

## Study Guide / Conversation Starters

for *Still Laughing, Still Learning (Still Looking for a Good Title)*

Also, know that I would love to chat with your book group,  
either in person or through videoconferencing.  
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### ***Prelude: The Christmas Eve Sermon***

- a. Share some of your favorite Christmas memories.
- b. Did Buster remind you of someone in your hometown? Tell about this person.
- c. The book begins and ends with stories of making judgments about people. Share a time that you have made a false judgment about a person or persons.
- d. Evolutionary biologists tell us that making judgments about others is part of our reptilian brain. Our early ancestors needed to quickly identify “the other” as a way to know who was a safe person—someone from one’s own clan—and who was potentially a danger. How does that continue to impact society today? How do we overcome this innate tendency?

Note: Other stories on this theme of judging are “On Listening” (p. 177) and “To Know the Whole Story” (p. 204).

## *Checking Corn and Other Stories*

### **1. “A Heart’s Desire” (p. 13)**

- a. Bill writes about the monarch butterfly being one of his favorite creatures. Name some of your favorite members of the natural world and explain why.
- b. Bill’s desire for a BB gun is described this way: “I longed, I yearned, I *ached* for a BB gun in a way I had never longed for anything else.” Did you have a childhood longing? Was it ever fulfilled and was it all that you expected? What do we learn from these experiences?
- c. What is a yearning you presently have? What are you doing to make it come true? Anything blocking you?

### **2. “The Report Card” (p. 20) and “The Encouraging Spouse” (p. 100)**

- a. Just for fun, talk about your first kiss.
- b. Did you feel pressure in school to excel, whether at academics or music or sports? What was that like? Who was doing the pressuring? Did you want more encouragement?
- c. Talk about the people in your life who gave you encouragement. Who are you encouraging today and how?

### **3. “Checking Corn” (p. 25) and “On War” (p. 74)**

- a. What is your experience, or your family’s experience, with the military?
- b. Do you have family members or friends who served in World War II?

- c. Do you have family members or friends whose names are on the Vietnam War Memorial?
- d. Do you think it's a helpful or not helpful practice to show the flag-draped coffins coming back to the US and why?
- e. Do you think the US should reinstate the draft, and why or why not?
- f. Were you surprised that the elderly folks who had lived through World War II were unanimously, adamantly opposed to the Gulf War?
- g. What are some other issues these chapters brought up for you?

#### **4. "A Farmer's Son" (p. 31)**

- a. What do you appreciate about how you were raised?
- b. If you are a parent, compare and contrast your parenting style with that of your parent or parents or guardians.
- c. Comment on the saying, "If a parent isn't hard on a kid, life will be."

#### **5. "On Grace" (p. 40) and "Unconditional Love" (p. 123)**

- a. What was one of your grandmas like?
- b. In his book *Amazing Grace*, Philip Yancey writes that "Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us more...And grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us less...Grace means that God already loves us as much as an infinite God can possibly love." What do you think about that statement?
- c. Why should we follow God's commandments if God already loves us unconditionally?
- d. Is Hitler infinitely loved by God? What does that mean for us?

## *Life Lessons from Our Elders*

### **6. “On Being Santa” (p. 51)**

- a. Bill writes that he “wasn’t a big fan of Santa Claus...” How do you feel about Santa and why?
- b. What’s your reaction to the two 80-year-olds’ sexual innuendo?

### **7. “On Ministry in Memory Care” (p. 55)**

- a. What experience do you and your family have with dementia?
- b. Were there things about dementia that you learned in this chapter?

### **8. “Deathbed Vigil” (p. 59) and “Ghosts in the Care Center” (p. 62)**

- a. Had you heard about animals doing deathbed vigils or sniffing out cancer? What do you make of it?
- b. What is your response to the call lights turning on?

### **9. “On Death” (p. 65)**

- a. Have you witnessed the phenomenon of people having control over when they die (which would include not dying until everyone has left the room)?
- b. What’s your reaction to the phrase “liberated by a wheelchair”?
- c. Share an experience you have had with a dying person and his/her last few days. Does that experience influence how you feel when contemplating your own mortality?

**10. “On Old Age” (p. 77)**

- a. If you could be any age, what age would you choose to be and why?
- b. Probably one of the reasons that elderly people were given such great respect in biblical times is that very few people survived to old age. In today’s society, do you see changes in the esteem given older folks now that baby boomers are entering into old age?
- c. Is it hard for you to be on the receiving end of help? Do you think you can learn to be a gracious receiver?

**11. “Holy Fools” (p. 85)**

- a. Do you remember your reaction the first time you saw “Godspell,” with the characters dressed as clowns? Talk about the clown as being a symbol for Jesus.
- b. What do you make of this story of a man entombed in silence, but finally liberated by a clown? Do you think he kept on talking or reverted to silence?

***Would We Do It Again?*****12. “On Marriage” (p. 91)**

- a. How might we do a better job of preparing people for marriage?
- b. Has your attitude about divorce changed through the years?
- c. Has your attitude about same-sex marriage changed over the years? Why or why not?

### 13. “On Luck” (p. 103)

- a. Is there a difference between *grace* and *luck*?
- b. What does the phrase “There but for the grace of God go I” say about the unfortunate person or persons that triggered that response? Are they not recipients of God’s grace for some reason? If not, why not?

### 14. “On Being a Boy” (p. 107)

Author’s notes: (a) Perhaps you’ve noticed that this is the longest chapter in the book. Obviously, it could have been MUCH longer, the size of an old-fashioned set of encyclopedias. (b) I recognize that most book clubs are populated by females, and thus, most of the people using these conversation starters are women. Go ahead and share your own stories of men being stupid. Have fun! And know that most of us are truly sorry that we are such knuckleheads.

### 15. “On Time” (p. 117)

- a. Would you prefer to live with a US sense of time or the more relaxed sense of time found throughout most of the world? Why?
- b. What is on your “to do” list that God didn’t put there?
- c. Don’t you agree that Bill’s suggested new calendar with nine-day weeks is absolutely brilliant?

### 16. “On Adoption” (p. 126)

- a. What is your experience around adoption?
- b. Her aunt Lynn credited at least some of Anji’s near-constant happiness with the fact that every time she entered a room, people stopped what they were

doing, joyfully called her name and gave her a hug (p. 134). Is there a way that we might adopt some form of this practice with the people we encounter each day or at least really SEE the people we encounter?

**17. “Our Middle Child” (p. 136)**

- a. Where are you in the birth order of your family, and how do you think this affected you, or perhaps continues to affect you?
- b. Does your family (either growing-up family or current household) follow traditional birth order roles? Should children be treated differently from one another based on birth order or other factors?

**18. “Would We Do It Again” (p. 139)**

- a. For those of you who are parents, what are the best and worst things about having children?
- b. “The people in my life don’t do what I want them to do.” The issue of control is one of the major concerns of most people’s lives. What have you learned to be helpful in letting go of control?

***On Being Faithful***

**19. “The 3 Percent” (p. 152)**

- a. Did you find that this book gave you new insights into the life of a pastor? What was most surprising?

- b. If you were a parish pastor, what do you think you would find to be most enjoyable in that role? Least enjoyable?

## **20. “On Fun” (p. 158)**

- a. Were you aware of that description of Jesus as “a glutton and a drunkard?” What is your reaction to it?
- b. Are you a “I need to get the work done first, and then I can go have fun” sort of person? Or are you able to put the work off? Do you have enough fun in your life? If not, what can you do about that?

## **21. “The Presence” (p. 163)**

- a. In your family of origin, what was your experience with prayer, if any? How is your prayer life different from that today?
- b. Have you had any experiences where you felt the palpable presence of God/Jesus? If you feel comfortable doing so, tell the group about one of those experiences?

## **22. “On Anger” (p. 166)**

- a. What’s your hot button? What makes you angry? Give an example from your own life (like Bill getting ticked at folks with too many items going through the express lane at the grocery store), and then a societal issue that really makes you angry.
- b. If you are willing, share a time when you used anger inappropriately.
- c. Share a time you used anger appropriately (on behalf of others).

## **23. “On Being a *Christian*” (p. 169)**

- a. Do you think Bill is over-reacting to the influence of the Christian Right?



- b. Bill writes (p. 171) that he no longer even uses the term “Christian” to describe his faith stance. Instead he says, “I try to follow Jesus.” What is your response to that?

#### **24. “Sharing a Scar” (p. 183)**

- a. If you are willing, share a scar with the group and the story behind it.
- b. Do you find it hard to let go of some hurts from your past? What do you think might help you to do so?
- c. Do you find it hard to forgive *yourself*? What might help you to do so?

#### **25. “On Heroes” (p. 187)**

- a. Tell about your childhood hero and why you looked up to them. Do you still look up to that person?
- b. Do you have a hero or heroes today? If so, do you try to model your life after that person in any way?

#### **26. “The Green Van” (p. 193)**

- a. Tell of a time when you have been the recipient of a stranger’s kindness.
- b. Do you give to those seeking? Why or why not?
- c. Tell of a time when you practiced a random act of kindness.

#### **27. “On Motorcycles” (p. 201)**

- a. Were you surprised by some of the stories in Bill’s list of Christian martyrs on p. 202?
- b. Have you previously considered that “Jesus died as a political criminal” (p. 203)? What, if anything, does that mean for us today?

- c. What do you think of Bill's challenge to high school graduates to "go to jail" for their faith? What's the scariest thing you have ever done as you try to follow Jesus/God?