voices we hear on TV, or the radio, or online, or in print. We are an easily convinced people, gullible to those who would speak with conviction to our fears about tomorrow. Just sound like you know what you’re talking about and we will believe you. Because we sure don’t know for ourselves.

How then, can we discern the voice of God in the midst of the collective noise and our own confusion? What will strike our hearts as words of divine authority?

Perhaps it will not come from those under the spotlight who seek attention for themselves, but rather from an unlikely source, far removed from the camera's aim, who will speak a word that sounds like ...

“Blessed are the poor ...”

**// REFLECT // Watch [To Rise Above](#) by Kelly Stewart Hall**

Kelly Stewart Hall's beautiful poem “To Rise Above” talks about how Jesus turns the world upside down. “What we thought was taken, is given. What we thought was dead, lives. ... His wholeness a white flag over the battle of our minds.” Consider what is feeding the battle that rages in your mind. Is it possible that Jesus' alternative worldview offers you a window out of your internal imprisonment?

**// RESPOND //**

In a world of know-it-alls, what makes His wisdom different from all others? Where do you go to seek out the wisdom of this sage?

Pray each day this week for wisdom to discern the difference between the voices of wisdom and the voices of bluster.

# The Ridiculous Journey - Session 6

## THE PRESENCE

### // REVEAL // *Watch Film* [The Human One with Richard Rohr](#)

Father Richard Rohr wisely observes that “Chosen crosses are hardly ever crosses. The cross, as it did for Jesus, has to come uninvited, usually unexpected, undesired.”

1. What unwelcome crosses have appeared in your life lately? What has been your response to them?
2. Surprisingly, Rohr found that “the word empathy was not in the English dictionary until 1909.” Look up the difference between the meanings of sympathy and empathy if you are unsure. What does it say about human nature, and our evolving consciousness, that we’ve only created a word for this about 100 years ago?
3. Rohr goes on to say, “What’s true of Jesus is true of everything. That would be my Christology in one sentence.” What do you think he means by this? What would be your “Christology,” your statement about who Jesus is, in one sentence?
4. “Awakening is your inner state ... you can have a high stage of evolution, awareness ... but your inner state is how awake you are to the union of all things in God.” How awake are you feeling to the union of all things in God?

### // READ // **Living in an Un-Level House by Rich Nelson**

I have had to learn to live in an un-level house. Following my father-in-law’s death, my wife and I decided to remodel and move into his place. It was the house he was born in and the house he died in. (How many people can say such a thing?) In fact, that house has been in my wife’s family for generations. Our children are the fifth generation to live in it.

I went after the remodeling project with great energy. I wanted to do the house justice. I wanted to “do it right” so that it would easily last another generation. I

wanted it to be a tribute to him, a loving gift to my wife as consolation for her grief, and a comfortable home for our family to live in. I planned out the order things should happen. First the entire house should be leveled again. Concurrently, we could begin to rip up the carpet and layers of linoleum beneath it to get back to the original wood floors. We discussed ways the walls and doorways could be returned to their original locations after a couple of different prior remodels. The kitchen and bathrooms would be gutted. The plumbing would be completely replaced. And I would have it all done in time for Christmas that year, bow on the door and everything.

But immediately things refused to go according to my plan. The house levelers said they couldn't get it completely level because it likely hadn't been built completely level to begin with. I did not accept this premise. I insisted they continue to work to make it right. The wood floors revealed years of holes drilled for different reasons and saw marks where subsequent plywood overlays had been trimmed. The plumbers had difficulty getting to the narrow places, which required more sheet rock to be removed than I'd anticipated. The new refrigerator didn't match the cabinet height and the old dishwasher we'd planned to keep stuck out too far for a drawer to open. The time I thought I would have after work and on the weekends never seemed to be enough. And the subcontractors were always too busy to get to my project until several weeks out.

I became more and more unhappy. And when the house was finished, two months after Christmas, it was beautiful - and yet it's imperfections stuck out to me like a sore thumb. No one else seemed to notice as much, but I could literally feel how un-level the floor was as I walked across it. Had it always been this way before? If so, why was I just now noticing it? And now I was destined to live in this imperfect house the rest of my life, being daily reminded of my own inability to make it "right."

There was only one way to keep this from driving me crazy. I eventually had to accept the house's imperfections and forgive myself for being unable to fix it all. I would have to learn to accept my own limitations in order to appreciate the beauty of what is instead of be consumed by the madness of what could have been.

How could Jesus have possibly dealt with it all? How could he have explained it time and time again to the disciples, each time being faced with the fact that they still didn't get it? How could he have died in peace with the knowledge that these moronic misfits who left him in his hour of greatest need were the only hope the

world had for his life and message to be carried forward? He was leaving behind a very un-level world.

Jesus was able to see the world not only with his human eyes but also with the eyes of God. The human eye sees the imperfections of life as a constant reminder of our own failures and the ways others have let us down. The divine eye sees the imperfections of life and instead notices the countless seeds of possibility for truth and beauty to emerge.

The only way Jesus could do this was by being fully present to the reality of what is and choosing to love and accept it. You cannot deal with the imperfections of life by trying to ignore them or running away in your mind to an imagined alternate reality in which they don't exist. Through his prayer life, his willingness to touch the lepers, and his journeys to the forbidden places full of "unclean" people, Jesus exemplifies a life of complete openness to the presence of God in and through all that is - shining through "that which is as it should be" and redeeming "that which is not."

This is not the path most in the world choose to take as we attempt to right all the wrongs and slay all the demons (both internal and external). But perhaps there is no way to conquer such things, only to make peace with them and love them into a higher form of existence. The only way to do this is by being present to the presence of God in every imperfect place, an imperfect world of God's own creation which God still calls "good."

**// REFLECT // *Watch Film [I am Present](#) by Kelly Stewart Hall***

Kelly Stewart Hall's poem begins, "I am present in the wait..." So many times we convince ourselves that we can't recover "the good old days." Or else we believe that "prize" is at the "end." This poem says that God blesses our longing for what was and reassures us of the promise of what is to be, but that God is not absent in the meantime, but instead is present here and now, giving light in even these dark times. What parts of your past or future do you long for? How might you become more aware of God's presence in the present?



## **// RESPOND //**

What practices might you adopt to help increase your own awakening? (Many people report things such as time in nature, reflecting on scripture, centering prayer, pilgrimages, serving and befriending those who struggle, etc. help increase their awakening.) Schedule time on your calendar to do one of these practices each day this week.

# The Ridiculous Journey - Session 7

## FOLLOWING JESUS

### // REVEAL // *Watch Film* [Risking it on Jesus with Rachel Held Evans](#)

Popular blogger and author Rachel Held Evans says, “The story of Jesus is just the story I’m willing to risk being wrong about. I see in Jesus something true and something real ...”

1. What do you find inspiring about the story of Jesus? What leaves you puzzled?
2. Evans says, “I can’t stop following Jesus. I can’t stop being compelled by the truth that he teaches.” Why do you think so many people have found the story of Jesus so compelling?
3. She affirms that “Jesus is God’s dream for all of us.” What about the life of Jesus is God’s dream for your own life? How are you allowing that dream to become a reality?
4. Evans concludes, “If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus ... God is wrapped in flesh and wearing sandals.” Who else has been a revelation of God to you? What did that person look like? Can you think of someone who surprised you by how God-filled they turned out to be?

### // READ // *Why Jesus?* by Rich Nelson

Would people follow Jesus if he wasn’t so popular? What if there weren’t buildings dedicated to him in every town in our country? What if millions of other people didn’t say they follow him? I know that Christianity is going through a decline in popularity, but seriously, who else has ever had this kind of support?

What if Jesus was just some little known mystic/teacher/healer with four short books written about him and handful of letters that some of his disciples wrote about their attempts to follow his teachings and none of this things ever got assembled and called “The NEW Testament”? If you came across these stories in a

dusty book in the basement of your local library one day, would they be enough to compel you to call yourself a Christian?

I don't know. The story of Jesus IS truly compelling. It has a beauty that few other stories have. God comes to live among us, taking the form of a baby born with little fanfare, just a notice to the local shepherds and few traveling visitors who arouse the fears of the local king. He is placed in a feed trough instead of a crib. He grew up to feed thousands with the hope and healing he offered. However, the hope he offered was seen as a threat by the powers that be and, on the night before they brutally executed him, Jesus gathered his closest followers and said, I am now giving my body to be your bread and my blood to be your wine. Remember me and tell others to live as I have taught you to live. He was killed while speaking words of forgiveness and reconciliation to those around him. But God found a way to turn even his death into a sign of hope and a promise of love. Jesus returns to offer forgiveness to the friends who had abandoned him and tell them that even in all their imperfections, they are the ones to whom God is giving the power to change the world. And they did.

Pretty amazing story. But is it enough by itself if it didn't have a Church full of history and the stories of centuries of other people who have walked this path before us?

I don't think so. Not because the stories we find about Jesus in the Bible aren't compelling enough. They are. But the real power of Jesus' story doesn't lie in words about him but in lives lived for him. It is the countless others who have made their own sacrifices to continue Christ's story of love. It is the Francis of Assisi's and the Martin Luther King, Jr.'s and the Dorothy Day's, and the people who immigrated to this country and founded my local congregation back in the mid 1800s, and the woman who gets up at 5:30 every Tuesday morning to open the food pantry, and the grandmothers who sang the hymns, and the nurses who cared for the AIDS patients before we knew how the disease spread, and all of these people who have laid down THEIR lives because Jesus laid down his. These people are a part of the story of Christ as much as a wandering, homeless faith-healing prophet in the Middle East some centuries ago. Sure, his life is the fulcrum, the point at which the years stop counting down and start counting forward in the history of the world. But it was his plan all along that he simply be the first of many who would show the world what God looks like in the flesh. He intended those nurses, and grandmas, and teachers, and peacemakers, and reformers all along.

*Then Jesus said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” —Luke 24:44-49*

*Jesus said, “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.” —John 14:12*

So no, I don't follow Jesus because it is the popular thing to do. I don't follow him because my parents and grandparents did. I choose to follow Jesus not because they followed him but because I see the way it changed their lives because they did. And if I'm going to spend my life serving someone, he seems like a worthy someone.

Bob Dylan famously sang:

*You're gonna have to serve somebody  
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord  
But you're gonna have to serve somebody*

It may well be a Ridiculous Journey. He was a Nobody from Nowhere. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

Even if it turned out that nothing about his story is true, it's still the truest story I've found.

**// REFLECT // [Watch Film I am the Path by Kelly Stewart Hall](#)**

I leave you once more with the insightful and moving words of Kelly Stewart Hall for further reflection:

I bless the feet of My people  
whether their imprints are made  
tracking across mountainsides  
or laying low in the valley—

their soles move Me, and I bless them.  
I named a guiding star above them,  
a little reminder that I AM coming.

The Path I develop,  
is unlike any other.  
His course is restorative,  
and through Him I will receive all who come.  
The time is approaching  
the Way is well lit  
the Pathway, straightforward  
and just as foretold,  
He will come.

**// RESPOND //**

It is difficult at times to remain committed to the ridiculous journey. What do we know about where it leads? What keeps you moving forward?

God blesses your journey.

