Raucous But Tender, Sometimes Angry But Measured, This Book Will Rattle Your Cage.

I came late to Christianity, writes Sara Miles, knocked upside down by a mid-life conversion centered around eating a literal chunk of bread. I hadn't decided to profess an article of doctrine, but discovered a force blowing uncontrollably through the world. In this new book, Sara Miles tells what happened when she decided to follow the flesh and blood Jesus by doing something real. For everyone afraid to feed hungry strangers, love the unlovable, or go to dark places to bless and heal, she offers hope. She holds out the promise of a God who gave a bunch of housewives and fishermen authority to forgive sins and raise the dead, and who continues to call us to action. And she tells, in vivid, heartbreakingly honest stories, how the ordinary people around her are transformed by taking up God's work in the world. Sara Miles offers a fresh, fully embodied faith that sweeps away the anxious formulas of religion to reveal the scandalous power of eating with sinners, embracing the unclean, and loving the wrong people. Jesus Freak: Feeding Healing Raising the Dead is her inspiring book for undomesticated Christians who still believe, as she writes, that Jesus has given us the power to be Jesus.

My Personal Review:
I love books like this and wish there were more of them. Although Sara Miles is a gay female living in San Francisco, and I'm a straight white male living in rural Pennsylvania, I felt an immediate kinship with the author. I, too, came late to my faith, at the age of 47, and I still find myself feeling frustrated by the tight confines of doctrine and dogma, even though I also attend an Episcopal church. Even though I see my particular denomination as being one of the most open and inclusive, I cannot shake the feeling that every denomination is in a constant battle to halt, or at least impede, any type of change. It's as though they want to freeze their faith in place to keep it from eroding. The constant intrusion of the outside world clearly frightens some Christians, but it's only in this encroaching outside world that we encounter what truly matters.
Miles presents an image of faith far removed from the comfortable personal faith of Sunday church-goers. Instead of fighting to shore up our defenses against the outside world, why not feed and nurture the change? Miles see her Christian faith as a rambunctious, nurturing vegetable garden growing wildly out of control, and not a small plant that we quietly nurture in the corner of a closed room. Faith is living fearlessly. Faith is loving and feeding anyone who needs it. Faith is not walking away from contact with undesireables, but taking the time to talk to them, to touch them. The outside world cannot be viewed as an intrusion, Miles discovered, because it's only in the messy, unkempt outside world that we truly encounter Jesus.

But Miles makes a point about organized religion that I've also discovered on my own. While we may struggle against the rules and regulations of "formal" and structured faith, the sense of community we gain from it is difficult to find anywhere else. She speaks of initially feeling uncomfortable speaking to new people at coffee hour, and cringing during the sharing of the Peace. I knew exactly what she was talking about, as I went through the same process when I began attending church. Truth is, it made me uncomfortable, but over time I found a home and a new family, and learned that its in opening ourselves up to others that we find our faith.

The themes of the book loosely follow the subtitle "feeding, healing, raising the dead." In each section we find vignettes of the daily life and struggles of ordinary human beings coming to terms with the reality of life in the Kingdom. It's not easy, and we were never promised that it would be. But in feeding and nurturing everyone, without regards to whether or not they "qualify" for this generosity, Miles discovers Jesus in her midst. One of the best lines in the book comes when a minister visits the church's food pantry on a Friday afternoon, looks around the room filled with prostitutes, alcoholics, crack-heads, homeless and crazies, and says, "This looks a lot like Jesus." And in this wonderful book you'll find the true meaning of "church" and the type of people we should all hope to find within it.

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